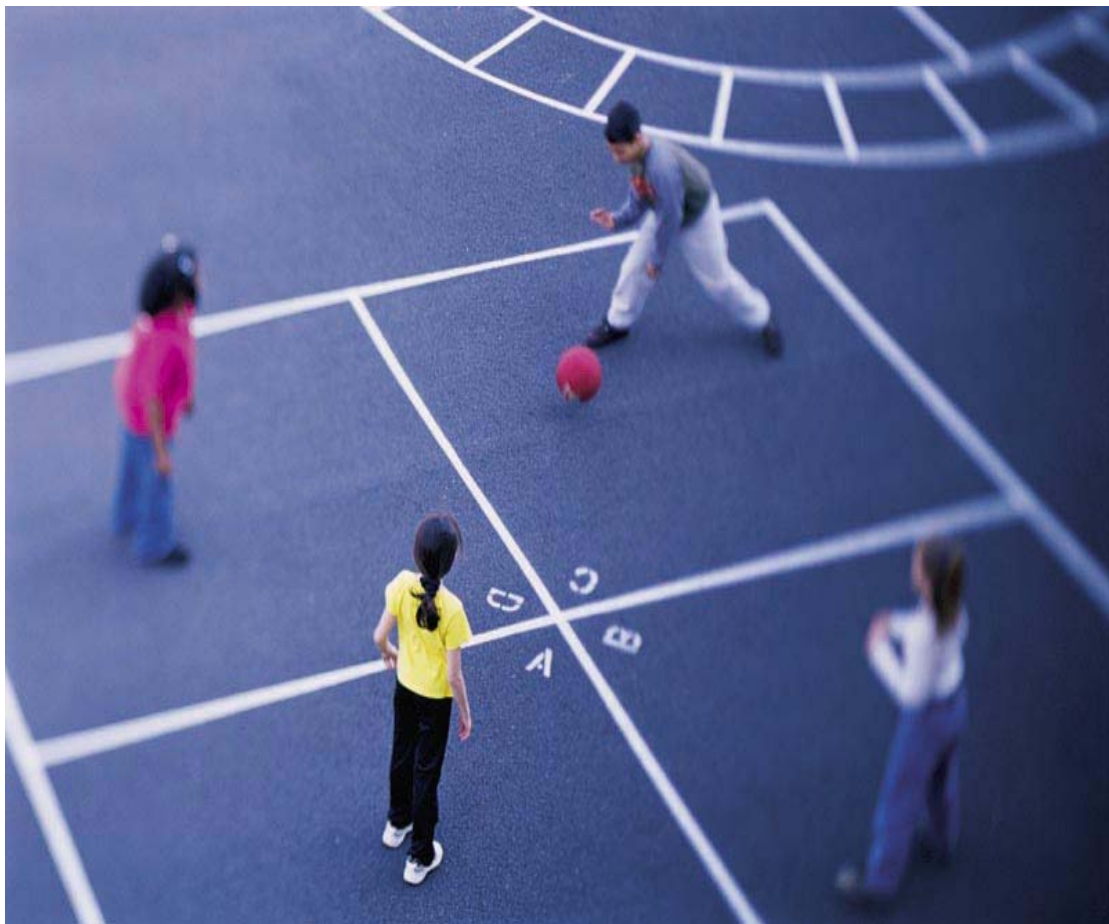

Department of Education

Research with young people: New admissions arrangements for post-primary schools

Final report - June 2005



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I. Executive summary

Background, terms of reference and approach

- 1.1 The Department of Education is consulting on the new admissions arrangements that will be required when the Transfer Test ends after 2008. A Consultation Document has been published (New Admissions Arrangements for Post-Primary schools) seeking views on options for future admissions arrangements with an underlying theme of placing children at the centre of the decision making process.
- 1.2 Given the focus of placing children's needs at the centre of the decision making process, the Department of Education (DE) commissioned PwC to undertake research with young people to discuss their experiences and views in relation to the current transfer process and ways in which it could be improved.
- 1.3 The main objective of this project was to investigate the views of Year 8 pupils regarding the current transfer process which they have gone through and how different elements of that system could have been better. Specifically, the research was to focus on some elements of the Department's Consultation document 'New Admissions Arrangements for Post-Primary Schools', including:
 - the information the pupils used to make the decision on their choice of post-primary school;
 - what information they would have liked to have known about the post-primary schools available to them;
 - the usefulness of open nights/school prospectuses;
 - the extent of their role in the decision-making process and whether it should be increased/decreased; and
 - who had the biggest say in deciding which post-primary school they should attend – parents/themselves/school.
- 1.4 Our approach to conducting this research involved the organisation and facilitation of 20 focus groups with Year 8 pupils in schools across Northern Ireland. The groups were structured to achieve a spread across:
 - school type – grammar (10) & secondary (10);
 - sector – controlled (9), maintained (8), integrated (2) and Irish-medium (1);
 - geography – rural (12), urban (8);
 - education and library board (ELB) area – NEELB (4), BELB (5), WELB (4), SELB (4) and SEELB (3); and
 - gender – mixed (14), single sex (6).

Information used to make the transfer decision

- 1.5 Pupils reported having availed of a wide range of information sources and assistance when making their transfer decision. The most useful of these were considered to be:

- open nights;
 - advice from parents and family;
 - visits from post-primary school staff to the primary school; and
 - general information on the post-primary school, e.g. school's reputation and academic achievements.
- 1.6 Other sources of information such as school prospectuses, whilst also considered useful, were looked upon as supplementary sources compared to the others listed above.
- 1.7 There was general consensus across the groups that more information on the subjects taught at post primary schools and on the various facilities and activities available at the schools would have helped pupils in making their decision. Pupils were also of the opinion that the decision would have been made more easily if they had been able to hear about the experiences of current year 8 pupils at the post-primary schools.

Influences and participators in the transfer decision

- 1.8 Pupils themselves and their parents or family had most influence over the transfer decision. Most pupils believed that their views were adequately listened to and were, therefore, satisfied with their level of involvement in the process.
- 1.9 Findings regarding the usefulness and level of involvement of primary schools varied across participants. Some pupils reported having received lots of helpful information and advice whereas others commented that their primary school had little or no involvement in the decision.
- 1.10 Most pupils stated that they would have liked more help from their primary school. The main types of assistance identified were:
- informing and discussing with pupils the most suitable type of post primary school for them; and
 - providing more information on the subjects taught at post-primary level.
- 1.11 High levels of satisfaction were reported regarding the level of involvement of post-primary schools in the decision and the efforts made by the schools to encourage pupils to attend. Open nights and visits from post-primary school staff to primary schools attracted particular praise and both were thought to be very useful exercises. The most important or biggest 'selling' aspects of open nights and visits were considered to be:
- the facilities and activities available at post-primary schools;
 - being able to watch and participate in practical demonstrations;
 - the range of, and information on, subjects available at the schools;
 - the general atmosphere at the schools;
 - having a tour of the schools; and
 - the 'truth' or 'real story' about life at the schools.

