

## Evaluation of Learning Away

### Hypothesis 6: Transition

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This report should be cited as: CUREE (2012) *Evaluation of Learning Away: Hypothesis 6: Transition*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

## Key Hypothesis 6: Transition

*High quality residential learning programmes incorporating cross-age/peer mentoring and collaborative learning can significantly improve pupils' transition experiences, particularly between phases, and improve pupil progression at times of transition from one key stage to the next.*

### Background

Transition, and transfer between schools/phases in particular, is often associated with a number of possible concerns for schools, pupils and their parents. These range from 'dips' in pupils' attitude, engagement and achievement to instances of bullying, anxiety about building relationships with peers and staff and new expectations and approaches to teaching and learning. It is therefore not surprising that many schools develop systems and approaches that aim at helping children to feel secure and settled in order to support them to engage successfully in academic work.<sup>1</sup>

Results from a major longitudinal study<sup>2</sup> are helpful in establishing what we mean by successful transfer from primary to secondary school, with the key features as follows:

- social adjustment (new friendships and higher self esteem);
- institutional adjustment (settling well and getting used to new routines); and
- curriculum interest and continuity (being prepared for the level and style of work in secondary school, being challenged as well as having an opportunity to build on progress at primary school – i.e. the academic dimensions of transfer and the specific strategies which help to sustain pupils' progress).

### Programme-wide outcomes related to transition

Attention to the importance of transition in young people's lives and learning was a particular feature in the work of five clusters in the first two years of the LA Programme.<sup>3</sup> Clusters took part in a number of activities which are likely to be 'steps on the way' to improved transition experiences. These related principally to the:

- identification of the skills (including social skills and personal qualities) required to achieve successful transition;
- design, refinement and implementation of residential activities and resources targeting the development of such skills; and
- monitoring and evaluation of changes in pupils' skill sets.

Whilst clusters did not necessarily develop practice in all these of the areas it is likely that when combined they are likely to lead to improved transition experiences.

Across the programme, clusters (via staff report, student report and self evaluation) reported positive outcomes in relation to pupils' (including disengaged and special needs pupils') development of **enhanced skills**, including confidence, communication, bravery, respect, responsibility, joining-in, decision-making, ownership of learning, learner engagement, team work, independence, collaboration/group work in problem solving, sharing, listening, self esteem, resilience and organisational skills. Walney particularly highlighted pupils' improved confidence in working with others after the residential.

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<sup>1</sup> Evangelou, M et al, *What makes a successful transition from primary to secondary school?* DCSF, 2008, Research Report DCSF – RR019

<sup>2</sup> Evangelou et al, *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Bulwell, South Hetton, Walney, Calderglen, BEMAT

Walney followed some of the pupils post-transition. Their teachers noted:

- the pupils settled smoothly and quickly into their new school; and
- there were improved pupil-teacher relationships.

The pupils themselves felt that their transition to secondary school had been 'quite easy' and mentioned the Learning Away camp as being a particularly effective way of preparing them for their move. They highlighted that it had enabled them to mix with children from other schools.

### **Examples of contexts and transition focused residential interventions**

#### *Bulwell EAZ Cluster*

This Learning Away cluster of one secondary and seven primary schools, led by the local Education Improvement Partnership (EIP), is situated in an economically and socially deprived area north of Nottingham. The focus of the cluster's residential activities is across the board and hundreds of pupils from KS 1-4 have taken part in the first two years of the LA programme. A key aim is to *facilitate transition and minimise the 'achievement dip' that frequently happens following transfer to the next key stage*. Related aims include raising student aspirations, developing student social, emotional and personal skills, developing resilience and, not least, increasing teacher commitment to and confidence in implementing and evaluating the residential programme.

The residentials are cross phase, with older students supporting younger ones. Locations have included Edale and Hartington in the beautiful Peak District, and the extensive campus of Bulwell Academy itself. Activities have included the physically challenging, such as climbing and orienteering, problem solving challenges such as crossing a swamp using carpet tiles and a range of other activities, from boating to sports.

Self-esteem and relationship building are amongst the hallmarks of successful transition for Bulwell cluster. The Year 7 residential, for example, succeeded in helping the pupils make friends with their new classmates, as well as develop their confidence and preparedness to try new things. Similarly, colleagues noted increased confidence about the move to secondary school amongst Year 5 children, who were reassured by the culture of peer support and care they experienced. During different residentials developed and delivered by the cluster, children in KS1 and 2 developed their independence and life skills and all pupils gained in resilience, made new relationships with peers and staff and enhanced their teamwork skills. Staff were able to learn more about their pupils' needs and interests from spending time with them in a different environment. The secondary school staff got to know students before transition and were able to discuss concerns with them. They also valued the opportunity to develop relationships with the primary colleagues.

