



# Lift Off

Supporting the transition from primary to secondary education

“Transition from primary to secondary school continues to be a point where some pupils begin to fall behind. There can be mistrust between primary and secondary schools around transition. This contributes to a failure to share information about assessment and the curriculum, or to fully understand it when it is shared.”

Sir Michael Wilshaw, former Chief Inspector of Education, Ofsted<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wilshaw M (2016) *Education and Skills: The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2015/16*, London: Ofsted

# Background

## Why transition matters

The transition from primary to secondary school can be a traumatic step for many young people. They have to deal with new challenges including negotiating their way around a bigger school environment, learning a new timetable, coping with greater expectations from teachers and trying to make new friends. All of this leaves some children feeling vulnerable and a less successful transition can lead to a dip in performance at school, and poor attendance and engagement.

## The impact on learners

Evidence shows that pupils from the poorest backgrounds are the most likely to struggle with transition, meaning they can end up under-performing throughout their time at secondary school. Learners who find it difficult to integrate into 'big school' are also less likely to continue on to further and higher education, training and employment.

To give pupils the best chance of success and to help schools maintain progress, strategies are needed to support them during this pivotal time in their education.

## Responding to the evidence

'Building for progression: a foot on the ladder' set out to develop and test a range of strategies to support learners in the transition from primary to secondary education. The project was funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and informed by:

- work on resilience from the Marmot report from Public Health England<sup>2</sup>, which asserted: "Resilience is the capacity to 'bounce back' despite adversity, and achieve good outcomes...those who need it most [people from disadvantaged backgrounds] tend to have it least." The report adds that: "...schools can build resilience by improving achievements, supporting transitions, promoting healthy behaviours."
- James J. Heckman's report<sup>3</sup>, which found that: "...socioemotional (noncognitive) skills foster cognitive skills and are an important product of successful families and successful interventions in disadvantaged families."
- The Progression Trust's work on Progression Theory and the ProgressionSmart characteristics
- ASDAN's curriculum development expertise and learning to learn methodology

The project has attracted the strategic interest and support of both the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) and The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), who contributed to the project's dissemination event in London in November 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Marmot M (2014) *Local action on health inequalities: building children and young people's resilience in schools*, London: Public Health England

<sup>3</sup> Heckman J (2008) *Schools, Skills, and Synapses*, Oregon: Economic Inquiry



# Action research project

The aim of the 18-month Paul Hamlyn Foundation funded project 'Building for Progression: a foot on the ladder' was to create and trial classroom activities to support learners in their transition from primary to secondary education.

## Classroom trials

A range of classroom activities were piloted by a mixed, non-selective secondary school (The Avon Valley School) alongside three of its main feeder primary schools (Boughton Leigh Junior School, Northlands Primary School and Riverside Academy). All four schools are in Rugby. The catchment area of the secondary school includes two Lower-layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) that rank within the top 10% most educationally deprived LSOAs nationally<sup>5</sup>.

## Evaluation methodology

Tiller Research Ltd, in association with Dr Niall Galbraith from the University of Wolverhampton's Institute of Psychology, undertook an independent mixed-methods evaluation of the impact of the project. Of particular interest was the extent to which the project supported learners to make a successful transition from primary to secondary school; how the project activities supported learners to develop key characteristics and skills, such as confidence, social skills and learning strategies; and the extent to which the project enabled schools to 'close the gap' between the success of the most disadvantaged learners and their peers.

There were quantitative and qualitative elements of the evaluation, both of which were carried out with the intervention group taking part in the pilot scheme and a comparison group that did not take part.

- The quantitative element used a 32-item questionnaire, which learners undertook at three points: before participation in the project (Year 5), immediately prior to transition (Year 6) and at the end of their first half-term at secondary school (Year 7). The questionnaire was developed to identify learners' self-reported thinking, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours relevant to the project's challenge activities. In addition, measures were used to assess the key outcome areas of self-efficacy and self-esteem, including the independently validated Children's Hope Scale<sup>6</sup>.
- The qualitative element of the evaluation consisted of discussion groups immediately prior to transition (Year 6), to establish learners' thoughts, feelings and expectations about secondary school, and again at the end of learners' first half-term (Year 7) to examine their experience of the early stages of secondary school.