Feelings and experiences encountered throughout the transfer process

- 1.12 Pupils experienced a wide range of feelings and emotions whilst waiting to find out their post-primary destination. The most common feelings experienced were those of nervousness and excitement at the prospect of moving to a new school. It is encouraging to note that not many pupils reported having negative feelings such as disappointment, fear or sadness. Many pupils also reported feeling happy due to the transfer test being over, or having received a high grade in the test.
- 1.13 Mixed views were reported regarding the 3 month time period between receiving the transfer grade and finding out the post-primary destination. Some pupils were relaxed during this time and did not consider it to be too long whereas others reported feeling nervous and worried and thought the time period should be shortened. This time period was more problematic for those pupils who were less sure of their post-primary destination, e.g. those who had received less than an A grade in their test and wanted to attend a grammar school.
- 1.14 Participants reported having very mixed experiences and feelings upon finding out their post-primary destination. These ranged from positive feelings such as excitement, happiness and looking forward to starting a new journey to more negative thoughts such as fear and worry of “not fitting in”, not being able to cope with the workload and getting lost.
- 1.15 Fear of the unknown was one of the most common feelings expressed and this was reflected in the findings regarding how well prepared pupils considered themselves to be when beginning their post-primary education.
- 1.16 In some cases, pupils did know what to expect and felt prepared. This was mainly attributed to having spoken to friends and family about life at the school, attending induction days and receiving lots of information on the school.
- 1.17 However, many pupils reported feeling unprepared and were unaware of what to expect when beginning their new school. The main aspects of post-primary life for which pupils were not prepared included:
- the size of the school and having to find their way around it;
 - being the youngest in the new school;
 - the amount of books and equipment they were required to bring;
 - a lack of knowledge about the subjects they would be learning; and
 - the increased independence and responsibility.
- 1.18 These pupils identified a number of ways in which they would have felt better prepared. The main suggestions included:
- knowing more about the subjects taught;
 - receiving timetables etc in advance of the school year;
 - having a map of the school; and

- having more information on, and better, travelling arrangements to school.

1.19 Despite the various fears and worries encountered by pupils when beginning their new school, it is encouraging to report that having now been at their school for nearly a year most pupils are very happy and believe that the school was the right choice for them.

Suggestions for improving the transfer process

1.20 Based on the research findings we have identified a number of ways in which the transfer process could be improved both to focus more closely on the needs of pupils and to reduce the level of negative feelings and experiences encountered by some pupils.

1.21 Having greater exposure to school life at post-primary level, whilst still at primary school, would make the transition easier for pupils and would provide them with more of an understanding of what to expect. This could be achieved through:

- arranging visits to post-primary schools to allow primary school pupils to experience a normal school day there;
- giving primary school pupils more experience of, and information on, the different subjects that they will be introduced to at post-primary level;
- providing pupils with a greater insight into the differences in school life at post-primary level compared to primary school, for example, the different teaching methods, the books and equipment used, information on the typical amount and examples of homework given and examples of typical Year 8 timetables followed;
- organising induction days to allow primary school pupils to visit the post-primary schools, meet their fellow pupils and others in their year group, meet their teachers, form teachers and year heads, find their way around the school and learn about the subjects and type of work they will be doing there.

1.22 A relatively straightforward way of providing pupils with increased information on post-primary schools is via the Internet. If this is to become a valuable source of assistance to pupils when making their transfer decision, the post-primary schools need to ensure that their websites contain adequate levels of information and primary schools must set aside time to allow pupils to access the various websites and assist them in doing so if required.

1.23 It is understandable that open nights and visits made by post primary representatives exist partly as selling exercises to encourage pupils to attend schools. However, the research has identified a very real need for pupils to know the “truth” or the “real story” about life in the post-primary school and what will be expected of them there.

1.24 Knowing the “truth” would perhaps alleviate many of the fears pupils have about starting a new school and make them feel better prepared for the transition. Providing primary school pupils with the opportunity to talk openly to current year 8 pupils at the post-primary schools would perhaps be the best way of achieving this. Indeed it may be particularly beneficial if the Year 8 pupils involved in these conversations are former pupils of the represented primary school.

1.25 The research also identified that pupils were dissatisfied with the information they received on the range of schools in their area. If the process is to be improved and pupils are to be assisted further in the decision-making process, it may be helpful for them to receive a short booklet which lists the range of schools open to them.

- 1.26 The final suggestion for improving the process focuses on shortening the length of time involved in the entire transfer process. As it currently stands the process begins when pupils take the transfer test in the Autumn and ends when they find out their post-primary destination at the end of May. This 7 month process attracted criticism in the research and it will therefore be important that any new procedures implemented are shorter; therefore helping to reduce any associated negative effects experienced by pupils. In particular, the timescale between completing the transfer form and receiving the letter notifying pupils of their post-primary destination should be shortened.

II. Background and Terms of Reference

Background

- 2.1 The Department of Education is consulting on the new admissions arrangements that will be required when the Transfer Test ends after 2008. A Consultation Document has been published (New Admissions Arrangements for Post-Primary Schools) seeking views on options for future admissions arrangements with an underlying theme of placing children at the centre of the decision making process.
- 2.2 New admissions arrangements will be based on informed parental and pupil choice. In order to make the best decisions for their children parents must be able to draw from different sources of information including schools and teachers and the arrangements must be as simple as possible to use.

Terms of reference

- 2.3 Given the focus of placing children's needs at the centre of the decision making process, the Department of Education (DE) commissioned PwC to undertake research with young people to discuss their experiences and views in relation to the current transfer process.
- 2.4 The main objective of this project was to investigate the views of Year 8 pupils regarding the current transfer process which they have gone through and how different elements of that system could be improved. Specifically, the research was to focus on some elements of the Department's Consultation document 'New Admissions Arrangements for Post-Primary Schools', including:
 - the information the pupils used to make the decision on their choice of post-primary school;
 - what information they would have liked to have known about the post-primary schools available to them;
 - the usefulness of open nights/school prospectuses;
 - the extent of their role in the decision-making process and whether it should be increased/decreased; and
 - who had the biggest say in deciding which post-primary school they should attend – parents/themselves/school?

III. Our approach

- 3.1 This chapter of the report details the methodology used to undertake this important piece of research. This project was qualitative in nature and involved the organisation and facilitation of 20 focus groups with Year 8 pupils in schools across Northern Ireland.
- 3.2 The Department of Education was responsible for selecting the sample of schools to be included in the research and this was structured to achieve a spread in terms of school type, sector, location and education and library board area. The table below shows the composition of the 20 groups.

