

Making a successful transition to year 1

Do children make a smooth transition from the foundation stage to key stage 1? This was the question our research team set out to answer in a recent research study. **Caroline Sharp, Gabrielle White, Bethan Burge and Anna Eames** report on the results of the research, examining the views of children, parents and school staff.

Introduction

Caroline Sharp

To some people it may seem quite strange to ask whether children make a smooth transition to year 1. After all, the transition in question involves children moving to a new year-group, not a new school. On the

children's descriptions of life in year 1 mirrored their expectations in reception

other hand, the foundation stage curriculum is distinctly different from that in year 1, so do children find the move disconcert-

ing and what can schools do to help them make a successful transition?

Our study was funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DFES) and carried out in 2004. We started with a review of recent research and a telephone survey of teachers in 60 English schools.

This article focuses on the findings from the case-study schools. We visited 12 schools on two occasions (during the summer and autumn terms) to follow the experiences of children making the transition from reception to year 1. This part of the research entailed interviews with school staff, parents and the children themselves.

Children's views of the transition to key stage 1

Gabrielle White

The research team wanted to find out about children's perceptions of transition. We asked teachers to select six children from reception, representing different achievement levels, 'seasons' of birth and both genders. With their parents' permission, 70 children were interviewed during the first visits and the majority (66) of these children were interviewed again during the second visits to the schools. The researchers explained what we wanted to know and invited the children to help us find out about their experiences. We asked them to draw a picture of themselves at school, which helped them to relax and provided us with some interesting insights into their experiences.

The interviews demonstrated that most children coped well with the transition to year 1. However, they also revealed that children had some anxieties, and highlighted the influence of the curriculum and teaching approaches on children's enjoyment of learning.

Children's experiences of reception

When asked what they did at school, reception children consistently used the word

'play'. One boy said: 'I play on the computer, write stuff, quad bikes, playing battleships'. Many of the learning opportunities the children reported involved physical activity. The activities they enjoyed most were role-play, dressing-up and playing outside. Social interaction was clearly an important part of the school experience, as



one girl said: 'I like playing with [the] tea set because you can share with other people.'

When asked what they thought it would be like in year 1, children said that year 1 would be quite different from reception. Phrases such as 'work' and 'hard work' were common, as one boy explained: 'you have to do hard work when you go to year 1 because you are getting older'.

Some children were worried that the workload would increase and the work would become more difficult. Others thought there would be less opportunity to engage in the activities that they really enjoyed. Here is a typical exchange between a researcher and two children in reception.

Researcher: What do you think it will be like in year 1?

Girl: It is just going to be work, work, work.

Researcher: Is there anything you are worried about?

Girl: Yes, not being able to play with my friends.

Boy: I might not know the words in the books because they have different books and the books in year 1 are harder.

Although children's expectations of year 1 were very consistent, there were some differences in the responses from children attending different schools. Children from a school where the play-based, active-learning approach was continued from the foundation stage into year 1 were noticeably more positive about the move and tended not to use the term 'hard work' in their descriptions of year 1. They anticipated that there would be 'new things to do' when they moved up, such as model-making and 'doing new jobs'.

Children's experiences of year 1

When we returned to interview the children in the term after the transition, their descriptions of life in year 1 mirrored their expectations in reception. For many of the children the most positive element of moving to year 1 was about 'getting bigger' or 'growing up'. The majority of children used phrases such as 'hard work', 'more work' or 'loads of work' to describe their experiences of life as a year 1 pupil. They frequently mentioned number work and writing.

Researcher: What sort of things do you do in year 1?

Girl: We do hard work. We have to count lots and we are trying to do some numbers.

Some children clearly enjoyed meeting the challenge of new expectations ('I like doing hard work, I like doing lots of hard work'),



but others found it more difficult to adjust. In particular, children regretted the reduction in play activities and some mentioned the loss of choice in year 1.

It [year 1] is different ... in reception we used to dress up and we could play on the carpet with the dressing-up stuff. We can play in year 1, but not lots of times any more.

They also said that they had fewer opportunities to work with friends, move around freely and go outside. When we asked whether there was anything they did not like about being in year 1, the most common response was that they disliked spending time sitting still, listening to the teacher during 'carpet time'.

Researcher: Is there anything you don't like about being in year 1?

First Boy: Being on the carpet for a long time.

Second Boy: Neither do I because it's very boring.

First Boy: And it wastes our time playing.

Second Boy: It wastes your life.

The children in year 1 classes where staff provided play-based, practical learning opportunities, also identified differences in their experiences in year 1 when compared

to reception. But they tended not to use the phrase 'hard work' to describe their experiences and reported doing similar activities in reception and in year 1.

Girl: We have the same toys, the lego. We still play with the cars.

Boy: We still have the garage, which is my favourite game.

Girl: Yes, and we have sand and water because we brought it with us.

