

# *Transition from Primary to Secondary School and More Able and Talented (MAT) Disadvantaged Pupils: Evidence from South-east Wales*

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## ABSTRACT

In Wales, as in many other education systems, there is an increasing focus on the impact that poverty can have on the educational achievement of disadvantaged pupils. Educational research in this area has included a focus on boys (compared to girls), ethnic minority groups and those with additional learning needs. Little attention, however, has been paid to pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds who have been identified as being more able and talented (MAT). This article reports on a mixed-method research evaluation of such pupils in a sample of schools in south-east Wales in relation to the impact of their transition from primary to secondary education. The findings from the research highlight variations in the definition and identification of MAT learners between primary and secondary schools and a lack of attention to this specific group of learners in school transition plans and policies. This leads the researchers to argue for the need for schools to specifically identify this group of pupils through the transition process and to suggest specific areas where transition practice might be strengthened to cater for their needs. The study supports the limited research that has been undertaken in this area that specific groups of more vulnerable pupils, such as those who are MAT but come from disadvantaged backgrounds, may suffer from shortcomings in the primary to secondary transition process such that it hampers their progression and the realisation of their potential.

**Key words:** transition, more able and talented, disadvantage, schools.

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<https://doi.org/10.16922/wje.20.1.4>

Introduction

Over the last decade schools, local authorities and the Welsh Government have been developing strategies designed to break the historic link that exists between poverty and low educational attainment in Wales. These have been supported by the introduction of additional funding for schools in the form of what is now known as the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) based on the number of pupils who have free school meals in the school. Whilst initially the focus was on developing school leadership and teacher pedagogy, increasingly attention has also been given to the importance of student well-being, family engagement and community-based approaches. There has also been a growing interest in the achievement of sub-groups of socio-economically disadvantaged learners including boys compared to girls, those who are looked after, those with additional learning needs and more able and talented (MAT) young people (Egan, 2012, 2016; Egan et al., 2014; Estyn, 2014; Grigg et al., 2014; Welsh Government, 2014).

Whilst the Welsh education system has long had an interest in MAT learners, in recent years an increased focus has been placed upon these young people by Welsh Government, the Regional Education Consortia and the inspection body Estyn (Estyn, 2011, 2012, 2017; Welsh Government, 2003, 2008, 2015). The background to this is a belief that the education system has overly focused on pupils reaching 'expected' standards, but has given insufficient attention to the most able pupils, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, achieving the highest possible grades. Evidence from GCSE and GCE examinations and the outcomes for Wales in the *Programme for International Student Assessment* are used to support this standpoint (see, for example, Jerrim, 2015; Estyn, 2017).

South-east Wales (encompassing the counties of Newport, Monmouthshire, Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly and Torfaen), whilst being a diverse area, is one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged regions of the UK. During the 1980s and 1990s its economy was devastated by the decline of the coal and steel industries and over the last twenty years it has struggled to recover its socio-economic base. Up to one-third of children in the region live in child poverty and their educational achievement lags significantly behind their more privileged peers (Egan, 2017a).

This article reports on research undertaken in a sample of schools across the south-east Wales region on school policies relating to MAT pupils in general and including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The research

focused on a wide range of areas relating to the experience of MAT pupils, including their transition from primary to secondary school, which is the specific area of the research reported upon here. This study was driven by the following research questions:

1. What challenges do MAT pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds face during primary–secondary transition?
2. What strategies have been found to be effective in supporting such pupils during primary–secondary transition?
3. Are there specific arrangements in place to identify and communicate MAT status in transition?
4. Are there arrangements to act on status in terms of teaching, learning, the curriculum and support in KS3?
5. How do these compare with the most effective examples and systems?

This article will focus on questions 1 to 3, since these yielded the greater weight of data.

### *Literature Review*

Over the last forty years an international field of educational research has developed around transitions between various phases of education including the transfer of pupils from primary to secondary school. Research studies have focused on both pupil concerns about the different experiences they perceived they would face in secondary compared to primary schools and more general concerns that academic progress might suffer as a result of the transfer process, largely because secondary schools were not aware of the curriculum coverage pupils had undertaken at primary level and the differences in primary and secondary approaches to learning and teaching pedagogy (Galton and Willcocks, 1983; Gorwood, 1986; Chedzoy and Burden, 2005).

By the new millennium, however, studies were reporting more positively on the new opportunities and challenges that primary pupils experienced in secondary education resulting from the attention which secondary schools had given to the need for pastoral and curriculum continuity highlighted in earlier research (Galton et al., 2003; McGee et al., 2004; Evangelou et al., 2008). In Wales where in 2006 the Welsh Government introduced statutory requirements for primary and secondary schools to

have transition plans (Welsh Government, 2006), Estyn were reporting by 2010 that this was now a strong feature of the work of most secondary schools and their primary partners (Estyn, 2010).