Table 3.1: Group Structure

Group no.	Type	Sector	Geography	ELB
1	Grammar	Controlled	Rural	NEELB
2	Secondary	Integrated	Rural	NEELB
3	Secondary	Maintained	Rural	NEELB
4	Grammar	Maintained	Rural	NEELB
5	Secondary	Maintained	Urban	BELB
6	Secondary	Controlled	Urban	BELB
7	Grammar	Maintained	Urban	BELB
8	Grammar	Controlled	Urban	BELB
9	Secondary	Irish-medium	Urban	BELB
10	Grammar	Maintained	Rural	WELB
11	Grammar	Controlled	Urban	WELB
12	Secondary	Integrated	Rural	WELB
13	Secondary	Controlled	Rural	WELB
14	Grammar	Controlled	Urban	SEELB
15	Secondary	Controlled	Urban	SEELB
16	Grammar	Maintained	Rural	SEELB
17	Grammar	Maintained	Rural	SELB
18	Grammar	Controlled	Rural	SELB
19	Secondary	Controlled	Rural	SELB
20	Secondary	Maintained	Rural	SELB

- 3.3 A minimum of 8 pupils participated in each focus group and a topic list containing the areas to be covered by the research was used to guide discussions. A copy of this topic guide is included at Appendix A to this report. A range of projective and enabling techniques were introduced at various stages throughout the groups to stimulate discussion and encourage participation. These included bubble cartoons, word association and picture boards.
- 3.4 On completion of the 20 groups, the tapes were transcribed and analysed using the content analysis approach which involves mapping views and opinions arising across the groups to the main topics set out for discussion.
- 3.5 The remainder of this report presents the key findings of the research which are summarised under the following chapter headings:

Information used to make the transfer decision: this chapter outlines the various information sources and assistance used by pupils when making the transfer decision. It details the sources that pupils considered to be most useful and also identifies gaps in information which pupils believed would have helped in the decision making process;

Influences and participators in the transfer decision: this section of the report examines the main influencers in the transfer decision and explores the various levels of involvement of the pupils themselves, the primary schools and the post-primary schools;

Feelings and experiences encountered throughout the transfer process: this chapter presents the various feelings and emotions experienced by pupils throughout the transfer process; looking back to when they initially began thinking about moving schools to their current situation of having just begun their post-primary education.

Conclusions and suggestions for improving the process: the final section of this report draws conclusions from the findings of all other chapters and makes recommendations regarding how the transfer process could be improved.

IV. Information used to make the transfer decision

- 4.1 The first period of each focus group was dedicated to discussing the various information sources and assistance that were available to pupils when making their transfer decision. Pupils were then asked to consider these sources and comment on how useful they were in aiding their decision.
- 4.2 Participants identified a wide range of information and assistance that was available to them. This included:
- open nights;
 - advice from parents / family;
 - advice from friends;
 - visits from post-primary school staff to the primary school;
 - booklet / prospectus on post-primary school;
 - transfer booklet;
 - general information on the school reputation / academic achievements;
 - advice from primary school; and
 - websites of post-primary schools.

Usefulness of information / assistance available

- 4.3 There was general consensus across the groups that the most useful sources of information / assistance available were:
- open nights;
 - advice from family;
 - visits from post-primary school staff to primary schools; and
 - general information on the school such as its facilities / extra-curricular activities, reputation or academic achievements.
- 4.4 Open nights were considered to be very useful as they gave pupils the opportunity to see the post primary schools for themselves and find out more about the school, such as the facilities and activities available, the range of subjects offered, the teachers and the general environment.
- “I liked the atmosphere, they seemed happy and it was good to see the classrooms and the facilities and the teachers and sporting events”*
- 4.5 Advice from family also emerged as a dominant information source with many participants commenting on having, or having had family members at the school.

“My sister told me to go here because they are stricter and if I went somewhere else I would be messing about”

“My family telling me about it, my brothers all came here”

- 4.6 Pupils also referred to representatives from post-primary schools having visited their primary school, which, again they considered useful as it gave them the opportunity to find out more information and to ask questions about the post-primary school.

“Principals from all the different secondary schools and grammar schools came round to our primary school and talked to us about what happened in the school and all. They would ask you what things you were interested in and then tell you about what they had to offer”

- 4.7 Most pupils were given prospectuses on open night or just in advance of attending open night. For the most part prospectuses were provided in booklet format but a few participants commented on having received a CD-ROM version.

- 4.8 Whilst pupils did consider the prospectuses to be helpful and welcomed having received them, they were regarded as secondary information sources and supplementary to those more useful sources identified such as open nights or advice from family.

“I didn’t really read it, my parents read it and told me all about it but it was good to find out about all the trips you go on like skiing”

“I had a look at the prospectus but I think there’s almost too much information there”

- 4.9 Participants reported mixed levels of awareness and use of post-primary school websites. Some pupils had visited a number of websites to find out information and believed these to be of use in helping them make their decision. Others, however, had not visited any websites but did consider them to be a worthwhile tool for researching schools.

“I just wanted to look around to see what things were in it and what the people are like and to look at the information when I was trying to decide and it was good for that”

“There is one but I didn’t use it, I didn’t know then what the website address was”

Gaps in information

- 4.10 Having discussed the various sources of information and assistance that were available to help pupils make their transfer decision, discussions then moved towards identifying information that pupils did not have access to but would have found useful.

- 4.11 For the most part, pupils were unable to suggest additional information that they would have found helpful and were satisfied with the range of information that they had received.

- 4.12 However, upon probing, most pupils were aware of a meeting having taken place between their parents and their primary school and, in most cases, pupils had not been involved in the meeting.

- 4.13 Feedback was mixed regarding whether or not pupils would like to have been involved in the meeting. Some pupils stated that they would like to have attended the meeting

as the discussion was about them and their future, whereas, others did not see the need to be involved and were happy to leave such discussions to their parents and teachers.

"It's really up to you what school you wanted to go to and what job you want to end up doing which is why you should be involved"

"If you are involved it would be better cause they might put you in a really smart school and you just can't do the work and get stressed out"

"Not really because I talked to mummy before so I knew what she was going to say in there"

4.14 Most pupils were of the opinion that they did not receive enough information on the range of post-primary schools open to them.

I only got a leaflet on two schools and I didn't know about any other schools I could go do. There could have been other schools out there I would have liked if I had found out more about it"

4.15 Specifically, pupils would have welcomed more information on:

- the range of, and general information on, the subjects taught at post-primary schools;

"Some schools could have given more information on what subjects are available"

"What the subjects involve"

- the facilities and activities available at the schools; and

"The sports facilities and technology labs"

- the experiences of pupils at the schools, particularly Year 8 pupils.

4.16 With regard to the final point made above, participants felt that hearing the experiences of pupils at the range of post-primary schools would have given them a more realistic picture of what to expect, compared to, for example, attending an open night which they considered to be a selling exercise.

"I would have preferred 1st years to show you round all the schools and tell us what is expected of us"

"Pupils from this school came in which was better than the headmaster or anything like the rest of the schools as pupils won't cover anything up"

4.17 A few participants stated they only wanted to go to one particular school and therefore would not have been interested in receiving information on any other schools in their area.

