

SUFFOLK EDUCATION DEPARTMENT 1996

A REPORT ON AN INVESTIGATION INTO WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PUPILS TRANSFER INTO THEIR NEXT SCHOOLS AT THE AGES OF 9, 11 AND 13.

PREFACE

We are most grateful to the many pupils, teachers and schools that made this study possible. We know that the collection of data caused considerable intrusion because of the unavoidable logistical constraints when organising an investigation such as this. We were received with great openness and co-operation by teachers, often at a difficult time. We thank them and believe that the outcome warrants the inconvenience caused.

The strength of this paper lies in its candour, brevity and direct style. We believe that such reports are more likely to lead to effective progress in schools if they are accessible and communicate directly with the reader.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In the overwhelming majority of cases schools are very good at ensuring that pupils are well prepared for transfer and that they settle into the new routines with the minimum of disturbance.
- The degree to which schools build on the standards already achieved by pupils in previous schools varies from school to school and subject to subject. In general this is not done well and much of the work of pupils and teachers in previous schools is undervalued.
- The standards which are ignored most are those achieved by higher attaining pupils. Continuing provision for pupils who have some learning difficulties tends to be much better.
- The dip in progress indicated by reading test progress data, which takes place in many schools when pupils transfer, is often the result of a reading curriculum in the receiving school which is too narrow. In all phases, and particularly in schools where standards are lower than might be expected, the full range of reading skills is not being systematically taught. This raises issues about the teaching of reading in successive phases in addition to those concerning quantity and challenge. Progress in speaking and listening is uneven. Progress in writing is usually better.
- In some schools, failure to build on previous attainment in mathematics means that pupils' progress is set back by a year, or more.
- Most schools are only partially successful in building on pupils' previous attainment in science. More able pupils are most disadvantaged and this is particularly the case in investigational work.
- Some teachers have suitably high expectations of pupils on entry to their schools. Many do not and often fail to recognise the sophistication of some of the work which has been done

ANNEX 6

previously. Where staff in the new school use the documentation on pupils' attainment which they receive, expectations overall are usually higher.

- Discussion about the curriculum and pupils' standards tends to be best between middle and upper schools, variable between first and middle schools and worst between primary and high schools. 'Liaison' at present focuses mostly on curriculum plans, materials, SEN and pastoral matters. Very little time is spent discussing pupils' attainment and standards. This needs to change, for whilst curriculum planning is a prerequisite to ensuring appropriate progression and standards of attainment, it is not sufficient on its own. Liaison should focus specifically on standards of work and expectations of pupils. All teachers need a common understanding of what constitutes high attainment in a subject at a given age.

In summary, although some schools are much better than others, 'receiving' schools tend to underestimate what their new pupils, particularly above average pupils, know, understand and are able to do.

Teachers too often unknowingly set limits on the standards which their youngest pupils are capable of achieving.

Improving teachers' knowledge of what has already been achieved by their new intake and ensuring that teachers use that knowledge in planning their course and preparing their lessons is a crucial element in raising achievement throughout Suffolk schools. All contributing schools need to send simple and accessible information to receiving schools and all receiving schools need to use it.

Meetings between staff in different phases need to be much more sharply focused on pupils' attainment.

Schools in all phases need to consider the issue of the teaching of reading and how teachers might develop a broader understanding and more skills in this area.

The relationship between reading and later examination success is so strong as to be almost causal. The systematic and detailed teaching of reading skills should be planned and implemented through all phases of a pupil's school life.

The findings in the summary paper below are reported using five key questions as headings, since these stood out as the main themes in the evidence gathered:

- how good are schools at preparing pupils for their new schools and making sure that they settle into the new routines quickly and without trauma ?
- how good are schools at building on the individual previous attainment of pupils when they transfer ?
- how do the expectations of pupils by staff on either side of the point of transfer compare ?
- what is the quality of transfer documentation and how well is it used ?
- what is the quality of meetings between teachers of feeder and receiving schools ?

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The birth of the project

Data collected as part of the Suffolk School Improvement Project shows consistently that there is a dip in progress in reading when pupils transfer from one phase of schooling to another. Pupils who are in 5-11 schools make more progress on average between the ages of 9 and 11 than do pupils who transfer to middle schools. Similarly pupils in middle schools make more progress in reading in Key Stage 3 than do pupils who transfer at 11 into high schools. Inspection evidence also suggests that the quality of work in year 9 in upper schools is weaker than elsewhere in those schools.

