

**MAPPING BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL TRANSITIONS
IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE –
IRISH AND ESTONIAN EXPERIENCES**

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Abstract. Several international studies refer to school transitions¹ as a time when pupils are particularly vulnerable and may easily become disengaged and at-risk of early school leaving. Early school leaving is generally seen to jeopardise young people's future as their possible career opportunities and life chances are largely determined by their educational attainment at school. The overall aim of this exploratory study is to obtain more adequate knowledge of factors that influence school transitions drawing on data gathered from Ireland and Estonia, representing two different national education systems. The analysis of quantitative and qualitative data indicate that while a number of institutional/organisational factors can be identified in both countries as having a detrimental effect on pupils during transition, the nature of these factors in Ireland and Estonia is different. The study builds upon existing international research on transition-related difficulties in school.

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1. Introduction

The level of educational attainment in economically developed countries has risen constantly over the past decades. In most cases, compulsory education now covers the primary and at least part of secondary education with most pupils staying on in formal education until the end of upper secondary level. However, despite this general trend, every year a significant minority of pupils drop out of

¹ Many international studies use the terms 'transition' and 'transfer' synonymously while writing about the move from one level of schooling to another. In this article, the term 'transition' is chosen to refer to the move to a new learning environment. This term is considered more appropriate to refer to the process of moving from one level of schooling to another.

school without even minimum qualifications, thus jeopardising their future – research evidence shows that future career opportunities and life chances of young people are largely determined by their educational attainment at school (Müller and Gangl eds. 2003, OECD 1998). While the reasons for leaving school are complex, there is some research evidence which indicates that schools have an important role to play in pupil engagement (Smyth 1999). Moreover, in order to promote social inclusion and combat educational disadvantage – a priority in contemporary societies – a better understanding is needed about factors that have an impact on pupils' experiences at school. In particular, this may help to reduce the number of pupils who terminate their formal education prematurely. This matter requires urgent attention as the impact of early school leaving on pupils' future life-chances in terms of increased probability of social exclusion later in life is well documented (Croxford 2004, Biggart 2000, Nisbet and Watt 1994).

There is an increasing body of literature exploring the impact of school effects on pupil outcomes (Jencks et al. 1972, Mortimore et al. 1988, Hedges 1994, Croxford and Cowie 1996, Card and Krueger 1996, Lee 2000, Cullen et al. 2003). Several international studies refer to school transitions as a time when pupils are particularly vulnerable and may easily become disengaged at school. Most of these studies focus specifically on the transition from primary to lower secondary level (see Seidman, et al. 1994, Woods 1995, Youngman, ed. 1996, Gutman and Midgley 2000, Anderson, et al. 2000, Kvalsund 2000, Lucey and Reay 2000). While this transition point is widely researched, the transition from lower secondary to upper secondary schooling has received little attention; although some research is emerging from Scandinavian and Baltic countries (see Myckelbust 2002; Erikson 2005, Rupsiene, 2006). Perhaps the lack of comprehensive research in this area is due to the fact that upper secondary schooling² is still voluntary in most European countries, while the lower secondary level³ is part of compulsory schooling and thus receives more attention from policy makers and educators. However, transition to upper secondary school is also an important 'point of departure' in some national systems marking the time when important choices are made in terms of young persons' subsequent pathways including entry to the labour market or continuing their studies.

The topic of school transition is relatively under-theorised in terms of comparative research. Yet, the approach is useful in enabling to examine the extent to which institutional contexts in different countries can explain differences in the patterns of the issues investigated (Eriksson and Jonsson 1996, Grelet and Smyth 2003). This article will address the gap in existing research by exploring the experiences of pupils who undergo a major school transition to/within secondary school in two European countries representing two different national education systems – Ireland and Estonia.

² Up to approximately 18 years of age.

³ Up to approximately 15 years of age.

The reasons for choosing these countries include late industrialisation and primacy of educational qualifications in determining social status and power in both countries (see Drudy and Lynch 1993, Breen and Whelan 1996 for Irish context). In addition, while having distinctly different national educational systems it is possible to compare the similarities and differences of pupils' experiences as in both countries they undertake a major move during their schooling career which results in a different learning environment, hence achieving a better understanding of the nature of the transition process in general. Such a move occurs in Ireland when pupils move from primary to lower secondary level at the age of 11–12 and in Estonia when they move from compulsory basic school⁴ that combines primary and lower secondary levels to the voluntary general upper secondary school or to a vocational school⁵ at approximately 15 years of age. Comparing these different institutional transition points is of particular interest considering ongoing concern and debate about the effects of transition-related discontinuities on pupils' academic progression and outcomes in countries where the transition occurs when pupils leave primary school at the age of 11–12 (Doyle 2006). It is expected that the comparative approach adopted in this study will make it possible to critically evaluate the educational practices in both countries in terms of managing and facilitating a major institutional transition point and to identify strengths and weaknesses and highlight good practice in both countries. In addition, while some research on institutional transitions to/within secondary level has been carried out in Ireland, similar research to guide policy is lacking in Estonia. This study also seeks to identify and improve our understanding of specific factors that act as barriers to successful transition into a subsequent level of formal schooling in both countries.

This article takes the following format. It starts by discussing previous international research on school transitions, focussing specifically on an institutional transition point in secondary education. This is followed by a brief overview of Irish and Estonian educational systems. The following section introduces data and methodologies used in the study and section Five draws on the main findings. The final section draws together the ideas presented in earlier sections of this article.