"Only if you are interested will you get the information. There is a school just down the road from me but I wasn't interested in attending so I didn't want any information on it"

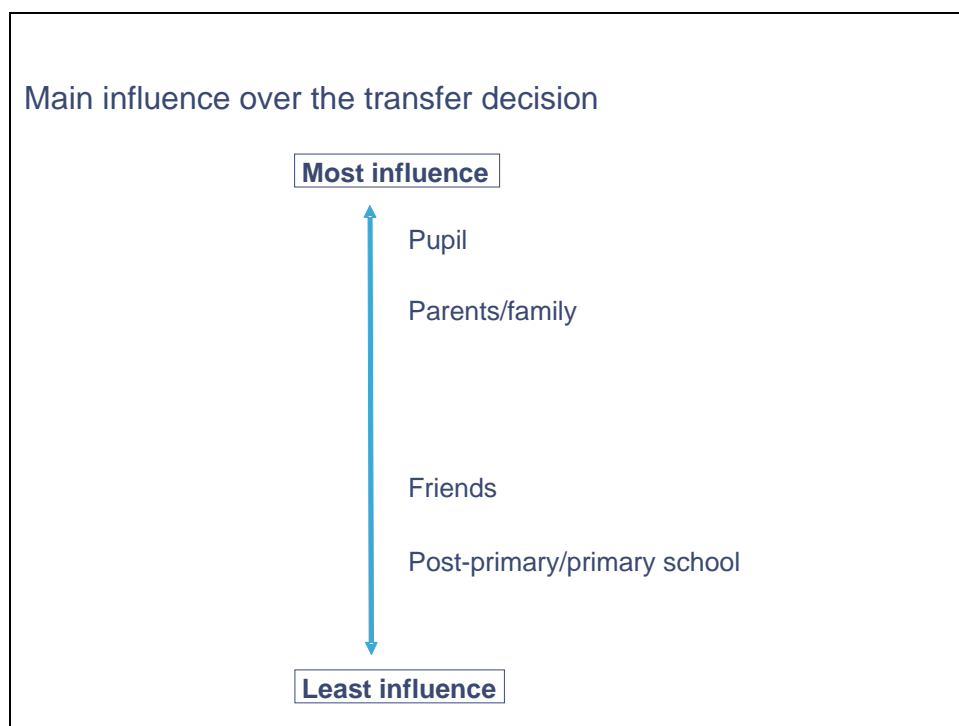
V. Influences and participators in the transfer decision

- 5.1 This chapter begins by outlining the main influences over the transfer decision and continues with a more detailed exploration of the level of involvement of pupils themselves, primary schools and post-primary schools in the decision.

Main influences in the transfer decision

- 5.2 The chart below summarises the findings regarding who pupils considered to have the most influence over their transfer decision.

Figure 5.1: Main influence over the transfer decision



- 5.3 Pupils themselves, followed closely by their parents or family, had the most influence over the transfer decision.

“Me, mainly I suppose”

“My sister and my parents mainly”

- 5.4 Whilst to a lesser extent, friends were also considered to have a degree of influence over the decision with the post-primary and primary schools ranked as having the least influence.

“My friends, we all wanted to stay together and go to the same school”

Involvement of pupils in the transfer decision

- 5.5 Most pupils were satisfied with their level of involvement in the transfer process and stated that the final say regarding the order and range of schools listed on the transfer form was decided by them or jointly with their parents.

“Just me, mum said for me to make the decision because I was the one that was going and who has to go there everyday”

“My mum said that I should go to XXX as I had the ability but they said I should make the decision myself and I agreed with them”

- 5.6 A few pupils in the research were unhappy with their level of involvement in the decision, commenting that their views were not listened to and that their parents made the decision for them.

“At the start my parents pretended I could go to whatever school I would be happy at but then they just said you’re going to this school and there is nothing you can do about it. I just felt really ignored and I didn’t go to any other open nights, I just came here and that was that”

“I was a bit angry really with my parents for having so much influence and me not really getting very much power over the decision”

- 5.7 These pupils commented that they would have liked to have had more involvement in the decision, particularly regarding:

- the meeting between their parents and the primary school; and
- the range of choices included on the transfer form.

“I think you should be allowed to go in and help join in the conversation and know what’s going on”

“You should be able to write down your whole choice of schools instead of having someone else write it down for you”

Involvement of primary schools in the transfer decision

- 5.8 Having discussed their own involvement in the transfer decision, participants were then asked to comment on the involvement of their primary schools and to rate their satisfaction with the efforts made by the primary schools in assisting them with the decision.

- 5.9 At this stage in discussions the bubble carton technique was introduced; this enabled participants to express their views regarding the involvement of their primary school using a picture. The picture showed two Year 8 pupils discussing how helpful their primary school was in assisting them in their choice of new school. Pupils were asked to imagine themselves taking part in this conversation and to complete the speech bubble accordingly (a copy of this bubble cartoon is included at Appendix B to this report). The following paragraphs summarise the main findings from this exercise.

- 5.10 Mixed feedback was reported regarding the degree of involvement and level of advice given to pupils by their primary schools. Some pupils commented that their primary school was heavily involved in the decision and gave them lots of advice whereas

others stated that their primary school had very little or no involvement in the process at all.

"We got together a lot and talked about it"

"Ours didn't have anything to do with it"

5.11 Opinion also varied regarding the usefulness of any involvement or advice given by the primary schools. This ranged from what was considered to be very helpful advice and assistance to the provision of basic information which did not help them to make their decision.

"Our teacher gave us lots of info on this school which was really helpful and now I am fitting in well"

"My primary school just handed us a list of the open nights but how do I know what ones to choose?"

5.12 The range of guidance and information provided by primary schools focussed mainly on:

- general information on the post-primary schools;
- the various subjects on offer at post-primary schools;
- encouraging pupils to make the choice which they considered best for themselves; and
- giving pupils the opportunity to visit post-primary school websites.

"My teacher told us about science and other subjects and that we would be able to do all different stuff"

"Our teacher told us to choose the school that was best for you and not to choose one just because your friends are going"

"We were given the opportunity to go on the websites to see what they were like and it was really good"

5.13 Most participants were dissatisfied with the level of involvement of their primary school and would have liked more assistance, specifically including:

- informing and discussing with pupils which post primary schools would best suit their abilities and interests; and
- providing more information on the subjects taught at post-primary schools.

"They could have a day to teach us what to look for in a school and what will be more helpful later on....say if you're good at and you like PE what sort of things you should be looking for in a school"

"They should give us information on the sort of work we would be looking at"

- 5.14 A few participants held the view that they did not need or want any help from their primary school as the decision was primarily up to them and that they had enough help from other sources, such as their parents and family.

“My primary school teacher didn’t help me that much but I think it’s mostly my decision anyway”

Involvement of post-primary schools in the transfer decision

- 5.15 On the whole, pupils reported high levels of satisfaction with the efforts made by post-primary schools in encouraging them to attend their school. Pupils were particularly complimentary of the efforts made by the school where they are currently attending.

“This school probably made the most effort. They did more things like in the drama department they did plays and then the PE department had fitness tests”

“A good enough effort, but here was the best”

- 5.16 Discussions in this area centred mainly on open nights and representatives of post-primary schools visiting the pupils whilst in primary 7. Both these efforts were considered to be very useful in aiding the transfer decision and it is worthwhile noting that most pupils had attended more than one open night and had received visitors from a range of post-primary schools.

“Open night was good as you got to see what the school was like”

“They’re good (visits) as you can find out information about other schools”

- 5.17 The most important or biggest ‘selling’ aspects of both the open nights and the visits were considered to be:

- the facilities and activities available at the post-primary schools;
- watching and participating in practical demonstrations;
- the range of, and information on, subjects available at the schools;
- the general atmosphere at the schools;
- a tour of the schools; and
- The ‘truth’ or ‘real story’ about life at the schools.

“Some schools were more pleasant and cheerful towards you than others”

“The information they give you on the subjects and what goes on like the activities”

“There were more things to do here, you got to take part in demonstrations”

“At this school they gave you a tour guide but at others they just gave you a map”

“XXX just gave you the information, they didn’t brag about themselves and they went into more detail about what you could achieve, it was more focussed on you”

- 5.18 It is worth highlighting the emphasis placed by pupils on finding out the “real story” as many pupils perceived the open nights and visits to portray a somewhat false image of the school and commented that they would prefer to have been presented with a more realistic picture.