The transfer investigation was undertaken in the summer and autumn of 1996. Teams of advisers and advisory teachers visited schools and watched the work and judged the standards of named pupils in year 4 in a sample of 4-9 schools, in year 6 in some 5-11 schools, and in year 8 in selected middle schools. The focus of the work was on English, mathematics and science. In the first place, these are the core subjects and, in the second, if the situation could be accurately described in terms of these subjects, it was unlikely to be very different in terms of the rest. The quality of 'pastoral' transfer was also investigated along with the particular arrangements made for pupils with special educational needs.

Four weeks after the summer holiday the same advisers visited the same pupils in their new schools and were able to make judgements on the degree to which their previous standards were being built on, the expectations of them in their new schools, similarities and differences in the way they were being taught, the use to which records of their educational history were being put and they also made judgements on the overall impact of the schools' arrangements for ensuring a smooth transfer.

A vast amount of data was collected. 360 pupils were individually tracked through their transfer. 32 schools of different phases were visited. Observations and discussions took place for over 500 hours.

The analysis and nature of the data

There was a full day meeting of those involved in the investigation at which broad conclusions were made. A substantial number of field notes were scrutinised and three papers, one for each subject were written and are appended to this summary report.

Main themes emerge from an analysis of this mass of data. Inevitably there are schools, subjects and teachers whose practice conflicts with the main conclusions. Where there are examples of extremely effective practice, these are referred to in this report. Where quotations from teachers or pupils are used, they represent perceptions which are shared by a number of other teachers and pupils. They do not represent an idiosyncratic view.

Some headteachers and teachers are concerned that the autumn term visit took place too early and the summer term too late. There may be some truth in this and there may be good sense in revisiting a selection of pupils from the main sample in the second half of the summer term 1997 to see if the conclusions still hold. The team which carried out the investigation nevertheless holds strongly to the view that its conclusions are accurate, based on the evidence which was collected and that there are serious implications for schools, irrespective

ANNEX 6

of the findings of any future study. A deceleration is taking place in progress in many classrooms when pupils transfer, and schools, in their search for higher standards, will want to address this.

THE CONCLUSIONS

These are set out as answers to frequently asked questions. They deal with the key issues. Much more detailed subject conclusions are to be found in the appendices. The appendices also deal with aspects of transfer which are not covered here.

How good are schools at preparing pupils for their new schools and making sure that they settle into the new routines quickly and without trauma ?

Suffolk schools are very good at this aspect of their work. Much time and energy goes into it and the results are very positive. Through such strategies as 'pyramid days' when all the pupils move up a year, through meetings for pupils and parents, through pupil pairing systems, welcome booklets and a range of other things, schools make sure, in almost all cases, that the transition to the new school is smooth and trauma free.

Pupils confirmed this. They reported that the preparation for transfer had been done well that they knew the routines and that any fears and anxieties had been quickly allayed. Most were looking forward in June to going to their new schools in September and talked cogently of their aspirations and expectations. At the end of September they talked equally cogently of similarities and differences, the things they liked and disliked. They were robust individuals who, with schools' help, were well able to make the transition with very little impact on their confidence and self esteem.

Most liked their new schools and appreciated that they were now in a more grown-up environment. For some, particularly the more able pupils, the novelty was beginning to wear off.

How good are schools at building on the individual previous attainment of pupils when they transfer ?

First to Middle

Approaches to the teaching of reading in middle schools are not generally as strong as they are in first schools. In particular the books chosen by pupils in their new schools are frequently less challenging than those they were reading in their first schools and sometimes inappropriate. In some middle schools teachers intervene to ensure that pupils choose books at the appropriate level of difficulty, but this is not as common as it should be.

Progress is better in speaking and listening but while schemes of work in middle schools indicated that writing tasks will eventually challenge more able pupils, much of the early work

ANNEX 6

in year 5 concentrates on too narrow a range of written tasks. Many more able pupils spend time practising skills they have already mastered. Many pupils commented that they miss the opportunities for extended writing with which they were provided in their first schools.