⁴ Estonian schools often incorporate basic schools (grades 1–9) and general upper secondary level in the same school. However, in 2003 (when the study was conducted) there were 150 basic schools in Estonia without an attached upper secondary level. In addition, there are also 122 separate kindergarten-primary schools. Another example of the existing/growing diversity of the system is the existence of 3 schools with only upper-secondary level (grades 10, 11 and 12); one school that incorporates lower secondary and upper secondary levels (without primary); and two where the grades run from 5–12. Bigger schools in cities usually have all twelve grades under one roof (Statistical Office of Estonia 2003).

⁵ In Estonia, there are two pathways at the end of compulsory lower secondary level: a 'college bound' general upper secondary level and vocational upper secondary level. This article concerns itself with the former in order to provide comparability with Ireland. Vocational schools in Estonia accept pupils from the basic as well from the general upper secondary schools and provide professional skills as well upper secondary education.

2. School transitions

Despite increased retention rates in secondary schools in economically 'developed' countries, every year a number of pupils continue to leave school prematurely. The consequences of dropping out are costly to the young person concerned as well as to society (Lanthier and Lan 2006). While patterns of disengagement may get established earlier during one's educational career, school transitions are critical stages in that pupils are seen to be more at risk of disengaging and dropping out than at other times during their schooling (Numminen and Kasurinen 2003). Consequently there is a growing body of research that deal with transitions from one level of schooling to another. According to this research, the transition from one level of schooling to another can be perceived to have an influence on how pupils fare in the education system later on (Brown and Cowen 1988), and can be defined as the movement from 'one state of certainty to another with a period of uncertainty in between' (Schilling et al. 1988:24). Depending on the nature of national education systems a pupil experiences several major transitions during his/her life: starting formal schooling; moving from primary to secondary schooling; moving on to tertiary level and/or entering the labour market. In general, a seamless and unproblematic transition from one level of schooling to another is seen to ensure pupils' success at the subsequent level of schooling. Research evidence indicates that for the majority of pupils the experience of transition, while filled with certain nervous tension, is a positive one and pupils 'settle in' after a couple of weeks after becoming more familiar with the new environment (Piertainen 1998, Smyth et al. 2004). However, there are some pupils who struggle with the settling in process – especially those from a lower social class background, those of non-academic disposition; pupils who are younger, less mature and less confident (see Galton et al. 2000). Such difficulties in adjustment may lead to a disengagement and early school leaving which have a strong impact on the pupils' future life-chances, especially in terms of successful entry to the labour market (Riele 2004).

While all points of institutional transition are important, this study focuses specifically on the transition to/within secondary level as it can be argued that this is the time when major changes take place in the pupils' schooling careers in terms of a changed learning environment (Tonkin and Watt 2003). In addition, this change is accompanied by rapid social, emotional, physical and cognitive development (Legters and Kerr 2001) as the move coincides with adolescence. Compared to primary schools, the learning environment in secondary schools is more formal and structured (Drudy and Lynch 1993) and the child-centred approach used in primary schooling is replaced by a subject-centred one (Smyth, et al. 2004). In addition, in secondary schools a number of subjects are taught by different subject teachers, and rules and regulations are stricter compared to primary schooling. It is also alleged that teaching methodologies in secondary level differ from those used in primary schools (Stabels 1995). The differences between the two levels are also identifiable in other areas: while the general aim of primary schooling is to provide pupils with learning skills, secondary education in most developed countries

focuses mainly on curriculum content and preparation for state exams (Burke 1987).

The issues addressed in international research with regard to the move into a new learning environment include institutional/organisational changes (see Galton et al. 1999, Demetriou et al. 2000, Lahelma and Gordon 1997, Pietarinen 2000, Anderson, et al. 2000), changes in academic achievement (see Galton et al. 2003, Galton et al. 1999, Reyes et al. 2000, Sparkes 1999), successful and unsuccessful transitions (see Sparkes 1999), developmental factors affecting the process (see Pietarinen 2000) and parental role in supporting the pupils (see Lord, et al. 1994). There is a general consensus among the authors that the success with which pupils adapt to the new circumstances have a lifelong effect, reinforcing their dispositions towards learning and shaping the choices available to them in their future (Reyes et al. 2000, Smyth et al. 2004). An abundance of research literature shows that early school leavers find it difficult to re-enter the educational system at a later stage and also find themselves in lower paid and lower prestige jobs (Gorby et al. 2006). The inability of the formal school system to respond to the diverse needs that the pupils have is perhaps one of the reasons why pupils disengage at schools and subsequently drop out (Mykelbust 2002). The following section provides a short description of the Irish and Estonian national systems in order to show where and when these transition points take place.

3. Irish and Estonian education systems

In Ireland, secondary education is compulsory up to the age of 16 or up to the end of Junior Cycle (lower secondary education), whichever occurs last. Primary and secondary education levels constitute two separate sectors of formal schooling. One secondary school (this can be a voluntary secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive)⁶ can have several feeder primary schools. Lower secondary school in Ireland is called the Junior Cycle and covers years one to three. At the end of their third year, at the age of fifteen, pupils sit for the Junior Certificate exams, these state exams constitute the minimum educational qualification that pupils are expected to attain. After this stage, pupils proceed to the Senior Cycle (Government of Ireland 1995). The major hiatus in Ireland takes place when pupils make a transition to a secondary school at the age of twelve. At this time pupils encounter new teachers, new subjects, and new peers and in most cases attend a much larger school in terms of building and numbers (Naughton 2000, O'Brian 2002, Smyth et al. 2004).