*"I used to worry a lot and not get much done...I learned that...if we work together and help each other we can get most things done" (Year 5 pupil)*

*"...it made me feel grown up. Nobody fell out because we all had to look after each other" (Year 6 pupil)*

*"..it's taught me much more about children themselves and given a much better insight" (staff)*

#### *South Hetton*

The cluster involves three primary schools located in an ex mining area of County Durham, working within its transition focused residential programme, with the Year 7 department of the secondary school they feed into. The cluster aims to *smooth transition between KS 1 and 2 and into KS 3 through strong curriculum links in a real life context*. The Ofsted-praised

thematic curriculum is central to these residential experiences, which also aim to give pupils a greater voice in their own learning. Along the way, the intention is to build pupil confidence, develop independent learning skills, build resilience for transition, raise aspirations and support enquiry-based learning. Several camping residentials linking with the curriculum for Years 3, 4 and 5 have already resulted in greater independence amongst pupils in these year groups, who have become less reluctant to take risks and more adept at solving problems.

A special camp to promote primary to secondary transition involved all the cluster Year 6 pupils spending three nights learning the skills of collaboration and teamwork, whilst linking the curriculum and learning experiences in the classroom to the outdoors, during activities which had a strong focus on friendship building. Year 7 pupils mentored the younger ones as they took part in activities ranging from archery, bell boating and camp craft to cooking, many of which were designed to promote collaborative learning:

*“The teamwork requirements of some of the activities were particularly powerful”  
(staff)*

*“To put the tents up we had to use lots of teamwork... it was the first time we talked to the Year 7s.” (Year 6 pupil)*

*“We had to use our problem solving and communication skills here, so it got us talking.” (Year 6 pupil)*

Motivation and engagement improved, as did communication and interaction, life skills, collaboration skills, teamwork, problem solving, independent learning and making new friends and contacts for transition. An excellent indication of the importance of these skills for sustaining children’s learning and their abilities to deal successfully with transition came with the significant improvement in their end of year SATs results, which were the best for many years. This was particularly true of children with SEN, because of the improvements in their attitude to learning.

#### *Walney*

Walney cluster is a partnership of 5 primary schools, a special school, an academy and a pupil referral unit in Barrow-In-Furness. The specific aims of the cluster’s transition focused residential programme included developing relationships between pupils and staff from primary and secondary schools, developing pupils’ confidence and emotional resilience in order to *build a community of inclusive and aspirational future year 7 students through experiences gained in year 6.*

Staff and primary and secondary pupils were all involved in collectively identifying and describing what they believed to be the skills required for effective transition in this cluster and designing the programme that would support the development of these skills. During the residential, Year 6 pupils and their Year 10 mentors were camped in the grounds of one of the cluster schools, where they tackled a cycle of four activities including rock climbing, orienteering, physical problem solving and managing their own free time, all designed to build their self esteem, confidence and teamwork skills. Pupils were also involved in identifying and applying assessment criteria for these skills. Pupils were grouped with different peers during the activities to take them out of their comfort zones and mingling and bonding with new people increased their confidence in forming friendships, although they slept in tents in friendship groups.

Overall, pupils’ confidence and social skills, communication and teamwork skills have improved, they have developed a sense of achievement and motivation and are more

engaged with their learning. By being involved in joint group work and problem-solving activities, the Year 6 pupils formed new friendships with peers from other schools and the secondary students.

*“How fantastically the children became involved! How well they worked together!”  
(staff log)*

By being involved in the assessment of the skills, pupils developed a meta-awareness of their own learning trajectory that also meant these skills could be easily and explicitly used in the new secondary setting. Pupils made a smooth transition to their secondary school and noted the value of the residential in facilitating this.

The most evident outcome for staff was their improved knowledge of pupils and relationships with them and their commitment to using contextualised and out of the classroom learning on a regular basis. The teachers valued an opportunity to see “true personalities emerge in a holistic environment”. This was particularly important for the (secondary) staff from the academy who got to know the Year 6 pupils, particularly the more vulnerable ones better, which “helped them to see beyond presenting name and data about needs”.

#### *Calderglen*

In the first two years, this cluster’s Learning Away programme mainly involved a secondary school (Calderglen High), located in East Kilbride, Glasgow. This cluster aims to build a community for the secondary school and its feeder primaries, to *support the transition from primary to secondary* as well as to provide ‘real’ learning experiences from which to build the introduction of ‘curriculum for excellence’ with a focus on enterprise and health and wellbeing.