Whilst the research evidence emphasised that for most pupils their pre-transition worries did not materialise and dissipated quickly on entry to their new schools, concerns remained in relation to a significant minority of pupils, particularly in relation to the impact of transfer on their achievement. The pupils in question included those with additional learning needs, boys compared to girls, ethnic minority students and particularly those from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (Jackson and Warin, 2000; Graham and Hill, 2002; Lucey and Reay, 2002; Wetz, 2006; Evangelou et al., 2008; Egan, 2009; Welsh Government, 2011; Barnes-Holmes et al., 2013).

A major longitudinal study in Scotland published in 2010 which criticised the rigour of existing research on primary–secondary transition identified that about one-quarter of the cohort they had followed between 1994 and 2003 experienced significant difficulties through the transition process such that this was still having an impact upon their well-being and learning at the age of 15, with the groups identified above being particularly vulnerable. Their conclusion was that ‘transition matters in a more profound way than is often assumed’ (West et al., 2010: 47).

As far as can be established none of the research undertaken on primary–secondary transition has considered MAT pupils as a sub-group. The Scottish study of 2008 found consistent evidence that lower-ability pupils had found transition a more challenging experience than their higher-ability peers (West et al., 2010). In contradiction to this, however, a report published on the English education system in the same year noted that whether resulting from the effect of transition or other factors, a high percentage of able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds who performed well at the age of 11 did not continue to achieve highly at GCSE and very few proceeded into higher education (Sutton Trust, 2008).

Estyn in their largely positive 2010 report on primary–secondary transition plans in Wales noted that further work was needed, however, to secure the successful transition of the most able pupils and this finding was supported by two subsequent reports by the inspection body specifically on MAT pupils in primary and secondary schools in Wales (Estyn, 2010, 2011 and 2012).

In summary, therefore, research in this area suggests that whilst generally MAT pupils are not likely to be prone to a negative primary–secondary

transition, all pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to be vulnerable. The research on MAT learners from disadvantaged backgrounds that we report upon in this article is, therefore, unique and attempts to throw light on the apparently paradoxical findings that emerge from the existing literature.

### *Methodology*

The research undertaken by the team adopted a mixed-method evaluation approach which included a series of school-based case studies. A three-phase approach to evidence collection was adopted: a quantitative online survey of schools, interviews with staff responsible for transition and focus group interviews with MAT Year 4, 6 and 7 pupils. Schools were selected through a purposive method of sampling based on the status accorded them by their Regional Education Consortium (The South-East Wales Education Achievement Service).

Research that involves young people in a school-based setting requires thorough consideration of its ethical implications. Approval for the project was gained from our University Research Ethics Committee. Each member of the research team had an enhanced Criminal Record Bureau check and provided a careful explanation of the project to both the members of staff and the pupils. Consistent with established good practice in educational research (BERA, 2011), appropriately different information sheets were prepared and distributed to the head teachers, teachers, parents and pupils. Access was granted through a relevant gatekeeper within the school. In most cases, this was the head teacher or deputy head teacher. Each member of the research team had responsibility for gaining access to a small selection of schools. Once access was granted, the first phase of data collection began.

Phase one of data collection consisted of a quantitative online survey ( $n = 65$ ) of schools asking about primary-secondary transition plans, arrangements and evidence of their effectiveness (see Appendix 1). The survey contained a series of written statements to which schools were required to respond using a five-point Likert scale. Phase two of data collection comprised interviews with ten staff across primary and secondary schools identified by the Regional Education Consortium and the online survey as having effective measures in place (see Appendix 2). The focus of these interviews was to explore further issues within the online survey

data. Specifically, the interviews focused on the school's transition plan, the potential for a 'dip' in performance across transition and the pedagogical and pastoral improvements required across transition. Importantly too, these interviews helped the research team to identify MAT pupils to interview during phase three. Phase three of data collection comprised of three focus group interviews (see Appendix 3) of disadvantaged MAT learners in Year 4 (n = 4), Year 6 (n = 3) and Year 7 (n = 4). The primary school interviews centred on expectations of the transition to secondary school, the differences between primary and secondary school and their perceptions of workload. The Year 7 interview concentrated on pupils' early experiences of secondary school and any difficulties experienced during the transition process.