⁶ All four secondary school types in Ireland have similar general school practices and curriculum. However, they may have different ownership and ethos. None of the school types provides a pupil with a training for certain professions; this is done on Post Leaving Certificate courses. The four school types differ somewhat in pupils' intake in terms of social class (Torvey and Share, 2000).

In Estonia, basic education (grades one to nine) is compulsory up to the age of 17. Upper secondary education is built upon the basic education and can be divided into general secondary (grades ten to twelve) and vocational secondary education. A general upper secondary school is a comprehensive school where each subsequent school year is based on the previous one and allows for smooth transfer from one year to another. It is possible to obtain upper secondary education in day schools, evening schools and through distance learning (OECD 2001). The general upper secondary schools are largely academic, focusing on entry into higher education. This school type currently caters for approximately 70 per cent of the pupil population in any given year. The vocational schools in Estonia accept pupils from the basic schools as well as from the general upper secondary schools and provide a professional qualification as well as upper secondary education. For a number of pupils in Estonia the move to upper secondary level means physically changing schools. This results in having new teachers, new peers and new surroundings. Others who continue their upper secondary schooling do not have to adjust to a changed physical environment; however, all pupils need to adjust to a more academically demanding school ethos characteristic of this level, which is heavily geared towards state exams. Based on the differences between the two national educational systems, it is expected that the transition to a new environment is smoother in Estonia where most pupils continue their studies in the same school whereas in Ireland the pupils encounter a variety of institutional and social barriers.

The following section describes the data and methodologies used in the study.

4. Data and methodologies used in the study

In this study transition-related issues are examined in a comparative framework in order to draw out the similarities and differences in the two countries. This approach is useful for highlighting the issues for other countries and not just for Ireland and Estonia that are involved in this research. More specifically, the study uses a mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. In particular, triangulation was employed for identifying barriers to successful adjustment to the new learning environment. An exploratory approach was considered most suitable for the purposes of the study as it gives priority to the quantitative data that is collected first, followed by the collection of qualitative data.

Data sources, data collection and instrumentation

Data for the present study has been derived from three main sources:

Phase I: Postal questionnaires in Ireland and Estonia

Initial information for the study was collected from postal questionnaires sent to secondary school Principals in Ireland and Estonia in order to explore their

perceptions of pupils' ability to cope with a major institutional change. While all four school types in Ireland were incorporated into the study, only general upper secondary schools were chosen in Estonia as vocational schools in Estonia are very different in their character as they also provide students with a professional qualification. In Ireland, 765 Principals of voluntary secondary, community, comprehensive and vocational schools participated in the study. In Estonia 127 Principals agreed to participate. The questions asked from the Principals in both countries related to the transition process from primary (basic school in Estonia) to secondary schooling exploring the following issues:

- information received by secondary schools;
- school practices in preparing for pupils' arrival;
- support structures available in the schools; the existence of specific policies for the integration of new pupils
- academic issues

The questionnaire was modified slightly for Estonia taking into account its different educational system, and was also translated into the Estonian language. To capture recent changes in the education system in Estonia, the questionnaire was piloted in several schools across the country before finalising the questions and an internet forum was set up for people interested in education related issues was also utilised.⁷

Data collected from postal surveys in Ireland and Estonia allowed an examination of the relationship between different approaches taken in Estonian and Irish schools regarding transition. It also enabled a systematic selection of case-study schools for the later stages of the research. In both countries, a number of factors were taken into account while choosing case-study schools: school type, location, size and level of integration. The questionnaire draws on extensive international research literature on transition into secondary school. There was a high response rate (78% in Ireland and 69% in Estonia) to the postal survey. This was achieved by extensive follow-up procedure in both countries involving reminder-letters and phone calls.

Phase II: Sample selection

Based on the information provided by the postal surveys of school Principals, twelve case study schools were chosen in the Republic of Ireland and six in Estonia to capture further differences in school practices regarding transition. The case study schools were chosen on the basis of location, size and level of support systems available for pupils (see Tables 1 and 2 for school profiles).

⁷ The help of Estonian researchers was also obtained in the distribution and collection of Estonian questionnaires.

Table 1. Case study schools in Ireland

School name	School type	School size	Gender, 1st year	Level of integration ⁸
Beech Grove	Community/ comprehensive	Medium	Mixed	Stronger
North Alley*	Vocational	Large	Mixed	Stronger
Palmerston Crescent	Fee-paying secondary	Large	Mixed	Stronger
Herbert Place	Secondary	Large	All boys	Stronger
Rockingham Road	Secondary	Small	All girls	Stronger
Oak Leaf*	Vocational	Small	Mixed	Stronger
Angesly Point*	Secondary	Small	All boys	Stronger
Dawes Street	Secondary	Large	All girls	Stronger
Pearl St.*	Secondary	Small	All boys	Stronger
Ainsly St.*	Secondary	Small	All girls	Weaker
Madeira Road	Secondary	Large	All boys	Weaker
Hay Street	Vocational	Small	Mixed	Weaker

* Schools that were given designated disadvantaged status by the Department of Education and Science.

