

INDEPENDENT
THINKING
ON ...

TRANSITION

Dave Harris



FOSTERING BETTER COLLABORATION BETWEEN
PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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FOREWORD

Since establishing Independent Thinking in 1994, we have worked hard to share with educators around the world our belief that there is always another way. The Independent Thinking On ... series of books is an extension of that work, giving a space for great educators to use their words and share great practice across a number of critical and relevant areas of education.

Independent Thinking on Transition addresses one of the biggest elephants in the room when it comes to seeking to raise achievement for all children in all of our schools. We have created a system that deliberately throws a massive bump in the road for children to navigate at a time when they are still young and vulnerable. Rather than helping them move smoothly through their educational childhood and into adolescence and young adulthood, we throw everything up in the air just at the point when they were starting to make sense of the world around them and their place within it.

Of course, many young people deal with this process like any other rite of passage – a challenge, possibly unpleasant, but just what you have to go through. After all, my parents did before me, and their parents before them.

But, as ever, there is another way.

Drawing on his experience in all sorts of schools in various parts of the world, including establishing a 3–18 all-through school in a former pit village in Nottinghamshire, Independent Thinking Associate Dave Harris shares insights, tips and ideas for primary and secondary schools, encouraging and inspiring them to work together to make the whole process of transition not just less of an

INDEPENDENT THINKING ON TRANSITION

ordeal but an altogether more positive and constructive event for all concerned.

A head teacher I met once described trying to get primary and secondary schools to work together on better transition practices as being like 'mating a cat and a dog'. With this book we can all come together to address the elephant, cat and dog, and create an altogether better animal for our young people.

**IAN GILBERT
LINCOLN**

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I would like to thank the many wonderful teachers, both primary and secondary, who step out of their comfort zone to help give young people a stimulating educational journey.

Thank you to the inspiring team at Independent Thinking who continue to provide solutions in a world so often full of negativity and accountability. Thank you to Ian in particular for making it all happen.

Thank you to my wife, Esther, for her unstinting support and belief in me, and to my daughters, Beth and Meg, for their talents and passions and for reminding me why this is all so important.

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FIRST THOUGHTS

'We have a brilliant transition programme,' proudly claimed one secondary school leader I met recently. I held my breath in anticipation of finding the educational holy grail I had been searching for. 'We have two great days in early July when the primary kids visit us and do a forensic science project.'

My heart sank.

This is not brilliant transition. In fact, it probably isn't transition at all.

I have been working in the area of transition for over 15 years, creating one of England's first all-through 3-18 state schools in the early 2000s. Back at that time, I wrote a book called *Are You Dropping the Baton?*, which focused on ways of improving the transition from primary to secondary education.¹ In it, I painted a positive picture of what schools can achieve when they work closely together. However, it is with great sadness that I can see the gap has not narrowed over the past decade. Indeed, there are many signs indicating that it has in fact widened. We are now staring into not a gap but a chasm, one that claims more victims every year.

Surely, enough is now enough. The time for action is here. In this short book, my aim is to succinctly highlight the issues causing this problem, and then to offer some straightforward and practical solutions to remove them. The book is organised into four main sections: in Chapter 1 (The Chasm) we explore what the problem is and its effect

1 D. Harris, *Are You Dropping the Baton? From Effective Collaboration to All-Through Schools - Your Guide to Improving Transition* (Independent Thinking Series) (Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing, 2007).

on learning; in Chapter 2 (Bridging the Chasm) I propose a seven-step process to improve transition; in Chapter 3 (Success Factors) we consider other features that affect transition; and in the appendices there are materials to support the ideas put forward in the book.

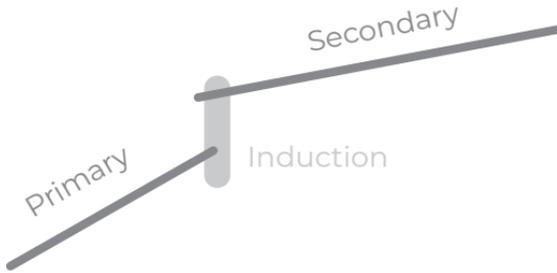
The secondary school I mention on page 1 may have designed and executed a couple of fun days for their new pupils, and this is probably something worth doing. But if we believe it is solving the transition problem then we are fooling ourselves. At the very best, this type of event helps pupils to feel positive about their new school and enables them to become familiar with some new faces, names and rooms. However, it does nothing to develop coherent learning and progression, and in some cases it might even be construed as false marketing.

There can be a big difference between what a secondary school puts on during days like these and the diet of lessons served up once the children are on roll. I am not suggesting that fun learning events should be avoided, but we need to be clear that their role is simply about smoothing the bumps as young people deal with some of the many differences they will find between the two types of institution.

