

# LA TRANSICIÓN ENTRE LA EDUCACIÓN PRIMARIA Y LA EDUCACIÓN SECUNDARIA. PROPUESTA PARA UN INVESTIGACIÓN NECESARIA

## THE TRANSITION BETWEEN PRIMARY EDUCATION AND SECONDARY EDUCATION. PROPOSAL FOR A NECESSARY INVESTIGATION

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### **Resumen**

El presente artículo debe entenderse como una propuesta de investigación sobre la transición entre la Educación Primaria y la Educación Secundaria, dos etapas educativas que suelen desarrollarse en dos espacios diferenciados y que comportan diferencias curriculares, metodológicas y organizativas, presentando dos realidades divergentes de lo que debería ser una misma trayectoria, la

educación obligatoria del alumnado. Partiendo del marco teórico proporcionado por la doctrina, se propone una aproximación que delimite el impacto de la transición entre etapas e identifique una serie de áreas sobre las que actuar para minimizar su efecto. Una vez realizada esta aproximación, podrían aplicarse estas medidas en diferentes centros y recoger los datos derivados de éstas.

**Palabras clave:** *Educación Primaria, Educación Secundaria, transición entre etapas educativas, centros educativos, inspección educativa.*

### **Abstract**

This article should be understood as a research proposal on the transition between Primary Education and Secondary Education, two educational stages that usually take place in different spaces and that entail curricular, methodological and organisational differences, presenting two divergent realities from what should be a single trajectory, the compulsory education of the students. Starting from the theoretical framework provided by the doctrine, an approach is proposed that delimits the impact of the transition between stages and identifies a series of areas on which to act in order to minimize its effect. Once this approach was made, these measures could be applied in different centres and the data derived from them could be collected.

**Keywords:** *Primary Education, Secondary Education, educational transition, educational centres, educational inspection.*

In the life of every student, the transition between stages is particularly delicate. The transition from infant to primary and then from primary to secondary education requires adjustments that go beyond the simple academic life of the student.

In our country, following the enactment of the Law on the General Organisation of the Education System, LOGSE, on 3 October 1990, the age of compulsory schooling was raised to 16 years of age. Undoubtedly, the great transformation of the new law, which was born with an innovative spirit and with the intention of adapting the Spanish education system to the demands of the European Union, was the change of model in terms of the age at which pupils had to remain in primary schools. Thus, since the approval of the new law, pupils from the former seventh and eighth years of Basic General Education (hereinafter EGB) have become the first and second years of Compulsory Secondary Education (hereinafter ESO), leaving school at the age of 12 to begin a new stage, Secondary, which will end at the age of 16 if they do not continue on to *Bachillerato* (upper secondary education) or at 18 if the pupil chooses to complete the two courses of which it is made up.

The possible impact of these transitions makes it advisable for all those involved in the educational process to adopt measures to minimise, as far as possible, the adverse effects that pupils may suffer as they move from one stage of education to another.

For this reason, any study that aims to provide solutions to a problem such as this must be based on a solid theoretical foundation that allows the various aspects of the issue to be studied from a holistic point of view. As a complement to the theoretical foundation, a quantitative study will be necessary to show the impact and scope of the transition between stages in our pupils through data. After applying this methodology, once the problem has been defined, it will be possible to identify the different areas where action can be taken, providing

proposals aimed at combating the adverse effects described above that can be generated in the transition between stages.

An exhaustive analysis of the literature on the subject presents us with a growing interest in it, given the profusion of sources and approaches on the subject (Ávila, Sánchez & Bueno, 2022; Bereziartua, Zubiri, Intxausti & Odriozola, 2017; Castro, Díaz, Fonseca, León, Ruíz & Umaña, 2011; Elias & Daza, 2017; Dockett, Petriwskyj & Perry 2014; Monarca 2013; Sánchez & Moreno, 2018; Sierra & Parrilla, 2014). Leaving aside the transition between Infant and Primary Education (Castro, Ezquerro and Argos, 2012 and 2018 or Tamayo, 2014), the different studies focus on areas as disparate as academic success, the social impact on pupils, transition for pupils with educational needs, educational guidance or differences in transition for pupils from rural schools.

A first approach to the object of study should be to try to define it. Thus, Celia Azorín (Azorín, 2019a) includes in her article "Educational transitions and their influence on students" up to ten different definitions of what is understood by transition between educational stages. Transition can be considered as "a multifaceted phenomenon that involves interactions and processes over time" (Azorín, 2019a, 227), which is why the different attempts to define it focus on certain aspects to the detriment of others. Thus, Gimeno associates educational transition with change; Corominas and Isus emphasise the interconnection between previous and subsequent situations; Rogoff and Peralta define it as an individual experience immersed in broader social and cultural processes; Fernández and Santos Bocero add the need for students to readapt, and Sebastián describes it as a critical moment of change that opens up opportunities for development and learning.