There is little continuity in pupils' learning in mathematics between most first and most middle schools. This slows pupils' progress and improving the situation should be a matter of urgent attention. Overall performance in mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2 in middle schools has not yet quite reached the national average, whilst in primary schools, and in upper and high schools at the end of Key Stage 3, it is above the national average. It would appear that one reason for this is that many middle schools do not build successfully on what their pupils can already do when they arrive in year 5.

In science, most of the teaching in first schools provides opportunities for pupils to achieve at National Curriculum levels 2, 3 and 4, although investigative work is often at a lower standard. Middle schools sometimes set tasks to year 5 classes which allow achievement to level 5 but more often they fail to provide opportunities for higher attaining pupils to reach levels they already have achieved.

There is also evidence that *some* first schools in effect place a "glass ceiling" on pupils' attainment because of pressure from middle schools not to 'send us any 4s'. The culture which allows this to happen needs to be modified and a new one established which seeks to encourage children to realise their full potential as soon as they can.

Primary to High

Although some good practice occurs in year 7 in the teaching of reading, in general this tends to be less systematic than it needs to be. There is evidence here as in other phases that some teachers do not have sufficient understanding or skills in the teaching of reading or a systematic policy for developing all pupils' achievement in this area. In particular, schools need to give further attention to their strategies for encouraging pupils' personal reading. Most year 7 pupils commented that they read considerably less than they had been used to in their previous schools. This needs to be addressed.

Progress in writing in year 7 is much better than that in reading. Although pupils think that writing in their secondary schools tends to be repetitive in nature, they appreciate the stricter rules for setting out work and they have already improved its structure and complexity. This is a direct result of the teaching they receive in year 7.

In mathematics, although there are examples of good teaching which builds on previous attainment, the general picture is worrying. Secondary schools do not take sufficient steps to find out what their pupils can already do and most often teachers aim lessons at the middle or lower third of the class. A detailed analysis of the levels achieved by individual pupils in their primary schools, validated by SAT results, teacher assessments and the judgements of the advisers, show a consistent under-expectation by teachers in the high schools. Frequently pupils who achieved level 5 in their primary schools are asked to work on tasks at level 3 and 4 and in the worst cases, level 2.

The situation in science is similar although some teachers show what is possible. In one investigation a teacher made good use of data on the pupils' attainments which had been received from the primary school to target the work appropriately. Unsurprisingly the pupils achieved appropriately, within the levels 3 to 5. However, in most lessons teachers under-

ANNEX 6

estimate the levels of prior attainment, particularly in relation to investigational skills and progress is badly affected.

Middle to Upper

In general things are better at this point of transfer than elsewhere. There are almost always fewer middle schools which feed an upper school than there are first schools which feed middles, or primaries which feed high schools. At this point meetings of all staff involved are therefore logistically easier to arrange. Where meetings are held specialist subject teachers are usually involved and the numbers attending are fewer. Further, upper schools receive pupils for the last year of Key Stage 3 and their SAT scores are dependent, to a degree on work already done in the middle schools.

In English, there is less failure to build on previous attainment across most aspects of the subject, although the strategies to support reading are usually under-developed. However, where pupils have some learning difficulties, the approach is often good.

In mathematics, the picture is also somewhat brighter, although there were instances of pupils being given work to do which they had already done two years before. In science, practice is variable. If most Suffolk schools reflect those seen in the sample, much more work is needed to build effectively on previous attainment in science. Too often work is pitched too low, sometimes absurdly low and there is a failure to recognise pupils' previous attainment in the planning of lessons. In one a girl who talked cogently to an adviser about photosynthesis and what effect different coloured light might have on its rate was asked to spend time drawing round different leaves and identifying similarities and differences between them.

Commentary

Upper schools tend to be better at building on pupils' prior attainment than other phases although there is no cause for complacency. Elsewhere, there is too little account taken of what pupils can already do. The situation is worst in reading and in mathematics. There is evidence in all phases that teachers' understanding and skills in the teaching of reading need to be improved. Most schools are actively pursuing strategies for school improvement in their management, teaching and organisation. The effects on standards overall are being seen. This investigation reveals that a failure to build on pupils' previous attainment at the point of transfer is a major weakness. It halts progress, particularly in the case of more able pupils. It probably depresses the standards eventually achieved. It needs to be addressed.