Table 2. Case study schools in Estonia

School	School type	School size	Gender, 10th class	Level of integration
Verijärve	Secondary	Large	Mixed	Stronger
Kisejärve	Secondary	Medium	Mixed	Weaker
Luhaso	Secondary	Medium	Mixed	Weaker
Haanja	Secondary	Small	Mixed	Stronger
Kirikumäe	Secondary	Large	Mixed	Stronger
Karula	Secondary	Large	Mixed	Stronger

Phase III: Self-administered questionnaires (pupils)

In total, 916 First Year pupils in Ireland and 269 10th grade pupils in Estonia completed the self-administered questionnaires in the selected case study schools. The questionnaires were completed during class periods in both countries and supervised by experienced interviewers. Pupils were given between 45 minutes to one hour to complete the questionnaires and were assured of complete confidentiality of their responses. The questionnaires were compiled using research literature on school transitions. In both countries, the questionnaires were piloted first. In these case study schools, pupils who had made the transition into a new learning environment were asked to explore retrospectively the following issues:

- school choice and pre-entry contact;
- level of anxiety before starting school;
- experience of transition, perceptions of the new school, inter-personal relationships
- school-related issues

⁸ Stronger and weaker integration refers to level/amount of support provided for first year pupils.

These self-completion questionnaires were administered by research personnel and the purpose of this stage of the study was to explore the pupils' perceptions of the transition to the new level of schooling. As the next step, focus group interviews with the pupils were conducted in selected schools in order to gather more detailed information of their experiences. In both countries, six pupils from each class group were randomly chosen to participate in the interview session. In Ireland, a total of 38 interviews were conducted in the eleven schools (one school discontinued participation) including a total of over two hundred pupils. In Estonia, fourteen focus group interviews were conducted, involving over eighty pupils. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim and analysed by qualitative analysis software QSR N6.⁹

In-depth interviews with school staff

To complement information gathered from the pupils, in-depth interviews were carried out with 'key personnel' in Irish and Estonian case study schools in order to explore their perceptions of the pupil cohort that had made a transition from primary (basic) school, exploring the following issues in detail: school choice, entrance requirements, the existence of specific policies for the integration of new pupils; support structures within the school; perceptions of the nature of the pupil intake (for example, literacy difficulties, behavioural issues); perceptions of the quality and extent of information available about the pupils, particularly relating to academic performance, behavioural issues and curriculum coverage. Although in Ireland the commissioned project involved interviews with a variety of school personnel, in order to provide direct comparability, the interviews with school Principals and class tutors/teachers were chosen as in Estonia, these are the people who have the closest contact with new pupils on upper secondary school/gymnasium level. In total 32 interviews with school Principals and class tutors/teachers were conducted for the study in both Ireland and Estonia.

As a next step, the completeness and quality of data in SPSS was checked and the data sets were weighted to reflect the profile of schools in the population as a whole in order to avoid some cases being over-represented and to adjust for variation in response rates between institutions/geographic areas. Descriptive analysis was run on some aspects of the research based on the questionnaires utilised in both countries. The outcomes of the descriptive analysis are presented in subsequent sections of this paper.

As an additional step, qualitative data was analysed using NUD*IST or N6¹⁰ software. N6 facilitates the management and analysis of data and was designed for grounded theory (Cresswell 1998). It does not conduct analysis for the researcher, but provides an extremely versatile vehicle for managing and analysing qualitative

⁹ The interview schedules were designed by the author and the transcripts analysed by her. The help of two Estonian researchers was obtained in the conduct of interviews in Estonia.

¹⁰ N6 stands for Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing (N6 Reference Guide, 2002).

data. Typed interview transcripts were imported into this program and the program then allowed text to be highlighted and coded at what is referred as a 'node'. Within this program nodes, or categories of data, are broken down into linked concepts or sub-categories. The coding tree structure generated by this process is visible within the program and nodes can be moved or merged. Such structural changes to data are logged by the program and this allowed the development of ideas to be traced. Additionally, the program's 'memo' feature allowed 'memos' or notes to be linked to selected text and nodes, enabled further cataloguing of the analytic process. It was felt by the author that the methods mentioned above were sufficient in order to address the research questions and that more elaborate techniques were not necessary.

Utilising a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods benefited the study in many ways. Firstly, data from questionnaires provided an overall picture of transition-related issues in Ireland and Estonia. Secondly, interviews provided voices of the key personnel in the case study schools and enabled the author to tap into rich information which was otherwise impossible to get.

Limitations

There are certain limitations to the study. While in Ireland the Principals of all second-level schools were sent self-administered questionnaires as a part of the study, the Estonian part of the study focusing on transition issues is limited to second-level schools where the language of instruction was Estonian due to limited time and budgetary issues. A second limitation of the study arises from the distinctly different character of vocational schools in Estonia: while vocational schools in Ireland are built into the same second-level system, in Estonia, vocational schools represent a separate track with a distinctly different character, catering for approximately 30 per cent of the pupil population compared to about 70 per cent who attend second-level schools. One can enter vocational schools either at the end of grade 9 or at the end of general upper secondary school (grade 12).

While there are certain limitations to the study, it nonetheless provides a valuable insight into the issue of institutional transitions by building upon the existing scholarly work in the area.

5. Findings

This section provides an overview of research findings. Quotations presented here are typical responses of a number of pupils summarised in these statements. As discussed in the previous sections of this paper a number of factors can contribute to difficulties in school transitions. Figures 1 and 2 list a number of such areas in order to explore differences in Ireland and Estonia drawing on the perceptions of secondary school Principals.