The cluster organised a two night residential specifically focussed on transition at Lake Windermere, where 167 S1 (Year 7 equivalent) pupils participated in 17 groups early in their first term at secondary school. More senior pupils were there as buddies, or to assist with groups and a mix of staff from across the secondary school joined in to ensure that pupils had access to a range of staff that they saw in and around the school. Pupil working groups were matched where possible with their tutor class allowing them to build personal relationships with classmates that they may not be familiar with from primary school. Activities during this residential included canoeing, abseiling, climbing, fell walking, orienteering and a challenge course.

Pupils built many positive relationships with each other and with the staff and developed a range of valuable skills. A particular outcome for the school was an identification of the need to focus on developing the students’ team working skills. The school developed and piloted a new approach with a number of classes. Next, all subject areas adapted their courses to build in opportunities for developing teamwork skills in the classroom. The school sees their residential programme for S1 students as one of the drivers helping them to systematically develop the way in which pupils work together.

#### *BEMAT*

This Learning Away cluster of a high and three middle schools is located in a relatively affluent rural area in Bedfordshire. For this cluster, with an overarching aim of developing students’ responsibility for and engagement in their learning, transition originally was not a specific target. Yet, successful transition of students (who participated in the residential activities in 2009-10) from local middle schools to the high school was an outstanding feature of the start of the 2010-11 school year. These students were able to effect a

markedly successful transfer to their new environment as a result of their LA collaboration with staff and students from the high school in the previous year.

The core focus of this cluster's PE academy residential was on developing the students' communication, leadership and organisational, social and team work skills, as well as improving their confidence.

Student direct involvement in preparation and planning of a residential that would allow them to develop these skills whilst participating in physically challenging sports and outdoor activities was one of the key characteristics of the programme. The participating students were selected from Years 8, 9 and 10 classes across the cluster schools. Middle and high school students working together, they were responsible for deciding on the venue, costs, transport, learning activities and expertise needed to support them, undertaking the risk assessment and communications with parents. To enable the students to work on planning the residential, the cluster schools supported them in attending after-school sessions and classes held at the high school during school hours.

The high school leadership team were surprised when whilst monitoring Year 9 students' experience of transfer they noticed that the young people who were involved in the programme had settled much easier and faster than usual. They attributed this to the students having an opportunity to experience the high school and meet some of the older students and develop friendships with them long before transfer. The young people developed relationships with older peers whilst solving problems around preparing the residential. The students themselves found that having sport as a common interest was also important in helping them bond. The cluster has since recognised the potential of residential programmes in improving students' experience of transition and has made the cross-phase peer collaboration and support one of the core principles of its Learning Away work.

### **Common features in the clusters' approaches to facilitating transition through residential learning**

The Learning Away clusters which included effective transition amongst their aims were by no means a homogeneous group and their approaches involved children of varying ages and backgrounds, ranging from comparatively disadvantaged, such as those in the Bulwell and Walney clusters and the comparatively well-off, such as those involved in BEMAT. They also used a variety of venues, ranging from camping to hostels and residential centres, and the relative levels of school staff and residential centre staff differed between clusters.

There were, however, a number of common features to the transition residential programmes across the five clusters.

#### *Student involvement in the development of the residential programme*

Active student involvement in programme development was a characteristic of four (out of five) clusters' work. Both primary and secondary schools in these clusters were successful in supporting their students to take on a more leading and participatory role in planning their residential. This ranged from asking students to simply select the activities to virtually making them responsible for the residential and all the logistics (e.g. BEMAT cluster's PE academy residential).

Walney cluster's approach secured pupil engagement in programme development most deeply through involving young people at a number of levels, including determining and assessing the skills they need for successful transition and designing a residential that would support the development of these skills. Co-construction was the hallmark of all the preparation and planning, thereby making sure that the combined experiences of staff and

pupils were used to construct a programme of activities, which would take account of the needs of all pupil groups. Planning teams created power point presentations and co-coached each other to prepare other pupils and staff for the residential. Six key skills were identified: confidence, communication, bravery, respect, responsibility and joining in. Thought was also given to the process of identifying when pupils had achieved each desirable skill and boys and girls alike enjoyed adding new recognition beads to their skills bracelets once camp organisers had been presented with clear evidence of the behaviour and actions which indicated that the individual pupil had achieved a particular skill.

*Attention to developing students' social and collaborative working/learning skills*

Working together to put up a tent, calculating how much bread they would need for their trip, and bell boating – these are just some of the examples of activities used by the five clusters to support the development of students' interpersonal and team work skills.