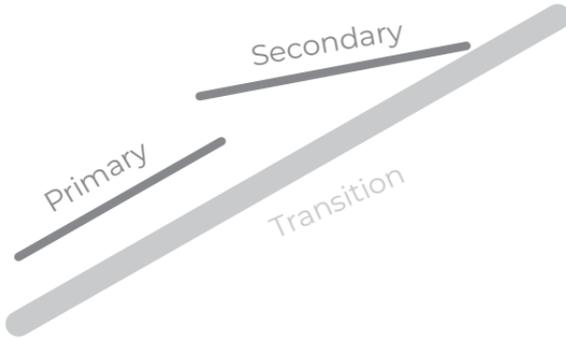
Let's get the language straight from the start. These types of event are not about *transition* but *induction* – inducting pupils into new places and procedures. Transition, on the other hand, needs to be a much longer, more detailed and ambitious process. Indeed, in its perfect form, transition begins on entry to primary school and finishes when the child leaves secondary school.² The following figure summarises the two approaches.

² See D. Harris and J. West-Burnham, *Leadership Dialogues II: Leadership in Times of Change* (Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing, 2018), section 1D.

INDUCTION



TRANSITION



While evidence suggests that any change of school is a time when transition issues need to be addressed, for the purposes of this book I will focus on the issues experienced by pupils as they move between primary and secondary school.

CHAPTER 1

THE CHASM

Before I take you on a short history lesson of the education system to help you understand the thinking – or lack of it – behind the current system, let us first agree on what the outcomes of a successful transition process might be.

Back in 2008, the then Department for Children, Schools and Families produced a report on transition in which they defined the following key indicators of pupils enjoying a successful transition:

- 1 *Developing new friendships and improving self-esteem and confidence.*
- 2 *Settling so well in school life that parents have no concerns.*
- 3 *Showing an increasing interest in school and school work.*
- 4 *Getting used to new routines and school organisation with great ease.*
- 5 *Experiencing curriculum continuity.¹*

Over a decade after this report was published, we would find it hard to disagree that a pupil exhibiting these traits has experienced a successful transition (although the phrase ‘showing an increasing interest in school and

1 M. Evangelou, B. Taggart, K. Sylva, E. Melhuish, P. Sammons and I. Siraj-Blatchford, *What Makes a Successful Transition from Primary to Secondary School?* Research Report DCSF-RR019 (London: Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008), pp. 53–54. Available at: <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8618/1/DCSF-RR019.pdf>.

school work' might have caused a few raised eyebrows in primary schools).

The basic needs of transition have probably not changed a great deal in 50 years, let alone 10. While the report suggested that a good number of pupils interviewed scored favourably on all five criteria, my own experiences would lead me to be less optimistic that we're getting it right. Most of the young people I encounter report few issues with items 1 and 4 (the areas on which many schools focus) but they are definitely not scoring high when it comes to areas 3 and 5. In a recent interview that I carried out with pupils one year after transition, under 30% thought that learning was more interesting than at their primary school.

I believe that the current focus on accreditation and testing in many parts of the world has driven secondary education into a traditional enclave where the test has become the goal rather than a tool in the process. To counter this, I would propose that the list on page 5 could be updated to include two more measures:

- 6 Understanding that education is more than just the exam grade achieved.
- 7 Understanding that you are never too old to enjoy learning.

How does your school measure up to these criteria today? What are you doing well? What could you improve? Where do you start?

According to a study by Marlau van Rens and colleagues, the most obvious but least used place to start is by asking young people themselves:

the involvement of children in decision-making by giving them a voice has been an area of growing interest ... The

absence of any direct consultation with the children involved in the transition process demonstrates the low priority given to this aspect of transfer. It should be possible for secondary schools to learn from children by asking incoming students about their thoughts about the transition, and ask recently switched students about their experiences and what they can suggest to smoothen the transition for other children.²

In England, at least, student voice has been forced into the backseat in recent years as ‘teacher talk’ has been given its place front and centre. But in transition, as in many other aspects of school life, we would do well to give children and young people a platform from which to speak about their experiences and a commitment that we will listen to them.

But how have things come to this? As is so often the case, in order to move forward more effectively, we need to look at the past.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PRIMARY AND SECONDARY DIVIDE

As with all things education, let’s start with the brain. After all, the more education is focused on the neuroscience of learning – the small electrical changes at the heart of all we do – the better we will be at designing an education system that is genuinely fit for purpose. With this in mind,

2 M. van Rens, C. Haelermans, W. Groot and H. Maassen van den Brink, Facilitating a Successful Transition to Secondary School: (How) Does it Work? A Systematic Literature Review, *Adolescent Research Review* 3(1) (2018): 43–56. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs40894-017-0063-2>.

let's get something clear from the start: the traditional splitting of education into primary and secondary has absolutely nothing to do with the brain. It should do, but it doesn't. The historic reason for separating education into distinct phases is firmly rooted in practicalities.