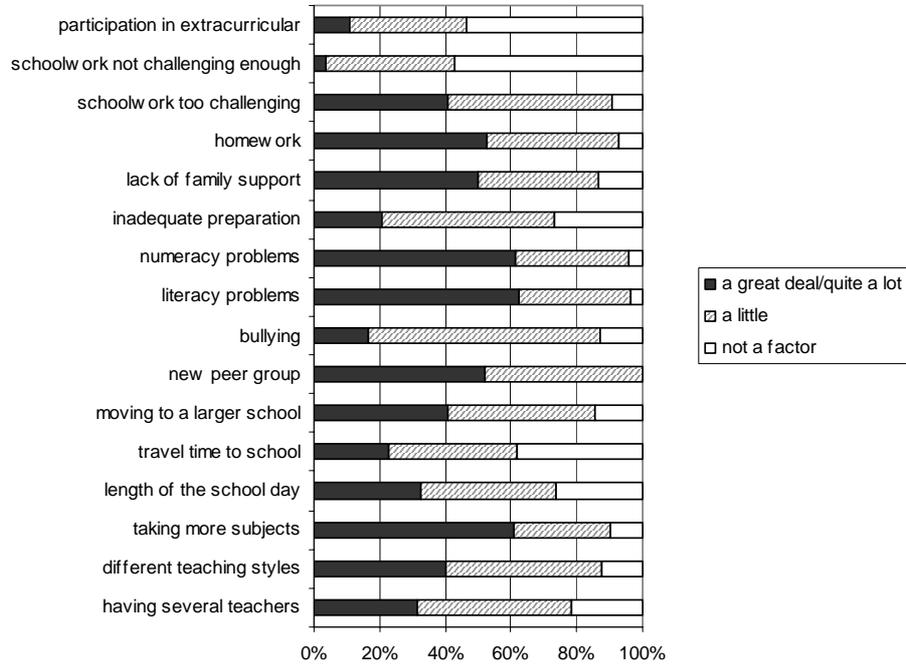


Figure 1. Factors identified by Principals as contributing to difficulties in Ireland (%)

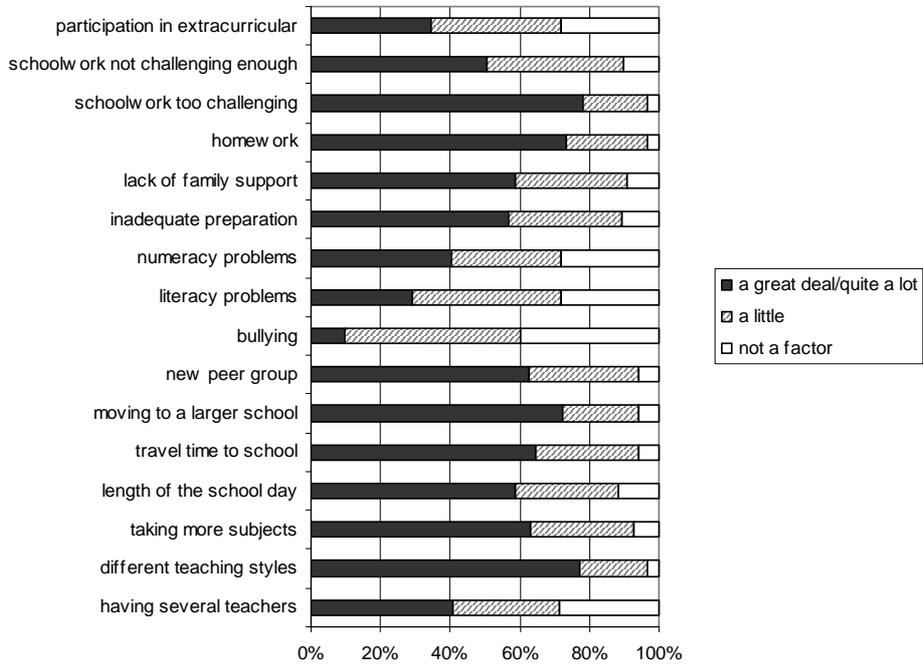


Figure 2. Factors identified by Principals as contributing to difficulties in Estonia (%)

The survey results demonstrate that Irish Principals perceive a number of academic and social factors as potentially hindering the settling-in process. In particular, problems with literacy and numeracy (59% and 58% respectively) and taking more subjects in secondary school (57%) were identified as areas of concern. Previous research by Smyth et al. (2004) has found that taking more subjects is an issue particularly in bigger schools with the average number of subjects on offer reaching 18.5 (p. 46). This has direct implications for the amount of homework provided – half of the school Principals highlighted this as a potential issue. Interviews with pupils also highlighted increased academic demands as illustrated by the following quote:

- *[In 1st year] you have to work harder.*
- *Teachers are more stricter [sic].*
- *And more homework.*
- *Yeah, lots more*
- *You get things to learn at night and then he questions you and if you leave out anything you get punished.*
- *One teacher in secondary school wouldn't know what the other teachers are giving you [in terms of homework] so they just give you homework. In primary school they would know how much you are getting.*
- *They just keep on, the teachers just go on and wait, or say our teacher she does Maths pages by math pages by Maths pages and then she gives us a test and then she thinks that we're not learning it but they [make] you feel embarrassed [and to say] to them I don't know how to do it, I find it hard.*
(Pupils, Madeira Road School)

Research carried out in other countries has also found the impact of transition on pupils' progress and attainment (see Galton et al., 1999) and the importance of curriculum continuity during the move into the new learning environment (Galton et al., 2000). Another area of concern included lack of family support during the transition (47%), in line with Anderson et al., (2000). Figure 1 also shows that for some pupils, several additional organisational factors pose serious problems. This was confirmed by pupil interviews:

Just that you have to move around different classes and you've your own lockers and... Different teachers (Pupils, Beech Grove School)

[The secondary school is] Mainly big, cold and [has] lots of classrooms. I kept getting lost for the first few weeks. In primary school there was only 6 people in our class now there is 28. (Pupils, Palmerston Crescent School)

All these findings are broadly in line with similar studies conducted in the United States and Europe (see Mizelle and Irvin 2000, Proctor and Choi 1994, Galton et al. 2000, Demetriou et. al. 2000). It could be argued therefore that these are the areas also to be addressed with regard to the transition to secondary school in Ireland.