In any case, far from attempting to establish a concept of transition between stages beyond those described in the literature on the subject, in the construction of the theoretical framework of this study it is necessary to address another series of concepts that may be useful for the development of the research.

In this sense, the concept of educational discontinuity, present in Gimeno Sacristán's work and analysed from different spheres (curricular, pedagogical between centres, inter-level and inter-stage), is the symbol of a specific moment in the student's life that occurs in the transition from primary to secondary education. In the author's words, this step

"It marks one of the most striking educational discontinuities in all education systems, since the general structure in all of them is very similar in terms of the cycles that comprise it. It is an important transition because it can accumulate changes of *curriculum*, teachers, classmates, climate and school. It represents the meeting of two educational subcultures that have obeyed different objectives".

Gimeno Sacristán's work is undoubtedly a fundamental contribution to the analysis of the subject. The author devotes the second chapter of his thorough study to the analysis of continuity and curricular coherence at the change of stage. Gimeno proposes various approaches to understanding continuity, a concept which explains and justifies the transition between the two stages on the basis of an ordered construction of learning, in such a way that the old elements are linked to the following ones in a graded sequence.

There is therefore, according to Gimeno, a vertical continuity throughout the courses, between courses, between cycles, between levels in which "the concern for the gradual progression of the experience and demands of learning" and a horizontal continuity which, in the words of the author, alludes to:

"The need for coordination of methodological lines, the establishment of possible interdisciplinary components between subjects, the search for common objectives between teachers and areas, the constant exercise of certain transversal skills or abilities in different areas because they are specific to general education, the coexistence of schoolwork with similar demands throughout a time cycle, or the coordination of assessment".

It is precisely this horizontal discontinuity in relation to the methodological change that most pupils perceive when they start secondary school, which leads

to a rupture in the academic and emotional stability of pupils, causing, in many cases, a disorientation towards academic failure. It is true that pupils tend to regulate this situation on their own, which requires an accelerated maturity exercise on their part, something which, together with the new social and personal ecosystem in which they are immersed (we must not forget that they arrive at the gates of Secondary at the same time as at the gates of their own adolescence), can take a heavy toll depending on the personal profile of the pupil and their way of assuming and integrating the transition.

Based on this idea, different aspects derived from this discontinuity can be traced in the scientific literature. These contributions represent a real theoretical substratum on which to base any research into the transition between educational stages, insofar as they make it possible to describe a phenomenon, the transition between stages, which is more complex than it might appear at first sight.

Thus, it would be possible to identify various factors that materialise the discontinuity between one stage and another. By way of example, the following could be mentioned:

- Dimensions of the centre.
- Class timetable.
- Number of curricular subjects.
- Rules of coexistence.
- Number of teachers.
- Different methodologies applied to different subjects.
- Higher academic standards.
- Reduction of rest periods.

The idea of school-to-school connection is the basis of the research that Michael Fullan develops in his book *School Leadership*. Fullan speaks of "intra-

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district" development as the need for schools in the same environment or district to be interconnected, generating networks of exchanges that encourage cooperative work and learning between them, contributing to the strengthening of both the schools and the rest of the agents that work in them. Although Fullan's idea is none other than to outline, from different perspectives, the competences that educational leadership (represented in the figure of the school head) should have, it seems pertinent to highlight the idea of the need to exchange information between schools, in all matters relating to the change of stage of pupils. It is in this context that the idea of interconnection between schools at different stages finds its most useful expression. Building bridges between schools and secondary schools in the same district, which year after year become the two pillars of the transition between the two stages in which hundreds of pupils spend their years of compulsory education, becomes a necessity for success in the educational discontinuity defined by Gimeno Sacristán.

The first big break that we find in this transitional stage is the change from one type of school to another from a physical point of view. In the eyes of a pre-adolescent, a school has nothing to do with a secondary school. Not only do the spaces change, but also the actors who carry out different functions in both are completely different.

For the objectives set out in the study of the transition between educational stages, another useful theoretical approach to the question is that of the ecosystem, used by Manuel Lorenzo to refer to the organisation of educational centres (Lorenzo, 2011). This author uses the idea of the ecosystem to explain that Primary and Secondary Education are two different worlds, with different structures. As a result of these structural and organisational differences, the relationship between teachers and pupils, assessment, decision-making, both collegiate and individual, and the role of heads of department versus cycle teams cannot be understood in the same way. For this reason, the school must be understood as an ecosystem, as it possesses the same descriptive notes that are

characteristic of these in the natural environment, albeit with nuances, given that it is an ecosystem that replaces the natural with the social and human.