“At this open night you got to speak to 1st years and they told you that you don’t get to use the stuff all the time and what the teachers were really like. That was good because they bring out all the best stuff to show you, like the weights and all were put out and you don’t get to use them until you’re older so it gives you a bit of a false impression”

- 5.19 When discussing the efforts made by post-primary schools, a few pupils also referred to having visited post-primary schools whilst in primary 7 to experience a normal school day. This was considered to be a very worthwhile exercise as it gave pupils an idea of what to expect and provide them with a greater insight into life at the school.

“One of the schools our P7 class visited made a big effort by having pupils and teachers set aside to show us around and let us see how things work during a normal school day”

VI. Feelings and experiences encountered throughout the transfer process

- 6.1 The final stage in the focus groups involved asking the pupils to reflect on the various feelings and thoughts experienced throughout the transfer process, looking back to when they first started thinking about moving schools to focussing on the present day, having been at their post-primary school for nearly one year.

Feelings and experiences – when first thinking about post-primary destination

- 6.2 To begin with, pupils were asked to look back at the initial thoughts they had when they were first considering their post-primary destination. There was general consensus across the groups that thoughts were mainly focussed on:

- which school friends were planning to attend;
- which schools family members were attending / had attended;
- what the school was like, in particular the teachers, the school's reputation, the size of the school and the level of bullying;
- the sports on offer at the school; and
- the location of the school.

“What school your friends are going to”

“My sister and cousins go to this school”

“What sports are available”

- 6.3 It is important to note that continuing in an Irish-speaking environment was one of the main thoughts of those pupils currently attending the Irish language secondary school.

“Getting to a school that did Irish”

- 6.4 Furthermore, mixing with pupils of different religious backgrounds was a specific focus of those pupils currently attending an integrated secondary school.

“You’ve a better chance of making friends with people of different religions”

Feelings and experiences – when waiting to find out post-primary destination

- 6.5 Pupils reported experiencing mixed thoughts and feelings during the three months when having found out the result of their transfer test and waiting to find out their post-primary destination. On the one hand, some stated that they felt nervous and worried and thought that the three month time period should be shortened. However, other pupils reported feeling relaxed and at ease during this time and the three month wait did not bother them.

“It’s far too long and there’s too much pressure, I got a stress rash during that time”

“I forgot all about it”

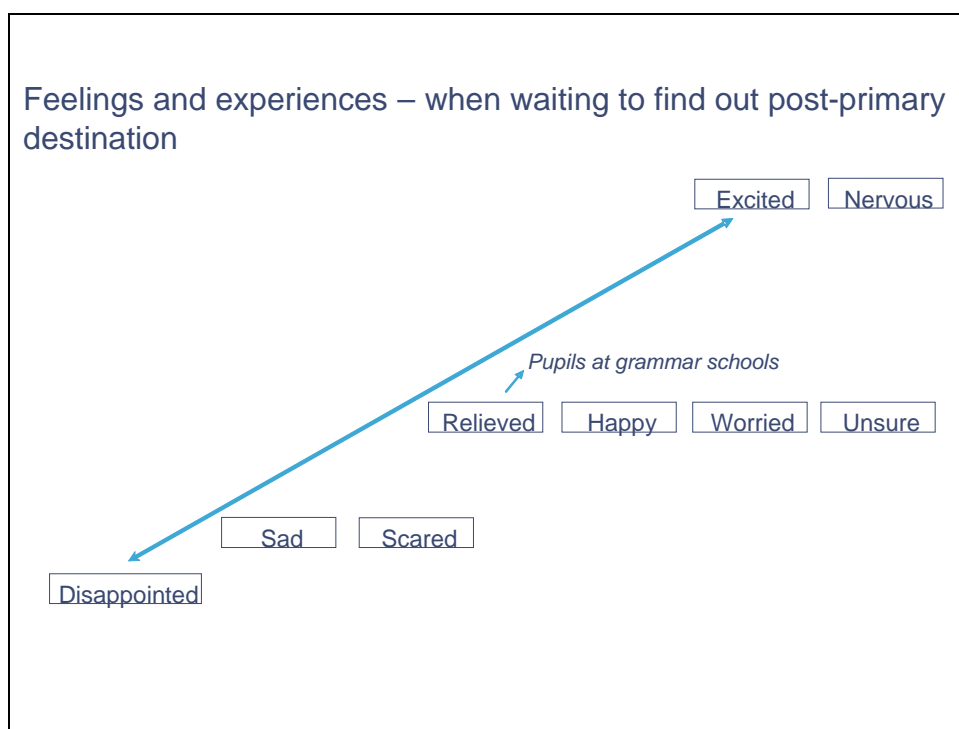
6.6 On analysing the research findings, it can be concluded that this time period was more problematic for those pupils who were less sure of getting into the school of their choice, for example, pupils who had achieved less than an A grade in the transfer test and wanted to attend a grammar school or those pupils who wanted to go to a popular or over-subscribed school.

“I didn’t get the result I expected so I had to wait and was really nervous. You should get your result and be told which school at the same time”

6.7 To explore further the range of feelings and emotions experienced at this time, a word association technique was employed where pupils were asked to circle as many words as possible which described how they were feeling whilst waiting to find out their post-primary destination. A copy of the word association grid is included at Appendix C to this report.

6.8 The chart below demonstrates the range of feelings experienced at this time.

Figure 6.1: Feelings and experiences when waiting to find out post-primary destination.



6.9 As Figure 6.1 shows, the most common feelings experienced during this time were both excitement and nervousness at the prospect of attending a new school. It is encouraging to note that those more negative feelings such as disappointment and sadness were the least common feelings experienced amongst pupils.

“Excited about going to a new school but nervous about what the school would be like”

6.10 Many pupils also reported feeling happy and this was mainly due to the transfer test being behind them or having achieved a high grade in the test. Other feelings experienced such as worry and uncertainty were mainly due to pupils not knowing if they would be accepted to the school of their choice.

“Happy because I got a good grade”

“Unsure because I didn’t know if I was going to get in or not”

6.11 It is interesting to note that pupils at grammar schools were more likely to have experienced feelings of relief than those at secondary schools. This can perhaps be attributed to them having achieved a high grade, or the grade expected of them, in the transfer test.

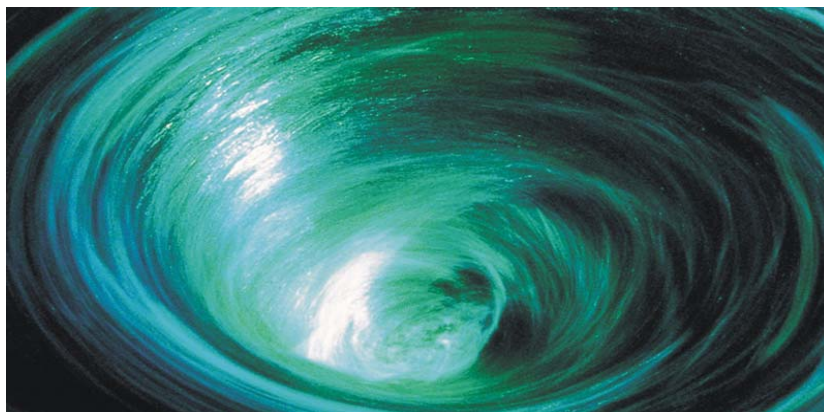
“Relief because the test was over and I had passed it and had no more exams to do and could just enjoy school”

Feelings and experiences – having found out post-primary destination

6.12 Participants in the research were then asked to think back to having received the letter which informed them of their post-primary destination and to discuss their various feelings and emotions at this time. To stimulate discussion a range of picture boards depicting abstract images were introduced and pupils were asked to select the picture / pictures which best represented how they felt and why.