A comparison of the factors perceived to contribute to difficulties while moving from one level of schooling to another in Estonia produced different patterns. Figure 2 presents information obtained from the Principals' questionnaires in Estonia with reference to the 10th form pupils in general upper secondary schools. Here the main

problem areas identified were mostly associated with the academic sphere. This is not surprising considering that the overcrowded curriculum in secondary schools aimed at the high achievers (see OECD 2003) results in the situation whereby the amount of homework is considered to be too much by a number of pupils (see Liivrand and Õun 2004). This study found that over 70 per cent of the Principals considered too challenging schoolwork and different teaching styles as areas of potential difficulties, followed closely by homework (69%), moving to a larger school (69%), travel time to school (62%) new peer group (61%) and taking more subjects (61%). Other major factors listed included the length of the school day, inadequate preparation for the transition and lack of family support.

Information gathered from the school Principals was complemented by pupils' views. The 10th grade pupils were asked about their experiences following the transition to the upper secondary level. Previous studies have shown that having a good idea what to expect may reduce pupils' anxiety and nervousness that could otherwise hinder the adjustment process (Hargreaves and Galton 2002, O'Brian 2002, Naughton 2000). In this study, about 37 per cent of Irish pupils reported having a 'good idea' what to expect coming to secondary school; just under half had 'some idea' with approximately 15 per cent reporting having 'very little idea' what to expect (see Figure 3). The relatively high figures of 'having a good idea what to expect' could relate to the pre-transition contacts with school. In Estonia, the analysis produced a remarkably similar result – about 32 per cent had a 'good idea what to expect' from the upper secondary school level, about 50 per cent reported having 'some idea' and approximately 19 per cent of the pupils admitted having 'very little idea' what to expect as seen in Figure 3. In the Estonian case study schools 64 per cent of the sample continued the schooling in the same school after finishing grade 9; 17 per cent of pupils came from a different school but the same town and 19 per cent came from a different school and different town. While some adjustment difficulties are to be expected in moving to a new school, interviews with pupils showed that some experienced transition difficulties even when they remained in the same school as demonstrated by the following quote:

Everything is confusing and [the teachers think] that we are grown-ups, but we are not (Pupils, Haanja School, same basic school).

The findings in Estonia are somewhat surprising given that quite a high percentage of pupils in this sample (64%) continued their studies in their current school setting and one would have expected them to be more familiar with the practices in the next level of schooling. However, these findings suggest that there is an inadequate information flow between staff and pupils with regard to the requirements at upper secondary level.

The study also showed that the different ages of Irish and Estonian pupils undergoing the transition had some effect on their experiences on the first day in the new setting. In the questionnaire, pupils were asked to select at least two words that best described their feelings on the first day in a new school setting. In Ireland, the pupils reported having been more 'scared', 'nervous' and 'excited' (see Figure 4).

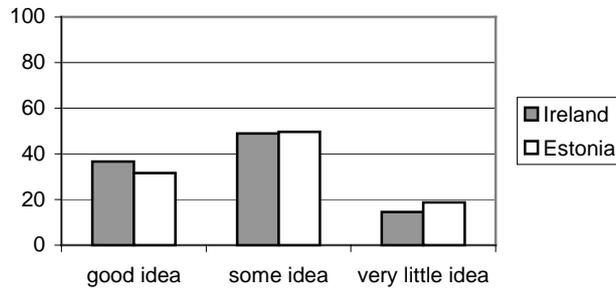


Figure 3. Expectations going to the secondary school: Ireland and Estonia (%)

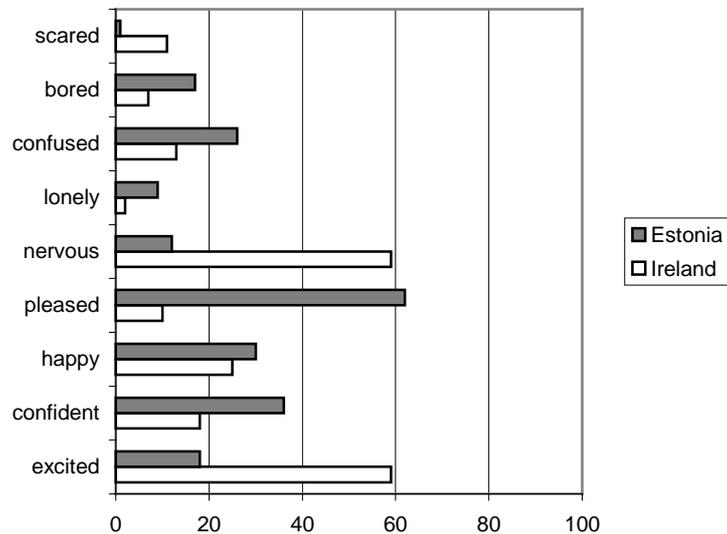


Figure 4. Feelings on the first day: Ireland and Estonia (% of pupils experiencing these feelings)

In Estonia however, pupils reported having been 'confident' and 'less excited' compared to their Irish counterparts, more 'pleased' as well as more 'bored' compared to the Irish pupils. This seems to reflect the fact that most pupils continue on in the same school and are subsequently less concerned on their first day. In line with studies carried out in other countries, some gender differences could be identified in Irish and Estonian schools as Irish females reported being more nervous and excited compared to Irish males whereas Estonian female pupils reported being more confused, lonely, nervous or happy compared to the males.