To help their students develop the social skills they need for a smooth transition, the clusters created opportunities for students to meet and work with unfamiliar peers. For example, to encourage the young people, many of whom had never met each other before, to interact and work together, the teachers from BEMAT cluster split them up into mixed school groups to complete tasks. The students believed this as a successful strategy in helping them build relationships and break down barriers.

In many instances, members of staff prompted the participating children and young people to reflect on how they lived and worked together, what they did well and what they needed to improve.

Both primary and secondary age students saw that some of the activities *required* them to work together. They recognised the value of the support they had from their peers and were good at admitting that they did not always work well as a team, noticing that they e.g. need to be better at listening. Young people noted the importance of trust and learning about each other and highlighted that many of the activities and arrangements during their residential supported their development (South Hetton and Calderglen<sup>4</sup>).

*Cross-phase peer support and mentoring*

Involving older students in working with younger ones was one of the key and widespread mechanisms adopted by the clusters in their approaches to transition residential. For example, colleagues from Bulwell involved KS4 students in leading some of the activities for younger pupils. The students received training in delivering the activities and acting as mentors and were supported by both their own school and wider cluster staff. In addition to multiple benefits for younger children and in particular their better readiness for transition, the older students learnt from the experience too. Many of them developed leadership skills and used their work as mentors to complete coursework for vocational curriculum areas and receive qualifications.

*Residential trips being part of a bigger programme/being embedded*

For several clusters, it was important that their transition residential were embedded or became part of long term programmes. Some clusters saw weeks and months of students' involvement in programme development as a way of embedding their learning and maximising it, others made explicit connections with the school curriculum. Calderglen, for example, used experiences and activities similar to those students had during the residential (working as a team to put up a tent), during PSHE lessons to support the process of young people settling in and developing their team work and social skills.

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<sup>4</sup> Diamond 9 CUREE SET data

### **Possible explanations for the outcomes**

In this section we wanted to explore the causes of successful transition experiences. Whilst Walney had collected some evidence after transition there is, as yet, little direct *post transition* evidence from the other residential programmes described above. This is partly because Learning Away is in itself a short term, intense intervention that often takes place late in the school year. In the absence of such evidence we explore ways in which the wider public knowledge base can start to act as a proxy indicator of how far the successful acquisition of the skills reported above are likely to have a positive impact on the pupils' transition.

We know from research linking student achievement with motivation and wellbeing the value of opportunities for students to develop their relationship and learning skills through carefully planned 'extra curricular' programmes.<sup>5</sup> Recognition amongst both staff and pupils that there are personal skills that pupils can learn which help them to do well and feel confident in school is also important. A systematic review of research on teachers' construction of challenge for students<sup>6</sup>, including 'at risk' and low achieving students as well as gifted and talented groups came to the conclusion that challenge had to embrace motivation as well as cognitive challenge, and that group work and problem-solving skills were an important part of the learning process. All of these factors are involved in all five of the transition-focused cluster residential programmes.

The six key skills which were targeted for development in the Walney cluster were focused on transition and identified jointly by staff and primary and secondary pupils working together to share their experiences. The cluster also developed mechanisms for involving students in collecting evidence about and assessing when pupils had made progress in any of the skill areas during the course of the residential. The development of personal and social skills and of meta-cognitive control of them, coupled with the research on transition, student wellbeing and successful challenge cited above, combine to suggest that pupils will be able to use their new skills effectively to secure positive experiences of transition and thus positive outcomes. Follow up research interviews with some of the students show that they did indeed experience a positive transition and particularly valued the role of the residential in facilitating this. In general the LA programme, irrespective of the particular aim of the cluster or individual residential, involves pupils in stepping outside their comfort zones, adjusting to new situations, meeting staff and new people and tackling unfamiliar tasks. These are all features of transition, especially between phases and schools, and the residential experiences across the programme as a whole are therefore likely to make a positive contribution to children's transition experiences.

### **Conclusions**

During the first two years of the programme, the LA clusters targeted appropriate skill development, used an effective range of activities and created positive circumstances for the successful achievement of their aims regarding transition. As the next stage of their development the clusters are recommended to strengthen the work on following the pupil cohorts through to post transition and using that learning to further refine and develop their residential programmes. Already started in some clusters (Walney in particular), such work can be supported through the opportunities provided by the length and scope of the PHF LA

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<sup>5</sup> Bell, M., Cordingley, P., Gibbons, S. & Hawkins, M. (2008). *Review of Individual Studies from Systematic Research Reviews*. Coventry: CUREE.

<sup>6</sup> CUREE/QCDA (2009) *Building the evidence base: Strand 3 challenge review report*.

programme and the close links between feeder primaries and destination secondary school/s within their clusters.