6.13 The following paragraphs present the images which were most reflective of how pupils were feeling at this time. The full range of images used in the research is included at Appendix D to this report.

The Whirlpool



6.14 The whirlpool was the image which pupils considered to be most representative of how they were feeling having discovered their post-primary destination. The main feelings and emotions associated with this image included:

- having mixed feelings and emotions about attending the new school;
- having to settle into a new school;
- lots of new things happening and your head spinning;
- happiness and excitement;

- confusion;
- getting lost at the new school; and
- having no escape – being “sucked in”.

“The whirlpool because you have so many different thoughts and things going on in your head”

“The whirlpool because it’s like your head was spinning”

“The whirlpool, scared of getting lost”

The rope bridge



6.15 The rope bridge was another of the most common images selected by pupils. For the most part the feelings associated with this image were negative and included:

- feeling scared, nervous and worried about transferring schools;
- being afraid of not succeeding or “making it” at the school;
- the difficult process pupils had gone through to get to the post-primary school, i.e. taking the transfer test;
- a new journey and crossing over from primary to secondary level education;
- a fear of the unknown – not knowing what to expect at the new school; and
- the long road ahead of pupils at the post-primary school.

“Because I was worried”

“The bridge cause it’s like moving from primary over to secondary school”

“The rope bridge because I didn’t know if it would be a good school or a bad school or if the teachers would be nice or if I would make new friends”

The watches



6.16 The image of watches also reflected many of the emotions experienced by pupils having discovered their post-primary destination. These included:

- the length of time it took to find out their post-primary destination;
- the length of time ahead of pupils before commencing at the post-primary school;
- having to get to their new school on time each morning, i.e. using different methods of transport such as buses and having to travel by themselves;
- the longer day at the post-primary school and getting home later; and
- having to spend more time on homework.

“The watches because I had to wait so long to find out”

“The watches because we have to make sure we know what time we have to get there at”

“More time to spend on homework and less with your friends and getting home later”

The ladder



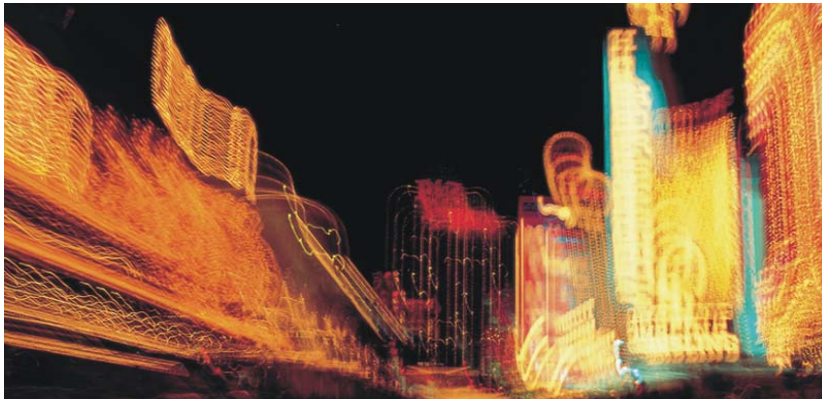
6.17 The ladder was another popular image which pupils considered to represent:

- the long road ahead of them at the post-primary school;
- having to work their way up through the school;
- starting over again, i.e. moving from being the oldest at primary school to the youngest at post-primary school; and
- another stage or step in life.

“The ladder because you are starting all over again in a new school and are the youngest”

“Because you were moving up another step”

The blurred buildings



6.18 As with the rope bridge, this image mainly conjured up negative feelings amongst pupils, which included;

- going to a big school and getting lost;
- nervousness / fear of the unknown and being bullied; and (on a more positive note)
- excitement and happiness.

“Because of going to a big school”

“Everything is all blurry and you don’t know what it is going to be like, was I going to get lost or was I going to be bullied”

“Because I was nervous and felt sick”

Contact with Post-Primary school

- 6.19 In addition to reflecting on the feelings and emotions experienced having found out their post-primary destination, pupils were also asked to discuss any contact they had with their future school prior to the commencement of the school year.
- 6.20 All pupils included in the research had some form of contact with the post-primary school prior to the school year commencing. This contact ranged from receiving letters about the school uniform and rules etc. to attending induction days and beginning the school year earlier than other year groups.
- 6.21 Discussions then focussed on the purpose and usefulness of this contact and for the most part related to induction days and starting the school year earlier than other year groups.
- 6.22 All pupils reported having started their first year at post-primary education one or more days before the other year groups returned to school. There was general consensus across the groups that this was of benefit to Year 8 pupils as:
- it gave them the opportunity and time to find their way about the school;
 - they did not have to worry about having to deal with big crowds of people; and
 - it gave them time to get to know the people in their own year group.

“It was good to work out where you have to go”

“You get used to the school before it gets busy”

“You got to meet the other first years”

- 6.23 Most pupils also reported having attended an induction day at their post-primary school, which, for the most part, took place towards the end of their primary school year. Again, pupils considered this to be very useful and of benefit to them as they :
- got to know their teachers and Year Heads;
 - found out what class they were going to be in;
 - learned a bit about the subjects they would be studying;
 - familiarised themselves with the school layout; and
 - made friends with future fellow pupils.

“You found out who your teachers were going to be and met your form teacher”

“Induction day is a good idea because only first years are here and it helps you find your way round and know which classrooms to go to”

“It was brilliant because you had a chance to make friends”

6.24 A few participants in the research also commented on having attended specific events prior to commencing their post-primary school. These included summer schools, sporting events and plays.

Feelings and experiences – beginning post-primary education

6.25 The final section of each focus group was dedicated to gathering feedback on the feelings and experiences encountered by pupils when starting out at their post-primary school.

6.26 This began with a general discussion on the main changes experienced and was followed by a more detailed exploration of how well pupils were prepared for commencing post primary education and any suggestions as to how they could have been better prepared. Finally, pupils were then asked to comment on the suitability of their post-primary school and, in particular, if they believed it to be the right choice for them.

6.27 Participants reported having experienced a wide range of changes when they first began their post-primary education. The main changes included:

- having to move classrooms throughout the day;
- more teachers;
- the increased number of subjects studied;
- being at a bigger school both in terms of physical size and number of pupils;
- meeting new people and not knowing everyone;
- more freedom and independence;
- more responsibility;
- more opportunities such as sports and after-school clubs;
- more school work and homework; and
- being the youngest at the school, compared to having been the oldest at primary school.