The Tiller Research Ltd. External Project Evaluation can be viewed in full at: [www.asdan.org.uk/lift-off](http://www.asdan.org.uk/lift-off)

4 Progression equation © Philip Dent, 2006

5 in the Education, Skills and Training domain of The English Indices of Deprivation. Warwickshire Observatory (2015) Briefing Note: Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2015 (2015) Warwick: Warwickshire Observatory

6 Snyder C R, Hoza B, Pelham W E, Rapoff M, Ware L, Danovsky M, Highberger L, Rubinstein H and Stahl K J (1997) The Development and Validation of the Children's Hope Scale, Atlanta: Journal of Pediatric Psychology

## Progression Theory

Awareness + Aspiration + Attainment = Progression<sup>4</sup>

## The ProgressionSmart characteristics

**Awareness:** Strengths, Possibilities, Challenges, Routes, Information, Support

**Aspiration:** Self-worth, Self-efficacy, Self-control, Purpose, Resilience, Determination

**Attainment:** Planning, Communication, Self-improvement, Application, Collaboration, Problem Solving

## Children's Hope Scale

The six sentences below describe how children think about themselves and how they do things in general:

- I think I am doing pretty well.
- I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are most important to me.
- I am doing just as well as other kids my age.
- When I have a problem, I can come up with lots of ways to solve it.
- I think the things I have done in the past will help me in the future.
- Even when others want to quit, I know that I can find ways to solve the problem.

For each, children are asked if it describes them: none of the time (1 point); a little of the time (2); some of the time (3); a lot of the time (4); most of the time (5); all of the time (6). The points are added to give their score.

# Key findings

## Increased confidence in learners about moving to secondary school

Learners in the intervention and comparison groups expressed similar concerns and nervousness about their imminent move to secondary school. However, those learners who participated in the project were more likely than those in the comparison group to be confident at the end of Year 6 about their transition to secondary school (Fig 1), and to be looking forward to the new experience (Fig 2).

Fig 1: Learners' feelings about moving to secondary school at the end of Year 6

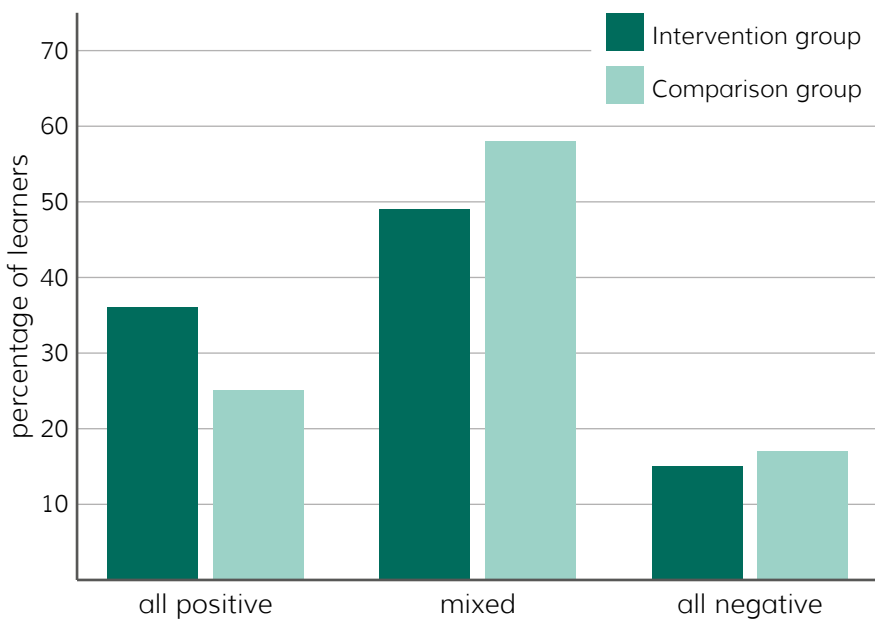


Fig 2: Percentage of pupils at the end of Year 6 for whom 'looking forward to learning new things at secondary school' was their most prominent feeling about moving to secondary school



18% of the intervention group



6% of the comparison group

## Development of practical and psychological strategies for transition

Learners in the Year 6 intervention group discussed a range of practical and psychological strategies which they intended to use to make the most of their move to secondary school.

This contrasted with the comparison group who did not display this level and range of strategic thinking towards their impending transition. For example:

“Take risks...  
So, if there's a trip or something, that you're nervous about, you should still try and go.”