How do the expectations of pupils by staff on either side of the point of transfer compare ?

This is a complicated question and subtly different to that concerned with the degree to which teachers build on pupils' prior attainment. It is possible that some teachers work backwards from the standards expected at the end of key stage and consequently demonstrate high expectations even though they do not know what pupils have achieved previously.

ANNEX 6

Undoubtedly some teachers fall into this category. One high school teacher was able to make sure that after four weeks at their new school, pupils were able to produce structured pieces of writing which were much better than they could produce in their primary school some 15 weeks before. This was achieved in complete ignorance of pupils' prior attainment.

Generally, however, this is not the case. Teachers in pupils' new schools are often concerned to provide a rather gentle start, making few real demands on pupils, particularly the more able, and fail to establish an immediate momentum. This is partly due to the frequent ignorance of what pupils can already do, but it is also due to the concept of 'a fresh start' which is widely prevalent. Often the organisational complexity overwhelms teachers as in the case of the head of a science department who commented that "as they come from different feeder schools and have been doing different things, my approach is to start again", but in some cases it comes from a distrust of teachers in the previous phase. "Pupils in the primary schools spend all their time drawing pictures. They don't do any investigational work" was the comment of one middle school teacher. It is also fairly common for teachers to view any records they do have on pupils' prior attainment with suspicion.

Although there is some poor teaching and under-expectation in feeder schools, and there is some evidence that in some primary schools the pace slackens after Key Stage 2 SATs in May, in general, any distrust in receiving schools of what has been done in the past by pupils' previous teachers is misplaced. Assessment of levels of attainment are usually accurate and pupils have probably been taught subjects with more rigour than the receiving school believes.

In English expectations are broadly appropriate in pupils' new schools in year 7 and year 9, although by no means in all lessons. The majority of first schools had higher expectations of pupils in year 4 than those which were held by teachers in middle schools in year 5. Across the phases many teachers do not have high enough expectations of incoming pupils in science. In mathematics teachers' expectations were often related to their confidence in teaching the subject but, even where this was high as in upper/high schools, pupils were still given work in many classes which was insufficiently demanding.

Expectations of pupils with special needs were usually appropriately high. The passing of records on these pupils and the use to which those records are put tend to be much better than for other pupils. There is usually an effective relationship and trust between the special needs co-ordinator in the receiving school and those of the feeder schools. There is much to be learnt from the approach taken by these teachers and there are clear benefits in the standards which many pupils with SEN achieve.

Commentary

High expectations are fundamental to good teaching in every subject and year group. In general expectations of incoming pupils are too low. A sharper start needs to be made in many schools in terms of what incoming pupils will learn, how long it will take them and how much homework will be done. The 'fresh start' approach is detrimental to pupils' progress. In planning lessons teachers would do well to begin with what the most able pupils will learn from them rather than from what will be learnt by those of middle ability or below average pupils.

<p>What is the quality of transfer documentation and how well is it used ?</p>

The quality and use of documentation sent by the feeder schools to the receiving schools is much better in English than in mathematics or science. All schools pass on reading test scores and National Curriculum levels in English for all pupils. Receiving schools use reading scores extensively, particularly for the purpose of grouping pupils. National Curriculum assessments are used less, often through suspicion of inaccuracy, and some schools set their own tests on entry.

There is less evidence that detailed information always gets to the subject or class teachers, and less still that use is made of it in planning teaching. However some teachers in receiving schools consider each pupil's portfolio of work, where these are transferred. These give them a much better picture of the strengths and weaknesses of each child. In some receiving schools, English teachers consider a letter from each pupil or a piece of autobiographical writing and this also seems to be effective in providing some information about the standards which have already been reached.

In mathematics, the quality of documentation sent to receiving schools is very variable. In the best cases National Curriculum level data are accompanied by the last parents' report for mathematics, test data and teachers' comments. In other schools, pupils in all the feeder schools had completed the same task which produced data which are then used for setting. In other pyramids however, although much time has been spent in agreeing what documentation would accompany pupils on transfer, not all feeder schools follow the agreed procedures and some send information too late for it to be of much use. Some receiving schools have incomplete data on their new pupils or different kinds of data, and this leads them either to under-value what they do have or to neglect it altogether. Even where good quality information is provided on all pupils, in many schools it does not reach the people who need it. It tends to be stored in a head of year's office and teachers of mathematics never see it. Where good information is available and good systems for dissemination exist, some teachers still ignore what their feeder schools are saying, preferring a 'fresh start' approach.