Boy: We do choosing like we did in reception.

For most of the children we spoke to, the move from the foundation stage to key stage 1 involved the changes shown in Figure 1.

What helped children to adjust?

The interviews with children show that their adjustment was aided when conditions in reception and year 1 were similar and the process of change took place gradually over time. Induction activities, such as opportunities for reception children to visit year 1 and continuity of experience, where reception and year 1 teachers adopted similar routines, clearly helped the children to adjust. Here are some reception children talking about their visit to year 1.

Researcher: What do you think it will be like in year 1?

Girl 1: I went there for a visit. We will do things like pictures when we go to year 1.

Girl 2: I already know because I have been there because we had 'change over classes'.

Boy: We went in their class already. Everybody moved up and I went in the year 1 class.

Parents' views of the transition to key stage 1

Bethan Burge

The research team felt it was important to find out about parents' views and experi-

Figure 1 Changes involved in the move from foundation stage to key stage 1

| Foundation stage | | key stage 1 |
|------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| Play-based | → | Work-based |
| Active | → | Static |
| Led by adults or children | → | Directed by adults |
| Thematic | → | Subject based |
| Emphasises a range of skills | → | Emphasises listening and writing |

ences of children's transition to year 1. We wanted to know whether parents had any concerns about their child's move to year 1, or whether they saw it as a routine consequence of their child getting older and progressing through school.

When we contacted parents to ask their permission to interview children, we asked whether they would be prepared to be interviewed as well. The interviews took place either at the school, or by telephone. Offering parents an opportunity to be interviewed by telephone helped to ensure that working parents were included. A total of 53 parents took part when the children were in their last term of reception and 46 of them were interviewed again once the children had moved into their year 1 classes.

The key issue for parents was communication about the transition, both in terms of written information and face-to-face meetings with staff before their child's move to year 1. Several looked back on the school's efforts to include parents when their child had started school and asked why schools seemed to put so much less emphasis on including parents during their child's transition to year 1.

Before their children moved to year 1, parents were concerned about their child's ability to cope with the transition and manage the work. Some also reported that their children were anxious about the impending change. By the time of the second interview, most parents reported that their children had settled into year 1 and were coping well with the transition.

Information about the transition

When we spoke to parents during the summer term, most said that they had not received any written information about year 1. A few had been sent a school newsletter before the summer holidays, containing information about visits the child would be making to the year 1 classroom and who their teacher would be next year.

Most parents said they would have liked to have received more information about the transition, because it would have helped them to prepare their child for the move to year 1. One mother said:

I think maybe [the school could have sent] a note out to parents saying, 'This is what we are planning to do this year, and this is how it will affect your child, this is what our expectations will be.'

The information that parents said they would have found most useful included:

- the type and level of work that their child would be doing
- the learning expectations of year 1 teachers
- any changes in their child's daily routine.

Meeting the new teacher

During our first visit, parents commented that there were few opportunities for face-to-face communication between parents and staff. We returned to this subject during our second interviews and found that some had still not had an opportunity to speak to their child's new teacher, several weeks after their child had started in year 1.

Parents wanted to meet the year 1 teacher before the summer holidays so they could find out what would be expected in year 1 and raise any issues about their child's transition and adjustment. Such a meeting would also enable them to reassure their child about the new teacher, from personal experience.

The lack of contact made it difficult for parents to establish a relationship with the new teacher that would enable them to raise concerns about their child once they had started in year 1. One parent in this position said:

It is not like in reception when we had a chance to get to know the teachers and we had the visits and everything so I felt like I had started to build a relationship with the teachers. It has been really different this time, because I don't even know her.

Some of the schools we visited had made arrangements for parents to meet their child's year 1 teacher, which were much appreciated by parents. Two of the schools held coffee mornings (one at the end of the summer term and the other at the very beginning of the autumn term) where the children and their parents could visit the year 1 classroom together. These were popular with children and parents alike. A teacher and parent at the same school described the meeting in the following terms.

At the beginning of the school year we have a 'meet the teacher' morning, where we ask parents to spend some time in the school ... They talk about ways that they can come in and help or support ... just making them feel welcome and to be part of the class. I think that that is important for parents.

Teacher

Parents' coffee morning was good because it was nice to meet the new teacher. She gave out information that you wouldn't hear otherwise and it was quite nice being able to hear her talk when she is new and you don't know her at all.

Parent

The interviews with parents suggested that parents had an important role in reassuring their children and preparing them for year 1, but this was more difficult to achieve in the absence of information from the school. On the other hand, providing parents with information and opportunities to meet their child's new teacher helped to reduce anxiety and enabled parents to support their children during transition.



Boy in reception 'painting a picture of my parents'

Staff views of the transition to year 1

Anna Eames

During our visits to the schools we spoke to headteachers, governors and school staff. This part of the article focuses on information provided by 59 reception and year 1 staff (both teachers and support staff) who took part in interviews with the research team.