Once the three phases of data collection were completed, the process of data analysis began. First, the statistical analysis of the online surveys identified key issues relating to the transitional process in relation to MAT pupils. The interviews and focus groups were then transcribed and coded together using NVivo software, before being subjected to an inductive thematic analysis. We followed the advice of Hartas (2010) in creating clear code definitions (Appendix 4), keeping a code logbook, avoiding the creation of too many codes and ensuring that there was a distinct purpose for each code. The first two of the codes in Appendix 4 make up the theme of definition and identification of MAT and disadvantaged learners. Codes 3–13 were drawn from the Regional Education Consortium's Draft MAT Strategy and refer to broad themes around the learning environment, pedagogy and pupil voice, both within and beyond schools. The codes prefixed MAT (14–20) constitute a theme, though each also links to the broader codes above (e.g. MAT-inspiration links to pupil voice and learner profile since all three refer to MAT learners' own perceptions of themselves as learners, their progress and future plans). These combinations of codes were drawn together to provide the themes reported below.

### *Results*

We were interested to explore how the schools defined MAT pupils. A survey undertaken for Welsh Government had found that schools have a range of interpretations with most adopting a broad-brush approach that included academic ability and a wider range of talents. Most schools defined more able learners as achieving above the expected outcomes for

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their age/stage in areas of the curriculum (Welsh Government, 2015). Our research found a great deal of variation between schools and particularly between the primary and secondary phases of education, in the way that MAT learners are defined and the criteria that is used to identify them. In general, primary schools espoused a more inclusive approach ('able **and** talented') whereas secondary schools tend to be more focused solely on students with exceptional academic ability ('able'). Whilst this may reflect the nature of pedagogy and practice in the different phases, it is also likely to be an effect of the increased accountability pressures on secondary schools which have developed in Wales in recent years. Some schools (n = 3) defined MAT in terms of attainment against national curriculum levels, e.g.:

there was one child who was identified in the moderation process. I wasn't in that process, but we'd taken her over as a solid level five, and the literacy department in the comp highlighted elements of level six in her work. [primary]

Others (n = 2) preferred to look for potential rather than performance, e.g.: 'we do look for some of the students to have potential there to show inherent ability, but maybe not quite buying in, not quite doing the work outside' (secondary). Specific talents outside the academic were also highlighted by some primary schools (n = 2):

For example, we've got some children who are *academically* more able and talented; we've got children who are *physically* more able and talented or have a specific talent. They might not necessarily be part of our thinking group because, obviously, their talents are different, and we address them in a different way. [primary]

Few respondents were able to explain how MAT pupils are identified, other than through the standard data-tracking processes:

wouldn't say we go out of our way to highlight eFSM pupils [pupils eligible for Free School Meals] with high achievement; we look at everyone very carefully. With the amount of data we go through with our data-tracking and monitoring systems, we look at everyone very carefully. [secondary]

The above data-driven identification process was also reflected in the approach in two of the primary interviewees: 'we identify the more-abled and talented from their levels, but also from their test scores, the national tests' (primary). One school talked about postcodes and Fischer Family Trust data and even personal knowledge of siblings as an identifier. Sometimes the identification was purely perceptual, as in the following two examples: 'Our MAT coordinator, she would ask us for names who

we'd think are MAT pupils' (primary); 'identified early from the Big Thinkers Club' (primary).

Individual school MAT policies surveyed (n = 10) were found to be variable in quality, with very few (n = 1) focusing on MAT learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. All schools from which staff were interviewed (n = 10) stressed that they are inclusive institutions and their pedagogical and pastoral policies apply to all learners and that, therefore, they believed themselves to be providing for all MAT learners including those who are disadvantaged. Their definitions of 'disadvantage' were largely perceptual, drawing upon indicators such as 'single parents' (primary). There was a recognition amongst some (n = 4) that eFSM is becoming an increasingly inexact proxy because of changes in eligibility and claim rates: 'our FSM numbers have dropped, I think that's a similar pattern because of the change in application, the change in eligibility, which means that there are other benefits available rather than free school meals' (primary).

In the absence of a reliable external indicator, close contact with the pupils' families was regarded as essential to identify risk factors for vulnerable learners. The following comment reflects the views of both secondary schools from which staff were interviewed:

actually knowing which students you have issues with. Just because you're FSM doesn't mean you've got issues, and just because you're *not* FSM doesn't mean you *haven't* got any issues in your education. It comes down to the knowledge of the background of the kid and the family as well. [secondary]

This emphasis on the individual rather than their eFSM status was a strong theme running through the interviews (n = 10) and written responses to survey questions (n = 34). We could find little evidence of formal monitoring of the progression of identified groups of MAT learners across transition. Some primary respondents (n = 3) expressed the view that such pupils were at risk of 'getting lost' in the larger environment of the secondary school.

