

Changing Uniforms

The Teaching and Learning of English in the Transition Phase

Anthea Pisani & Isabelle Tonna

The authors have conducted a study in two primary schools and four secondary schools which brought to light:

- the concerns and the difficulties encountered by pupils in two primary schools and four secondary schools before and after the transfer to the secondary level of education,
- the teaching and learning processes in English.

“It was clear that despite the provision of pastoral care liaison among secondary schools and their feeder primary schools, pupils still faced difficulties when they changed schools”

It was clear that despite the provision of pastoral care liaison among secondary schools and their feeder primary schools, pupils still faced difficulties when they changed schools. These were mostly caused by such practices as the introduction of specialised teaching and of new subjects, and the new school environment. Difficulties were also encountered in the case of English learning. Sharp discontinuity between the two stages was observed, and any achieved continuity was rather incidental. This affected the pupils and their performance negatively, as they had problems to cope with the new methodologies and content taught. This applied most strongly to low ability pupils, who lacked basic skills.

Some general recommendations regarding transition procedures within the educational system, and the teaching and learning of English during this phase will be forwarded, in the hope that teachers, policy-makers and parents become more aware of the importance of this stage, and thus be in a better position to facilitate this transition.

Suggestions concerning transfer procedures

Teacher and pupil familiarisation and parental involvement should be taken into account, when considering successful transfer procedures.

Teacher familiarisation

Teachers are already aware of the intensity and the kinds of worries children experienced at this stage, and their possible negative effects on the pupils' performance. Ideally such awareness could be increased if the teacher-training program also contains pastoral care techniques. Consequently teachers would be better equipped to handle the pupils' transfer difficulties and to guide and prepare their pupils for facing transfer.

However, in helping pupils to build a

positive attitude to the next stage, the primary teacher should also be allowed time and resources to initiate discussion and to familiarise the pupils with the new school and its facilities. This should not be left up to the teachers' discretion, as is often the case.

Pupil familiarisation

Inter-school liaison is very important here. Presently it is the guidance teacher in charge of the new pupils in the secondary school who makes contact with the primary schools. Although this has its benefits, the study showed that it may be insufficient.

The familiarisation process of Year 6 pupils would improve if the primary school pupils meet with the Form 1 teachers in the receiving secondary schools. Apart from viewing the school facilities, such visits to the secondary school could also include a day's work with their own class teacher and other secondary school teachers and could involve the use of secondary school resources (craft room, laboratories, etc.) when secondary pupils are not present (e.g. on a public holiday).

Furthermore, some Form 1 teachers and pupils should accompany the guidance teachers during meetings with prospective pupils and parents in the primary setting. The Form 1 pupils could be invited to talk about the new school, hence being a source information and reassurance for the Year 6 pupils and even for parents. These secondary school pupils (then in Form 2) could also help in showing the new pupils around on the first day at secondary school.

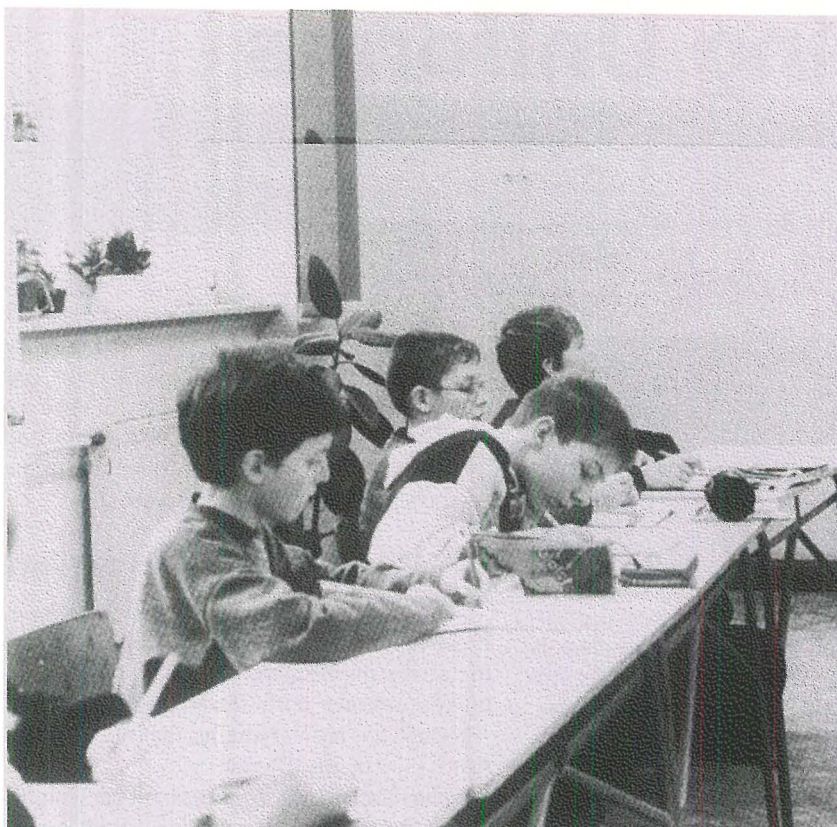
Another initiative, which could prove to be quite beneficial, could be that of preparing a secondary school brochure, which would be made available to new form 1 pupils. This could be set up by the guidance unit within the secondary school together with the secondary school pupils and other teachers. This brochure should include a school map, for the new pupils' use. Although this idea is already being implemented in some of our schools, this does not seem to be the norm.