*Learner from the intervention group*



# Key findings

## A positive impact on learners' initial experiences of secondary school

The project's approach and challenge activities were successful in enabling learners to identify and enact positive engagement with transition.

Half a term into secondary school, there was evidence that this more positive starting position had a positive impact on learners' initial experience of their new school. Not only did the intervention cohort have a more positive view of their new school than the comparison group had done at the same stage (Fig 3), but they also demonstrated a greater level of engagement with the learning process.

The quantitative data indicates that those in the intervention group generally showed a greater improvement in their questionnaire scores between Year 6 and Year 7 than their comparison group counterparts. A statistically significant difference was found on the Children's Hope Scale, with the intervention group showing a greater mean increase from Year 6 to Year 7 than the comparison group (Fig 4).

Fig 3: Learners' feelings about their experiences of secondary school after the first half term

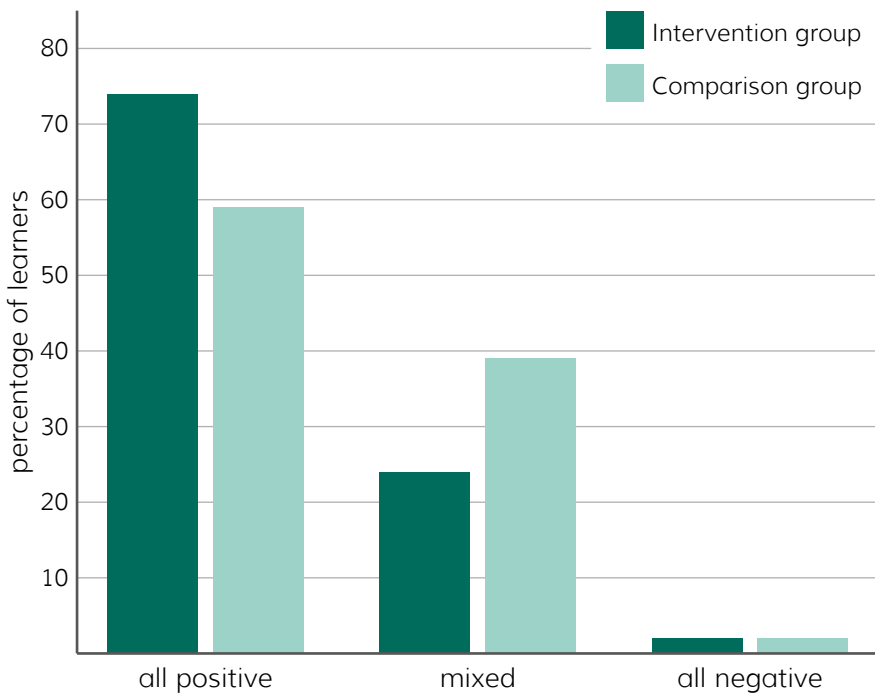
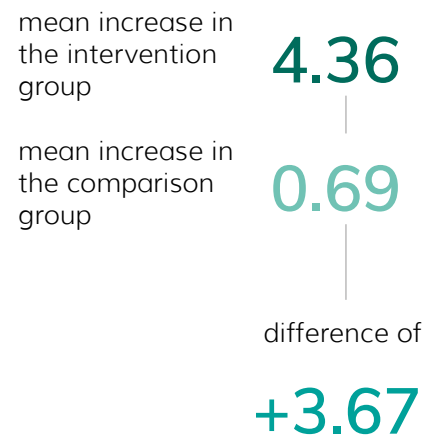


Fig 4: Mean increase in Hope attribute scores from Year 6 to Year 7



## Development of learners' key skills and characteristics

Feedback from teachers supports the evidence from learners that the project challenges had enabled learners to develop ProgressionSmart characteristics and skills. Several participating primary school teachers gave explicit examples of how learners in the intervention group were more prepared for secondary school than those in the comparison group had been. For example:

**“A lot of my children last year weren't ready to go to secondary school... a lot more of them this year are understanding what they're going to face when they get there, and have different things that can support them in terms of their understanding of self-control and things like that. They're thinking about their self-esteem and about their routes already. So they know the sorts of things that they need to focus on.”**

*Feedback gathered from a teacher working with the intervention group as part of the Appreciative Inquiry process*