“Changing classes all the time”

“All the different teachers”

“You get treated more like an adult”

“More subjects and more homework”

“Going from being the oldest in a school to being the youngest in another”

6.28 Opinion varied regarding the extent to which pupils considered themselves to have been prepared for commencing post-primary education. Those pupils who did believe they were prepared attributed this to having:

- had discussions with friends and family about life at the school;
- attended the induction day / summer schools etc;
- received lots of information on the school; and
- started the school year earlier than other year groups.

“My sister had told me all about it”

“Because of the summer scheme we knew how the classes worked and how long they lasted for and what they expected and also you knew the teachers”

“We got a yellow booklet telling us all the rules, school uniform policy and a map of the school and stuff”

6.29 The main issues which pupils did not feel prepared for included:

- the size of the school and having to find their way around it;
- being the youngest in the new school;
- the amount of books and equipment they were required to bring;
- a lack of knowledge about the subjects they would be learning; and
- the increased independence and responsibility.

“You have to remember 8 books a day”

“In primary school the teachers did everything for you but when you come here you have to be independent and work on your own which is a bit of a shock”

“It’s so big, you just get lost in the beginning”

6.30 Some pupils were of the opinion that, regardless of attending induction days and receiving lots of information on schools, nothing could have prepared them for life at the post-primary school. This was mainly due to having heard lots of different stories about the school and also to the differences in school life compared to what they had been used to at primary school. The main differences identified included the size of the school, the increased responsibility placed on pupils and the range of subjects taught.

“I don’t think anything can really prepare you for it because people tell you all these stories and things that happen but nothing really prepares you even though the teachers try their best”

6.31 However, some suggestions were made regarding how pupils could have been better prepared for transferring to post-primary education. These focussed mainly on:

- knowing more about the subjects taught;
- receiving timetables etc. in advance of the beginning of the school year;
- having a map of the school;

- having more information on, and better, travelling arrangements.

“Your primary school should tell you a bit more about what it’s going to be like and what we would be doing in class and maybe change the rules so that you get used to them for going to your new school”

“They should have sent out a list of things we need and the timetable before we started”

“Maps of the school”

“I would have liked someone to tell me the best way to get to school because I had to start and get the bus and didn’t have a clue so maybe if someone could have shown me where to go and what time and everything then I wouldn’t have been as worried”

6.32 Despite the various teething problems encountered by some pupils when starting out at their new school, it is encouraging to report that most pupils included in the research believed that they had made the right choice and stated that they were very happy in their new school. This was mainly due to:

- having made lots of new friends;
- feeling safe and secure – some pupils referred to “buddying” and “mentoring” schemes at their school which allayed any fears of bullying and not fitting in;
- liking and having good relationships with teachers;
- enjoying learning new subjects; and
- being able to cope with the workload.

“I didn’t realise how much I would enjoy certain classes, playing hockey and meeting lots of new amazing friends”

“The teachers are really nice”

“I expected the work to be really hard and it’s not that bad”

VII. Conclusions and suggestions for improving the transfer process

- 7.1 The final chapter of this report draws conclusions from the findings presented in previous chapters and presents our suggestions for improving the transfer process.

Conclusions

- 7.2 There is a wide range of assistance and information available to aid pupils in making the transfer decision. The most useful sources of information or assistance are open nights, advice from family and friends, visits from post-primary schools and the general information available on the schools regarding, for example, their reputation or academic achievements.
- 7.3 Increased information and exposure to subjects taught and information about teachers and general life at post-primary schools would be useful in helping pupils to make their transfer decision.
- 7.4 For the most part, pupils have adequate levels of involvement in the transfer process with the final decision regarding the choice of schools and content of the transfer form being made by pupils themselves or jointly with their parents.
- 7.5 Both the level and usefulness of involvement of primary schools in the transfer process is varied and the research identified a need for primary schools to play a more active role in the process via informing and discussing post-primary options with pupils and providing more information on the subjects taught at post-primary level.
- 7.6 High levels of satisfaction exist regarding the efforts made by post-primary schools to encourage pupils to attend their school. Open nights and visits from post-primary representatives are considered to be of particular benefit to pupils.
- 7.7 The three month-time period between receiving the result of the transfer test and finding out the post-primary destination causes more concern to pupils who are less sure of being accepted to their chosen school. For example, pupils who achieved less than an A grade and want to attend a grammar school or those who have chosen to attend a popular or over-subscribed school.
- 7.8 The most common feelings experienced during this time are a combination of nervousness and excitement at the thought of transferring to a new school.
- 7.9 Pupils experience a wide range of feelings and emotions upon finding out their post-primary destination. These range from positive feelings such as happiness, excitement and relief to more negative emotions such as fear, nervousness and worry.
- 7.10 Induction days, starting a few days earlier than other year groups and receiving lots of information on the school are valuable ways of preparing pupils for the transfer to post-primary education. However, despite these various events and forms of contact taking place, many pupils still do not feel prepared or know what to expect when they begin their post-primary education.

Suggestions for improving the transfer process

- 7.11 Research participants suggested numerous ways in which the transfer process could be improved and made easier for pupils. The following paragraphs summarise and build upon what we consider to be the most favourable and viable suggestions identified.
- 7.12 Having greater exposure to school life at post-primary level, whilst still at primary school, would make the transition easier for pupils and would provide them with more of an understanding of what to expect. This could be achieved through:
- arranging visits to post-primary schools to allow primary school pupils to experience a normal school day there;
 - giving primary school pupils more experience of, and information on, the different subjects that they will be introduced to at post-primary level;
 - providing pupils with a greater insight into the differences in school life at post-primary level compared to primary school, for example, the different teaching methods, the books and equipment used, the typical amount and examples of homework given and the Year 8 timetables followed;
 - organising induction days to allow primary school pupils to visit the post-primary schools, meet their new class mates and others in their year group, meet their teachers, form teachers and year heads, find their way around the school and learn a bit about the subjects and type of work they will be doing there.
- 7.13 A relatively straightforward way of providing pupils with increased information on post-primary schools is via the Internet. If this is to become a valuable source of assistance to pupils when making their transfer decision, the post-primary schools need to ensure that their websites contain adequate levels of information and primary schools must set aside time to allow pupils to access the various websites and assist them in doing so if required.
- 7.14 It is understandable that open nights and visits made by post primary representatives exist partly as selling exercises to encourage pupils to attend schools. However, the research has identified a very real need for pupils to know the “truth” or the “real story” about life in the post-primary school and what will be expected of them there.
- 7.15 Knowing the “truth” would perhaps alleviate many of the fears pupils have about starting a new school and make them feel better prepared for the transition. Providing primary school pupils with the opportunity to talk openly to current year 8 pupils at the post-primary schools would perhaps be the best way of achieving this. Indeed it may be particularly beneficial if the Year 8 pupils involved in these conversations are former pupils of the represented primary school.
- 7.16 The research also identified that pupils were dissatisfied with the information they received on the range of schools in their area. If the process is to be improved and pupils are to be assisted further in the decision-making process, it may be helpful for them to receive a short booklet which lists the range of schools open to them.
- 7.17 The final suggestion for improving the process focuses on shortening the length of time involved in the entire transfer process. As it currently stands the process begins when pupils take the first transfer test in early November and ends when they find out their post-primary destination at the end of May. This 7 month process attracted criticism in the research, in particular the period between completing the transfer form and finding out the post-primary destination was viewed as being too long. It will be important that

the new process is shorter, therefore helping to reduce any associated negative effects experienced by pupils and offer more time for induction towards the end of primary 7.