Pupils were also asked to indicate what would make it easier for them to settle into the new learning environment (see Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3. Recommendations for helping pupils settle into school (in order of frequency): Ireland

Recommendation	%
Put pupils in same class as friends	46
Stop bullying	42
Longer breaks	27
School trips	24
Show pupils around on first day	23
Help with pupils' problems	21
Teachers friendlier to pupils	20
Allow pupils to try different subjects	20
Uniform policy less strict	19
Lunch/after-school sports	16
Non-sport activities	16
Better equipment (e.g. PE, computers)	15
Listen to pupils before making decisions	14
Extra help with lessons	13
Improve buildings	10
Fewer subjects	9
Ensure behaviour	6
Explain rules	6
More subjects	3
Shorter breaks	2

Note: Total adds to more than 100 as pupils were asked to select three options.

Table 4. Recommendations for helping pupils settle into school Estonia (in order of frequency): Estonia

Recommendation	%
Listen to pupils before making decisions	41
Broader choice of subjects	33
Help with pupils' problems	32
Put pupils in same class as friends	29
School trips	26
Better equipment (e.g. PE, computers)	22
Reduce facts-based cramming	20
Fewer subjects	20
Extra help with lessons	20
Teachers friendlier to pupils	17
Improve buildings	16
Reduce the amount of school work	16
Show pupils around on first day	15
Stop bullying	14
Uniform policy less strict	13
Longer breaks	10
Lunch/after-school sports	9
Explain rules	7
Ensure behaviour	6
Shorter breaks	2
More subjects	1

Note: Total adds to more than 100 as pupils were asked to select three options.

The analysis of Irish data shows the importance of friendships at this stage of schooling. Reference to bullying in Ireland may reflect the extent the 1st year pupils get picked on and ‘tested’ by older pupils as ‘initiation rites’ are practiced on the newcomers by older pupils in the school. The pupils’ responses showed that getting lost is a problem for the incoming pupils as secondary schools are physically much bigger than the primary school and it takes time to get used to the novelty of having to move between classes. Interestingly, the number of subjects was not considered very relevant in settling in indicating that factors other than academic ones are seen by the Irish pupils to have an impact on the transition process.

A similar analysis was carried out based on the responses from Estonian pupils. Interestingly, ‘listening to pupils before making decisions in the school’ was the most frequently reported item by the Estonian pupils. Again, the responses may reflect the age of the Estonian pupils. Being approximately three years older than their Irish counterparts, their wish to contribute to decision-making in the school reflects more maturity. Bullying was not mentioned as frequently in Estonia as in Ireland, contrary to the responses from Principals. However, the Estonian pupils indicate that helping pupils experiencing academic and/or social problems is an area demanding attention. This seems to indicate a lack of appropriate support in Estonian schools, in line with Liivrand and Õun (2004) whereby Estonian pupils often find that there is no-one at school they can talk to if experiencing a problem. More Estonian pupils require extra help with lessons, referring to the diversity of pupil population in grade 10 as well as more limited academic support available compared to the basic school.

The items relating to increasing or decreasing the number of subjects was considered least helpful in Ireland, indicating that the number of subjects is not a major concern in the adjustment to secondary school (contrary to the views of the Principals). However, in Estonia the need for a broader choice of subjects was the second most helpful aspect in getting settled in general upper secondary level referring to, perhaps, limited subject options available. These findings are broadly in line with Liivrand and Õun (2004), a study carried out among 9–12 grade pupils in Estonian schools whereby 71 per cent reported that they would like to study subjects not offered by their schools. Having friends in the same class was also considered to be important showing that inter-personal relationships with peers and friendships in general are important for the adjustment also among older pupils.

Studies, such as the one by Galton, et al. (1999) and many others, suggest that transition-related difficulties can be more easily overcome if schools adopt comprehensive induction programmes targeting new pupils. This study found that all Irish secondary schools offer some support to new pupils, relying mostly on the Class Tutor system and induction day. Class Tutors are generally seen as the first ‘port of call’ for pupils and deal with them on day-to-day basis (Smyth et al., 2006). The extent to which induction programmes are utilised also differs from school to school. In conjunction with the induction day/programmes other means

of information dissemination are used, such as Home-School Liaison Co-ordinator. Often schools attempt to include at least one friend with whom the pupil had attended primary school in their class. Some schools have also detailed transition programmes in order to aid the newcomers.

Further analysis demonstrated that Irish and Estonian schools differ in the way they assist pupils during the transition from one level of schooling to another. In Estonia, information is generally disseminated during an open day and schools' websites. Information is also available on information brochures and is distributed during the annual information fair 'Teeviit'. In the latter case many supports that were available in the 'basic' school are discontinued. There is also a heavy reliance on the Class Teacher and School Psychologist in assisting pupils with difficulties. The Class Teacher has a wide role including administration, monitoring progress, counselling and is the first port of contact for the pupils. Information can be obtained during the entrance exams that some schools still practice, as well as during an interview.