In the past, education was a very local affair, often based in a single room close to the homes of its pupils. Children of all ages were taught in the same space, usually in lines, with the youngest at the front and the oldest at the back. Without becoming carried away by romantic reflections on the good old days of education, we can at least picture an educational environment focused, by necessity, on engagement, and not on the data-driven, achievement-focused system now seen in many parts of the world.

My own grandmother, a bright, intelligent woman, talked with passion about her time in her school in Neen Sollars, in rural England in the early 20th century. She described how the line between learner and teacher was frequently blurred, the pupils often learning as much from one another as they did from the teacher. General topics would be discussed by the whole class, then individual work would follow, with older children often supporting the learning of younger ones. Work was set at a variety of levels to support the different learning needs – differentiation before it had a name.

I was always impressed by her detailed knowledge of the geography of the world: she knew every country, capital city and major river, despite having never left her home in deepest Shropshire. She explained how, in her first weeks at school, she sat near the globe at the front of the class and, within days, an older pupil was enthusiastically sharing its hidden secrets. Each time a new pupil arrived at the school, the introduction was repeated and expanded, and her knowledge and interest increased. By the time she left

the school she was leading the whole class in geography. These days we would call such an approach a 'spiral curriculum', in which learning is revisited regularly and expanded on each time (there is more on the spiral curriculum in Chapter 2).

This type of school is called a 'one-room school' and, although there are many rural communities where such schooling still exists, in general it is an approach that has disappeared from the educational landscape in many parts of the world. As transport improved, larger schools were possible, and following the principles of a burgeoning industrial society, larger was seen as more efficient. Bigger schools meant that the model of teaching all the children together was growing increasingly untenable, and so a method was needed to separate them into different classes.

The obvious way to achieve this was by age, which also helped to moderate noise levels for the older pupils, allowed for the introduction of smaller furniture for smaller children and provided the opportunity for a very different curriculum for the youngest pupils. As workforce requirements broadened through the Industrial Revolution and the growth of the British Empire, the need to provide a wider 'specialist' curriculum grew. Housing all of this provision under one roof often proved impractical, and so different sites for different ages developed. These are the seeds from which grew two separate organisms – the primary and secondary schools with which we are now familiar.

It is a law of nature that when systems grow in isolation from each other, it is almost inevitable that they will develop different approaches, attitudes and beliefs. This is certainly true of primary and secondary education. In

many places they have evolved separately for over 100 years with little regard to the needs of young people.

The situation is further exacerbated by the argument that primary-age children learn best in one way and secondary pupils learn best in a different way. Too often these assumptions have little basis in the facts. Of course, the brain of a 3-year-old and an 18-year-old have different levels of maturity and will respond in different ways to stimulation, but the neuroscience of learning suggests that the variations between the two are not as great as our school systems would suggest.

I asked paediatric neurologist and Independent Thinking Associate Dr Andrew Curran for his opinion. Does the brain suddenly change to learn in a different way at the age of 11? From a neurological perspective, is a sharp transition between two very different environments the best way to learn?

He was very clear. The brain does not suddenly undergo a transformation at a set age. First, brain development happens at different rates for every child. Ideally, any alterations in the environment to accommodate changes in the process of learning should be done as needed and not at some arbitrary age. Second, while many changes happen to the brain between infancy and adulthood, they all require a gradual change in environment, not an abrupt one. In fact, viewed from a neurological perspective, the 'jolt' experienced by young people as they pass from primary to secondary school could hardly happen at a worse time – and, for many, it is an experience from which they never recover.

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WHEN IT COMES TO LOOKING AT THE QUALITY OF OUR CURRENT SCHOOLING SYSTEM, THE BIGGEST ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM IS TRANSITION. WE DO IT THE WAY WE'VE ALWAYS DONE IT AND, DESPITE OUR BEST INTENTIONS, WE OFTEN END UP DOING IT BADLY.

BUT, AS EVER, THERE IS ANOTHER WAY.

Which is where Independent Thinking Associate Dave Harris comes in. With an impressive track record in leadership that includes establishing one of England's all-too-rare all-through 3–18 state schools, Dave knows first-hand how much can be achieved when all phases work together and keep the children, not the system, at the heart of all they do.

In this book he tackles school transition head-on, sharing a wealth of practical tips and vividly illustrating how primary and secondary schools can collaborate better to ensure their pupils enjoy a smooth and effective move between the two phases.

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This is just what our education system needs: a thorough discussion about the difference between induction and transition.

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Well worth a read if you are passionate about pupils' well-being and the success of our education system.

JO EDWARDS, TRUST PRINCIPAL, SOUTH BANK MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST

Dave Harris has worked for over 20 years in school leadership, including 12 years as a school principal across both primary and secondary phases. During this time he has developed a reputation for innovative thinking and practice, which he is now sharing with school leaders across the world. He is a much sought-after speaker and writer and is also Business Director of Independent Thinking.

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