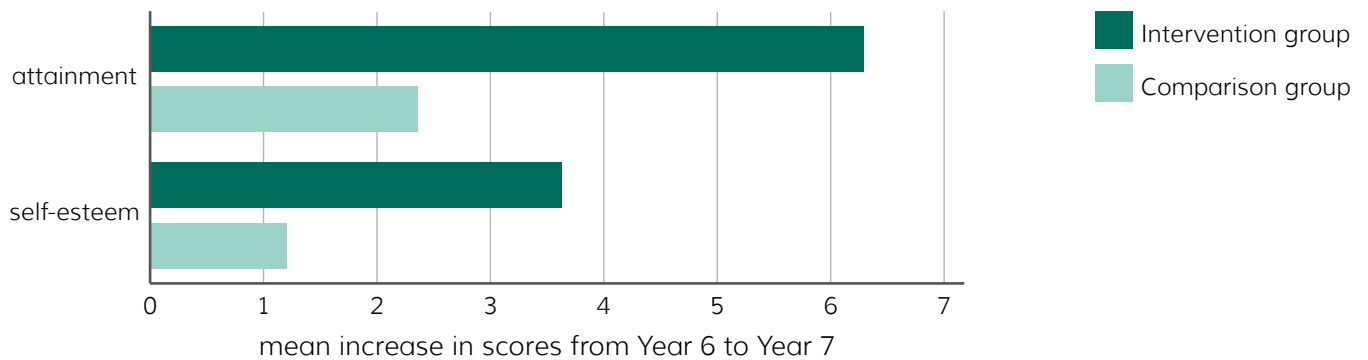
# Key findings

## Closing the gap for disadvantaged learners

The quantitative data analysis demonstrates that those learners who had the lowest starting position showed the greatest improvement from Year 6 to Year 7. Those in the bottom quartile of overall attribute scores at the end of Year 6 made significantly greater improvements from Year 6 to Year 7 than those in the top quartile, in particular in attainment and self-esteem (Fig 5).

This effect was much stronger for the intervention group, suggesting that participating in the challenges was effective in narrowing the gap between learners with the greatest level of need and their peers.

Fig 5: Mean increase in attribute scores from Year 6 to Year 7 for the bottom quartile of learners

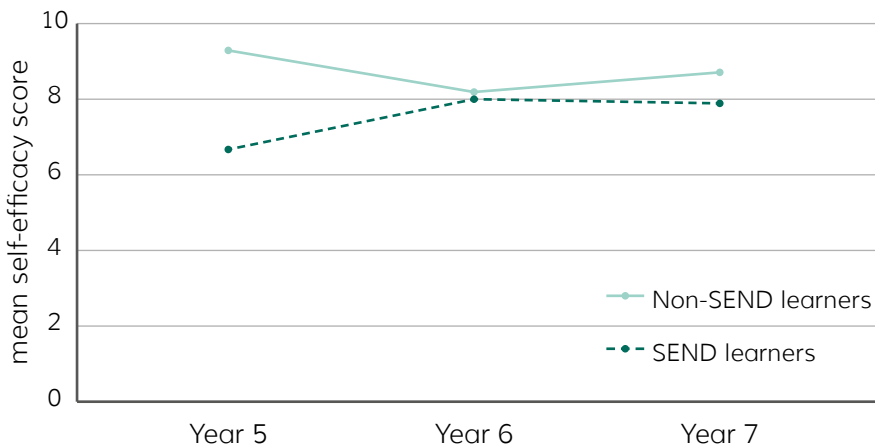


## Improved attainment among learners with SEND

Learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) who participated in the project showed improvements in attainment and self-efficacy a year earlier than SEND learners in the comparison group.

In addition, the self-efficacy of those SEND learners in the intervention group was much lower than that of non-SEND learners in Year 5, but similar to that of non-SEND learners by the end of Year 6. This indicates that the challenges enabled SEND learners to 'close the gap' in self-efficacy with their non-SEND peers prior to transition, and maintain a level largely equivalent to their non-SEND peers into Year 7 (Fig 6).

Fig 6: Self-efficacy scores of SEND and non-SEND learners from the intervention group



## Conclusion

The findings are that the 'Building for progression: a foot on the ladder' project has had a positive impact both on supporting transition from primary to secondary school and on enabling a wider engagement with learning.

The evidence shows that this action research project has had a positive impact by enabling learners to develop their resilience and engage productively with their new school environment.





## Contributors

We would like to thank the following people who contributed to the work of the project:

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*All photographs show teachers and learners from Northlands Primary School, Rugby – one of the pilot schools.*