This suggests that Estonian schools rely on the pupils' own initiative in informing themselves about the new learning environment in general upper secondary schools, whereby more comprehensive and holistic support is available to pupils in Ireland. Estonian pupils' perceptions of the transition process are illustrated by the following quotes:

[Being in 10th grade] is very confusing because in the basic school you get a lot of support from teachers whatever problem you have, but in gymnasium you have to look after yourself and if you don't then you will not graduate (Pupils, Kirikumäe School).

[Transition] was too abrupt to my mind. All of a sudden you encounter different tasks and obligations; it all takes time to get used to. (Pupils, Karula School)

6. Discussion and conclusions

This study has provided some insight into the transition process in two different educational systems. It has demonstrated what institutional factors are perceived to act as potential barriers to a transition to/within secondary schools in Ireland and Estonia with regard to different timing and conditions of the transition. It also touched upon the ways secondary schools in these two countries manage and facilitate the move into a new learning environment. As discussed in earlier sections of this paper, research carried out in other countries on school transitions have identified a number of institutional/organisational and social factors that may contribute to the adjustment difficulties of the new pupils.. Building upon these findings, this study explored these issues in a comparative perspective, drawing on the views of key personnel and pupils.

Results suggest that in both countries major problems were identified in the academic sphere. However, closer inspection showed that the nature of these

problems was different. In Ireland, literacy and numeracy problems as well as homework were seen by school Principals as causing most serious problems for the pupils moving into secondary school. This is a matter of concern considering the more complex curriculum content in secondary schools. It can be argued that experiencing academic difficulties sometimes allied by other factors such as lack of family support and difficulties in negotiating new peer groups, pupils may start disengaging and become at risk of early school leaving. Interestingly, when asked to provide recommendations for helping pupils to settle into school pupils themselves were more likely to list factors associated with social relationships at school.

In Estonia, the majority of the Principals considered too challenging school-work as most problematic for pupils, followed closely by homework and different teaching styles in the upper secondary school. This is not surprising considering the academic nature of this level of schooling that is heavily geared towards State exams. As pupils are generally admitted to upper secondary schools based on their academic achievements in the basic school, only a few Principals in Estonia listed literacy and/or numeracy as a potential difficulty. Other barriers identified by the Principals included the move to a larger school, length of school day, inadequate preparation for the upper secondary school as well as lack of family support. Pupils themselves felt that greater pupil autonomy would help pupils to settle in better. Many pupils would also prefer a broader choice of subjects in upper secondary school, in line with other studies in the Estonian context. Pupils also felt that they could benefit from more support at school level when experiencing academic or social problems. This is not surprising considering that many supports which are provided by schools in the basic schools are discontinued in the upper secondary school level.

As discussed earlier, the majority of Estonian pupils participating in this study came from the same school. Therefore it was expected that the combination of their age (at 15 years of age they are 3 years older than Irish pupils) and familiarity with the surroundings makes them generally well prepared for the upper secondary school. However, when comparing the Irish and Estonian pupils' perceptions of their preparedness for study at the next level of schooling it became evident that a considerable proportion of pupils had only 'some' or 'very little' idea what to expect. Subsequently some pupils felt uneasy during the first days in a new learning environment as they seemed to have had little preparation for the move.

It follows that in order to ensure a more successful adjustment to a new learning environment, pupils and their parents should be sufficiently informed about the process and differences between the two levels of schooling. Considering the different ethos in and at different levels of schooling, pupils generally need some time in order to 'find their feet' and adjust. More support systems should be available to Estonian pupils during the transition. The analysis of Irish data shows, however, that where comprehensive support is available, pupils don't necessarily have a better idea what to expect in the new level of schooling, perhaps indicating

that accessibility to the support and how it is organised at school needs to be addressed.

The findings in the Estonian context challenge the popularly held belief that pupils do not experience problems moving into general upper secondary level in Estonia because most of them continue in their 'old' school building and considering the voluntary nature of this level of schooling, the pupils 'know what they take on'. Although the study confirms the fact that 'newcomers' from other schools are the most vulnerable group, there is a need for a more comprehensive approach in Estonia to address the transition to general upper secondary level.

Overall, the comparative approach adopted in this study makes it possible to conclude that problems and advantages in making a transition to a new learning environment pertain to both national education systems. Considering the differences in the socio-historical development of countries and education systems it is not possible to decide what is the optimal education structure in terms of timing of a major 'disjuncture' in the schooling career to facilitate pupils' adjustment. Although some international studies note that 'dips' in pupils' academic achievement and difficulties in settling in the new environment following an institutional transition at an earlier age are matters of concern (Doyle 2006, Galton 2000), this study found that problems may still exist even if a pupil is older, continuing on in the same school and that the transition into subsequent level of schooling is voluntary¹¹. What seems to matter is the availability of comprehensive information and guidance before the transition process, especially in Estonia, and the availability of support addressing academic and/or social problems should pupils need it. It is also argued in this article that by addressing institutional transitions at school as well as at policy level, it is possible to identify pupils at risk of early leaving and provide them with appropriate support, thus improving the future life chances of the pupils.

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¹¹ However, the author acknowledges that pupils who come from other schools are more vulnerable in this group.

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