Appendix A: Topic Guide

DE - Post primary research with young people

INTRODUCTION AND WARM-UP

- Explain the process, importance of participant opinions and background to the research, confirm that the research is not about the transfer test
- Assure confidentiality of responses (responses from individuals wont be shared with current school or primary school) and explain the use of the tape
- Conduct introductions
- General warm-up discussion
- Changes experienced since joining new school (e.g. new friends, bigger building, different journey/transport to school, new subjects)

DISCUSSION OF TRANSFER EXPERIENCES

- Thinking back to last year when you were at primary school, what things did you think about when deciding what school you would like to go to: (probe if necessary on:)
 - Secondary/Grammar/Integrated
 - Mixed/single sex
 - Location of school
 - Distance to travel
 - Subjects offered
 - Friends planning to attend the school
 - Friends/family having attended the school in the past
 - School reputation
 - School's facilities e.g sports grounds
 - Single sex school – if appropriate
- What assistance/information was available to you to help you make this decision? (probe if necessary on)
 - School prospectus
 - Attendance at open nights
 - Guidance from primary school- Principal or P7 teacher?
 - Advice from parents/relatives/friends
 - Any other information e.g web-site
- What assistance/information did you actually use to help you decide?
- Are there any other things that you think would have helped you in making the decision? (probe if necessary on each of the following)
 - Formal parent/teacher event at primary school – [would pupils be involved in this?] explain further to children
 - More information about the schools in your area – probe for what types of information
 - Information on schools made available on the Internet (probe whether pupils could/would access this information if it was available)
 - Attendance at open nights
 - Guidance from primary school teachers
 - Guidance from the post-primary schools e.g. more detail in school prospectuses
- Who was involved in helping you decide what school to go to? (probe if necessary for levels of influence by)
 - Parents/family
 - Primary school teacher/principal
 - Friends
 - Post-Primary school
- Who had the final say in the decision of which schools to list on the Transfer Form? (May need to remind pupils of this process i.e. that their parent fills in the Transfer Form listing schools in

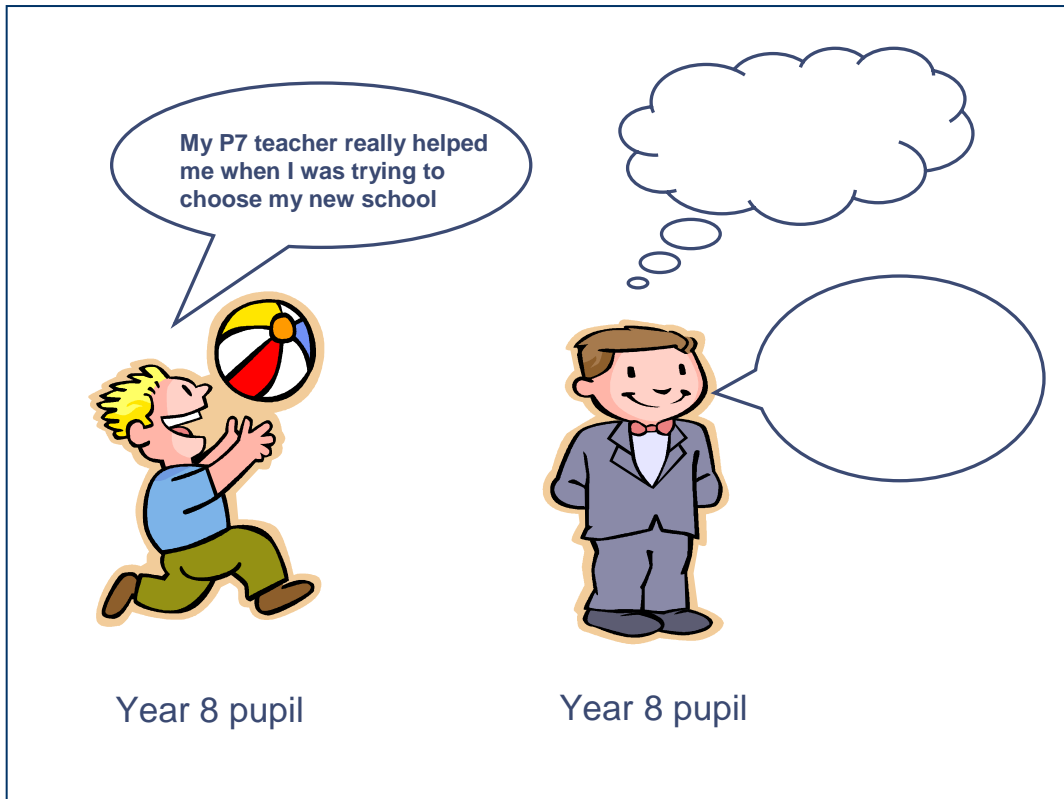
DE - Post primary research with young people

order of preference}

- Do you think that people listened to your views about choosing a new school?
- Would you like to have had more involvement in the decision to transfer?
- How helpful was the advice from your primary school in choosing a school? (Probe if necessary why/why not helpful and what could have been done better?) USE BUBBLE CARTOON TECHNIQUE – ASK CHILDREN TO COMPLETE BOTH THE THOUGHT AND SPEECH BUBBLE
- What efforts did the post-primary schools make to encourage you to attend? Probe if necessary for reasons why satisfied/dissatisfied and suggestions for improvement:
 - Arranging a visit for you to the schools
 - People from the schools visiting your primary school
 - ANY OTHERS?
- How did schools' open nights differ? Probe for evidence of how different schools sell themselves and the aspects of most importance to the pupils e.g. sports facilities, being shown around the building etc.
- *Last year the 11 plus results came out in February and you would have found out what school you would be going to at the end of May (3months).....What do you think about the length of time between these two things happening? (probe if necessary about shortening and lengthening of time periods and why?)*
- Which words best describe how you felt during those 3 months in between getting your 11 plus results and finding out what school you were going to and why? WORD ASSOCIATION TECHNIQUE
- Thinking back to when you were in P7 and when you had found out what school you would be going to the next year (May) – can you look at the following pictures and tell me which ones best describe how you felt about going to the new school? PICTURE/MOOD BOARD
- After finding out which school you would be going to (May last year) did you have any contact with your new school before you started in September? Did you visit the school? Did the school write to you? Etc Probe for issues relating to any induction
- When you started your new school in September, did you feel ready/prepared/know what to expect etc. If yes, why? If no, how could you have been better prepared?
 - School visit
 - Meet some teachers in advance
 - Information about homework policy/societies/rules etc
- *You've been at your new school now for nearly one year....Has your experience at this school been what you expected? Do you feel that this school was the right choice for you? Why/why not?*
- Thinking about your own experience of moving schools, have you any suggestions for how the whole process of changing schools could have been made more easy for you?

- **Thank and close**
- Sum up main issues arising
- Ask for any further comment
- Thank participants and close group

Appendix B: Bubble Cartoon Technique



Appendix C: Word Association Technique

Which words best describe how you felt (please circle as many as you want)?

Happy

Sad

Unsure

Worried

Disappointed

Scared

Nervous

Excited

Appendix D: Picture Board Technique