Considerations on better pupil familiarisation should also include suggestions for better teaching strategies. Currently primary school pupils have only one teacher, who teaches all the subjects put forward by the syllabus. After transfer they suddenly encounter specialised teaching, which involves



Anthea Pisani and Isabelle Tonna are both B. Ed (Hons.) graduates from the University of Malta. Anthea is currently teaching at Mellieha Primary School and Isabelle at the Sacred Heart Junior School.

continued overleaf



Curricular continuity in learning involves both the extension of established skills and knowledge and the continuity of content and learning style

“Pupils may also acquire fears and worries from their parents who may be as anxious about transfer as the pupils themselves”

ten or more teachers. Gradual introduction of specialised teaching, at least in the core subjects, would help pupil adjustment. This could be introduced after the age of 9, when there is an increase in the degree of difficulty of these subjects. Furthermore this approach would lead to more effective learning since specialised teachers, who would have a better understanding of the subject and of the essential methodologies for the teaching of the subject.

Parental involvement

Pupils may also acquire fears and worries from their parents who may be as anxious about transfer as the pupils themselves. Therefore a programme that ensures effective liaison with the parents will be of great benefit for the children themselves. As parents get to know those in charge of their children, trust and understanding between the two parts increases. This would be beneficial for the pupils themselves, since they feel a stronger bond between home and the new school. Apart from the usual talks held by guidance teachers to parents prior to and after transfer, this awareness could be increased, through activities held between parents associations and the secondary school. A meeting should be held at the primary school for a parents' question and answer session with the secondary staff. Other social functions could be held after transfer, to encourage new parents to become actively involved in the running of the school. Hence, parents would be encouraged to familiarise themselves with the staff of the new school, in the same way as they were with the

primary school staff. Parents should also be kept informed about their child's progress at the new school, and about developments in the school itself. This could be done by means of a letter regarding the progress and adjustment of each child sent to the parents by the form teachers after about four weeks from the beginning of the scholastic year.

Suggestions concerning curriculum continuity and English teaching

Curricular continuity in learning involves both the extension of established skills and knowledge and the continuity of content and learning style. The study showed that this was a missing key element in the teaching of English in the schools observed.

At this stage such continuity is only possible if good working relationships are established between the secondary and the primary schools. Ideally teachers of English in the secondary schools should meet Year 6 teachers in the feeder primary schools on a regular basis. Teachers' visits could include observation of English teaching in Year 6 and Form 1, followed by meetings, in which policies, problems and decisions, and their possible implications on the teaching and learning of English, are discussed. This would lead to the development of mutual esteem and trust among teachers, which are invaluable in establishing curriculum continuity liaison between schools, and an increase in joint planning of the English syllabus. Consequently teachers and schools would be in a more direct position of ensuring that there is not much repeated or new material presented. It is important that syllabuses are more complimentary and this could only be achieved if teachers are more directly involved in the curricular planning and are provided with the necessary resources, especially in the case of low ability teaching.

However, such initiatives need good management and organisational support from headteachers and the Education Division if they are to be fruitful. The primary and the secondary headteachers should also meet in each other's schools and discuss issues related to transfer, while the Education Division should ensure the provision of necessary resources both for the teaching and learning of English as well as for these meetings' coordination.

Hopefully, the changes being carried out within the Maltese education provision will lead to improvement. Awareness of the need for continuity across all the levels, but especially at this stage, is increasing. Therefore, authorities and educators must continue working for better coherence between the two levels of schooling, allowing the pupils to grow and learn more effectively as they change uniforms.