Understanding schools as ecosystems allows us to think of them as organisational units with their own particularities depending on the context in which they are located. Despite the common features shared by primary schools, sometimes those in the same neighbourhood or district tend to show great differences both from an organisational and methodological point of view, which leads to differences not only in the academic results of the pupils but also in the atmosphere of coexistence, and the objectives achieved, human interaction and the day-to-day reality set the tone for the teaching-learning process, beyond curricular objectives or the bureaucratic approach that organises the systematic work carried out in them. The student body, the mobility or not of the teaching staff, the relations with the surrounding institutions, the size of the centre and the presence or absence of families in the development of the activities carried out in the centre, create different spaces with radically different results. If we conceive the idea we have of the centre and the methodology adopted in it as the backbone of the teaching process, there is no doubt that the transition between stages becomes one of the most delicate moments in the student's life.

Further to this theoretical approach, the term "ecological transition" can be taken into account, insofar as it describes the successive changes of role or environment that the individual makes and which entail a modification in the expectations that others have of their behaviour, depending on the ecosystem in which they find themselves. In other words, this ecological transition can be understood as another way of conceiving the transition between educational stages.

From this approach, by understanding the two educational spaces that delimit the transition between stages as two different ecosystems from a curricular, methodological and organisational point of view, they are presented as two realities divorced from each other. In other words, this theoretical approach



focuses on what makes schools different from high schools, primary education from secondary education, making it possible to identify all the factors that may hinder the transition from one stage to the other.

This may be the ideal starting point for developing the study of the transition between educational stages: the differences between primary schools and secondary schools, understood as different ecosystems that require pupils to undergo a period of ecological transition in order to adapt. Approaching the study from this perspective will make it possible, in the first instance, to delimit the differences as they are perceived by pupils making the transition from one stage to another.

One aspect that can exemplify these differences between schools is the way in which space is perceived by pupils. It is part of everyday life in any school during the first days of the school year to find first year pupils who cannot find their classrooms. Undoubtedly one of the most striking aspects of the change for pupils is the change in the size of the facilities they arrive in. As a general rule, primary schools have smaller spaces, the playground, the library, the corridors, the dining room, the classrooms themselves, the bathrooms or the staff room are cosy, small places, full of colours and children's images that accompany the children in their daily school routine. However, the arrival at the secondary school is a visual impact for the children, the long, empty corridors, the size of the playgrounds and the crowds that gather there at break time, the closed doors everywhere that open up the departments and offices to which they do not have access.

Likewise, the analysis of these data cannot distance the study of the transition between stages from the perspective and perception of those involved in the transition.

a) Learners. It is necessary to delve into the worldview of the learner, the roles they play, the relationships with the tribe, the influence of social networks in their lives and their relationship with the learning process.

b) Teachers. The need for coordination between teachers in the transition between stages should be emphasised, without forgetting the lack of existing training in this aspect and the failures that systematically occur in the relationship between schools and colleges, minimising in some cases this transition process or over-dimensioning it in others.

c) Families. In the majority of cases, they suffer this process from a state of complete bewilderment. The change in expectations regarding their children's academic development or the awareness of the complete lack of knowledge about their children is generally associated with less participation in the centres and a more lukewarm involvement in the educational process after the change of stage.

d) Administration. The absence of regulatory channels affecting educational transition and its effects should be pointed out. Excessive bureaucratisation in public education does not allow for the development of coordination actions that could minimise the impact of the transition between stages.

Now that the terms have been defined and the actors involved in research on the transition between stages have been portrayed, the problem of quantifying the impact arises. How does this change influence our students, how does it materialise, and what are the consequences for the academic life of the students? Most authors consider the transition between stages as a critical moment that can affect both academic and personal aspects and that is reflected in learning itself (Gairín, 2014, Monarca 2013, Ávila, Sánchez and Bueno, 2022). However, very few studies provide quantitative data that materialise this impact. Some studies collect data from geographically limited environments (Monarca 2013, Ávila, Sánchez and Bueno, 2022), others only provide data on one of all the factors that can be circumscribed to this matter (Payá, 2019). Particular importance is attached to this issue with respect to students in vulnerable situations. Similarly, although there are studies that address this issue (Azorín,

2019b), more quantitative concreteness is needed with macro data analysis at the national level.

This quantitative specification should show the reality of our educational system, both at national level and in the different regional frameworks. Only through the study of these data will it be possible to confirm the initial hypothesis about the importance of educational transition for pupils.