Little use is also made of information on attainment in science which is passed to receiving schools. In one high school the head of department systematically collates information on pupils' attainment from the feeder primary schools and commented : " You know so much about them before you've even met them". Such an attitude was very rare and similar problems existed in science as applied in mathematics.

As with other aspects of transfer, much of the practice associated with the passing of information on pupils with special educational needs is exemplary. These pupils are often able to make an almost seamless transition and begin in their new school where they had left off in their old.

Commentary

If teachers are to build on the previous attainments of their new pupils in order to give them a sharper start and thereby raise standards they clearly need to know what those attainments are. They need information not only for the purpose of grouping pupils but also to enable them to target their teaching appropriately. Currently the picture in most

schools is bleak. More work needs to be done across pyramids in establishing what needs to be sent and how it will be used. The principle of parsimony needs to apply. Feeder schools should only send what is necessary and what will be used. It is probably unnecessary in most cases to send large portfolios of work with each pupil. These may never be read. It is probably more helpful for National Curriculum levels and test data where available to be accompanied by a sample of work which shows the range of attainment across the pupils who are transferring, with an emphasis on that achieved by the best. Headteachers and subject leaders in receiving schools must make sure that the information which is received is used.

What is the quality of meetings between teachers of feeder and receiving schools ?

In general, the impact of cross-phase meetings is best between middle and upper schools and worst between primary and high schools. The impact of those where first and middle school teachers meet lies in between, but is very variable.

Across the three subjects these meetings have most benefit where they are focused on pupils' standards. Where teachers from different phases spend time looking at and talking about pupils' work, trust develops more quickly and teachers in receiving schools are able to see some of the high standards which have been attained and can build this knowledge into their own planning.

Time is largely wasted where pupils' work is not a focus of the meetings. Teachers mean different things by the words they use and without a piece of work in front of them, conversation is often at cross purposes. Vague generalisations or broad discussion of content taught are of little use in bringing about higher expectations in the teachers from the receiving schools.

In some pyramids, meetings between teachers of different phases have not happened for some time. There are various reasons, but one is a lack of commitment to them because teachers perceive that they have little value. These perceptions usually arise from previous attendance at meetings which lacked clarity, focus and outcomes.

Where schools have been able to work out arrangements which allow staff to teach in each others' schools, usually one lesson each week for a period of time, the benefits have been huge. These teachers have been able to see at first hand the standards achieved and have been able to build on these when the pupils move schools.

Commentary

The word 'liaison' is currently used to describe these meetings between teachers of different phases. It is too loose and fails to describe what should be taking place during them. They need to be mainly focused on pupils' work and the standards being achieved - as indeed should many of the meetings of teachers from the same school. They need to contribute to the process of providing information on which receiving school teachers can base their schemes of work and which they can use to target their teaching. These meetings are expensive in time, but if they are well organised they can

make a major contribution to this process. If they are poorly organised and if they lack a focus on standards the evidence of this investigation is that teachers' time is wasted.

OVERALL CONCLUSION

Suffolk schools are very good at ensuring a smooth pastoral transfer for pupils. Pupils look forward in most cases to going to their new schools and very few suffer any trauma.

However, the academic benefits which could accrue from all the excellent work which goes on to ensure a smooth transfer are often thrown away. The sort of seamless subject continuity and progress envisaged by the National Curriculum is far from being a reality. Teachers in receiving schools often fail to capitalise on what their incoming pupils have already achieved and their expectations of the new pupils are often too low. This particularly affects more able pupils.

All too often this results in depressed standards and progress which is too slow. It may be that the pressure on pupils is increased later in their first year in the new school and certainly it increases higher up the school, but the lack of a sharp start is a waste of time which cannot be recovered.

Pupils know that these things are happening and many teachers in feeder schools suspect it. Many parents have a story to tell which confirms it. It is very largely for receiving schools to do something about it.