Which challenges did staff identify?

Staff told us that the main challenge was posed by the move from a play-based approach in the foundation stage to a more 'formal' and 'structured' curriculum in key stage 1. Some teachers (in both reception and year 1) reported feeling 'torn' and 'pulled in different directions' in trying to maintain foundation stage practice while being all too aware of the amount of content in year 1 and the need to prepare

children for their National Curriculum assessments in year 2.

The introduction of the full literacy hour and the daily mathematics lessons was experienced as problematic because it was difficult to get young children to sit still and listen to their teacher.

Most teachers were making efforts to smooth the transition for children by introducing elements of curriculum continuity throughout the foundation stage and into key stage 1, but this was not easy to achieve, and those who had attempted it were not always confident that they had got it right.

A related challenge for staff was to ensure that children had the skills to enable them to do well in year 1. Staff thought that the most important skill children needed in order to be successful was ‘independence’ (see Figure 2).

Reception staff tended to mention independence in relation to children’s ability to carry out routine aspects of personal care. The definition of ‘independence’ provided by year 1 teachers was subtly different. For them, a key consideration was children’s ability to follow instructions and to get on with their work without relying on adult help. Other aspects of independence, such as being inquisitive and having the confidence to find out about things for themselves were

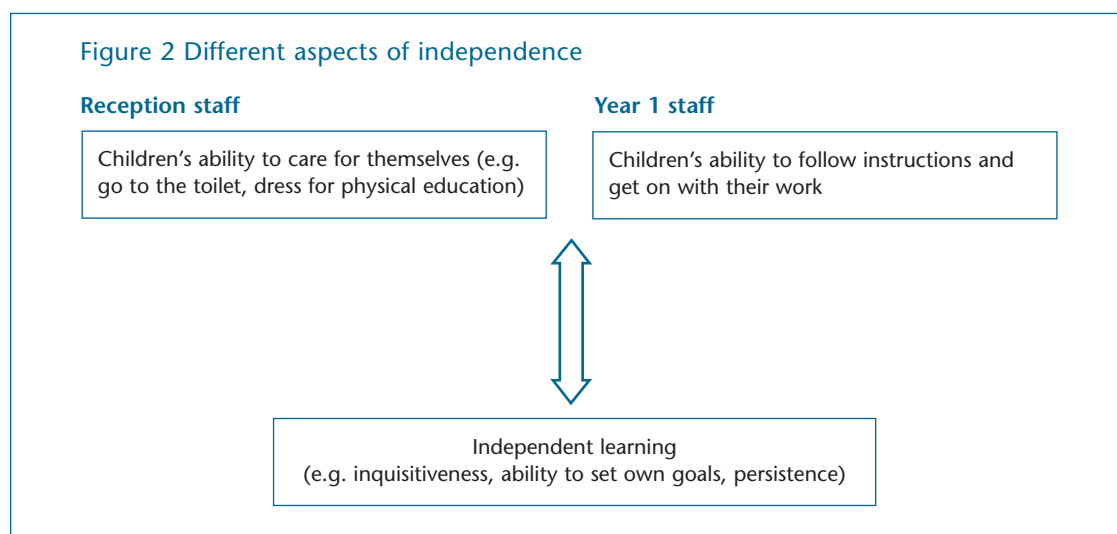
mentioned less frequently in the context of skills children needed to make a successful transition to year 1.

The year 1 staff said that in their experience most children made a smooth transition, although they acknowledged that a few children did find it difficult to adapt to the more formal learning activities in year 1. Teachers thought that children with certain characteristics were more likely to experience problems. They were particularly concerned about children who were younger or less mature, those who were less able, children with special needs and those who spoke English as an additional language. Staff thought that the best way to help these children prepare for and adapt to year 1 was to open up lines of communication between staff and parents in an attempt to consider children’s individual learning needs.

Strategies teachers used to ease the transition

The teachers and support staff we spoke to used a combination of strategies to make the transition to year 1 easier for the children. These focused on three main areas:

- induction to year 1
- continuity between reception and year 1
- communication with children, parents and staff.



Communication

What opportunities do reception children have to discuss the move to year 1?

What opportunities do reception staff have to review each child's needs with staff in year 1?

How can your school ensure that parents have received the information they need to help them support their child's move into year 1?

What opportunities are there for direct communication between parents and the year 1 teacher, both before and after children move to year 1?

School policy

How could your school's policies help children make successful transitions (to, from and within your school)?

Which strategies does your school have for identifying and supporting particular children who might find it more difficult to make the transition to year 1?

Reference

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Weblinks

Details of NFER research and publications on the early years can be found at:

<http://www.nfer.ac.uk/research-areas/early-childhood-education/>

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