A proposal for quantitative analysis could focus on:

- Pupils who are not promoted to 2<sup>nd</sup> year of ESO.
- Pupils who are promoted to 2<sup>nd</sup> year of ESO with outstanding subjects, compared to the results obtained in 6<sup>th</sup> year of Primary Education.
- Evolution of the academic results of students in 1<sup>st</sup> year of ESO from the first evaluation to the third.
- Pupils with difficulties in instrumental areas in 6<sup>th</sup> year of Primary Education, compared to pupils with difficulties in instrumental subjects in 1<sup>st</sup> year of ESO.

The treatment of these data can take into account a multitude of factors: differences between Autonomous Communities, differences between private and public schools, identification of students joining from foreign education systems, etc. In the same way, this comparative analysis could also show the different impact on the transition when it takes place in a private school that offers both Primary and Secondary Education, or in a CEIPSO (combined infant, primary and secondary educations centres).

Another approach that could shed light on the study is that relating to the transition between stages in the countries around us. The differences between the various education systems pose an added difficulty in trying to understand the phenomenon of transition between stages. However, the solutions found in

foreign education systems can also help us to understand the way in which action can be taken to tackle the problems that arise here.

This study of the countries of our continent must start from the different approaches to primary and secondary education in each of the member states. Thus, primary education begins at the age of 6 in most Member States. In Bulgaria, Estonia, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Finland and Sweden it starts at the age of 7. Other countries bring it forward to the age of 5 and in Northern Ireland it starts at the age of 4. In terms of duration, Germany, Austria and Turkey are the countries where primary education is the shortest (4 years).

Even so, most countries make a clear distinction between primary and secondary education. However, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Finland, Sweden, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Iceland, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia have a single system, common for all pupils throughout compulsory education. As mentioned above, all these differences can be a factor of difficulty for the analysis of the subject.

Once the above factors have been analysed, it would be possible to identify a series of areas in which it would be necessary to act in order to minimise the impact of the transition between stages on students. There are several authors (Gairín, 2002; Fernández, 2023) who state the need for organised transition processes to reduce the disadvantages for students and at the same time facilitate coordination between institutions; teamwork between educational centres of different stages is undoubtedly the epicentre of coordination. The different professionals must coordinate in order to agree on issues and aspects related to their teaching practice and working methodology, facilitating the transition for students who "land" in a new world full of difficulties and stimuli that sometimes do not contribute to the necessary concentration to deal with a new curriculum, a new type of assessment and a greater diversity of teachers. These coordinated transition processes will take the form of different actions implemented by the schools, related to these previously identified areas.

Following this argument, a distinction could be made between actions relating to the:

a) Teachers, assuming the importance of the transition between stages for pupils, focusing on methodological aspects, encouraging exchanges of information between teachers of different stages, promoting a change of school culture between pupils who finish one stage and those who have started a new one, encouraging self-evaluation of aspects related to the transition between stages in the evaluation of teaching practice, providing specific training for teachers who teach subjects in the first years of Compulsory Secondary Education.

b) Pupils, encouraging responsibility and autonomy, informing them of the differences between the different educational stages and the different ways of dealing with them, working in the classroom on the development of self-esteem, promoting aids that provide support for pupils in vulnerable situations.

c) Organisation of the centre, promoting actions that facilitate the transition between stages, as well as its monitoring by the management teams and the School Councils; coordinating meetings with teaching teams from the centres of origin and destination centres, discussing within the Pedagogical Coordination Commission the methodological proposals aimed at minimising the impact of the transition; promoting teaching meetings to coordinate actions and implement a plan to deal with this issue; supporting tutorial action aimed at detecting problems related to the transition.

d) Families, transmitting complete and clear information in advance about the transition between stages, encouraging collaboration between family and school, promoting the training of families to meet the needs of pupils.

Once these areas of intervention have been identified, our role as inspectors places us in a privileged position to undertake a second phase of this study. In this second phase, the Education Inspectorate could actively collaborate in the

implementation of these measures in different schools. The Inspectorate's in-depth knowledge of the reality of schools would allow it to identify a certain number of schools, both in Primary and Secondary Education, where these action plans could be implemented as pilot schools. Similarly, the inspectorate could work with management teams and the teaching staff to develop actions which would have an impact on the areas previously identified. The supervision of the implementation of these actions would make it possible to collect results relating to the transition between Primary and Secondary Education. In this way, the collection of quantitative data, once the actions have been completed, would make it possible to identify a series of good practices that could be extrapolated to any other type of school. This is what makes us think that this research proposal is necessary.

It should also be noted that in this "state of the question", we do not intend to delve into aspects inherent to future research on the subject. However, an analysis of the current situation in which transfers between stages are carried out in different countries or an analysis of the psycho-evolutionary development of the pupils involved in this change of stages will inevitably be the subject of future research.

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