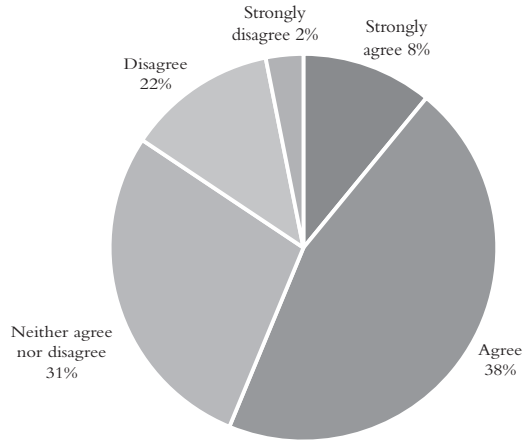
The contention that such learners do experience difficulties during transition was seen by an adviser from the Regional Education Consortium as evidenced by the lack of progress made between the end of primary school and GCSE level: 'the attainment gap gets wider when the children get to key stage three and then key stage four. So, something's going on. The results generally aren't as good regarding the attainment' (EAS adviser).

This perception of 'slippage' during the early years of secondary school was supported by the respondents to the survey (n=63) (Figure 1). The



**Figure 1. Survey response regarding the ‘slippage’ of disadvantaged MAT pupils during transition**

**Q3 - More able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds sometimes slip backwards in the transition from primary to secondary school in our cluster:**



reasons ascribed to this dip in progress tended to differ between primary and secondary respondents. As suggested above, some primary schools ( $n = 3$ ) tended to ‘blame’ secondary schools for a perceived lack of personalised attention and pastoral care, largely on account of their larger size:

The settings are very different with more freedom for pupils in KS2 and this causes issues as the children do not have one teacher to answer to who knows their history and background they have many teachers who don't see them every day or even week. [primary]

Another primary interviewee perceived that focus on individual needs reduced after the immediate challenge of transition had passed: ‘In my experience, despite thorough transition and going through each pupil's individual scenarios, the moment they arrive in the Comprehensive, the pupils are left to their own devices and problems occur’ (primary). A lack of challenge in Key Stage 3 pedagogy was also seen by some primary respondents ( $n = 2$ ) as a factor leading to MAT pupils either ‘coasting’ or becoming disengaged: ‘This is true of many more able pupils as they are

not pushed in the same way. Too much revision of work takes place in Year 7' (primary). Secondary schools, conversely, tended to attribute such dips to external factors such as family support, peer influences, local community environment and poverty in general. The following comments come from both the secondary schools in which staff were interviewed: 'Learners who are more able fail to progress for many different reasons. Many of these are sociological economic' (secondary). One interviewee regarded the potential disruption of transition as of much less significance than these socio-economic factors: 'I don't think that transition has much of an impact on stopping pupils from slipping backwards compared to the outside factors' (secondary). Family influence was seen by one secondary respondent as a key to successful transition: 'Some do and some don't and it's very much down to the individual families' (secondary).

Another regarded transition as just one key point in children's school experience where family support (or lack of it) could be crucial:

There are moments in a MAT pupil's education where they flourish – but if a background is a disadvantaged one, the MAT pupil tends to slip up educationally because there is no-one to push them back in the right direction. [secondary]

The potentially damaging effect of lack of parental support was seen by another interviewee as of greater significance for boys than girls: 'Often behaviours and family circumstances hinder progress and achievement of pupils. Often boys seem to do less well' (secondary). Another pointed to a wider range of factors that they felt were of significance in whether such pupils continued to thrive during and following transition: 'It also depends on community influences such as crime, drugs, alcohol etc.' (secondary).

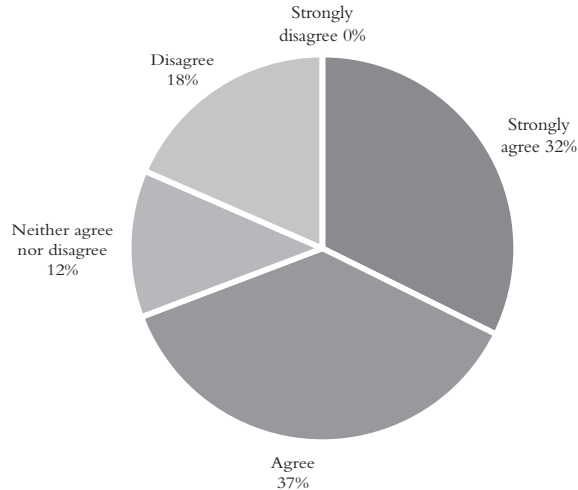
Overall, there was a perception amongst secondary interviewees (n = 5, from two schools) that if MAT learners from disadvantaged backgrounds did not make good progress it was because of a lack of sufficient parental/family support and their socio-economic background. It was not clear if this belief was based on evidence or perception. There was, furthermore a small number of responses to the online survey (n = 2) questioning the assertion that disadvantaged MAT pupils are at particular risk of dips in attainment:

I do not think that this group of learners is more vulnerable than any other learners ... during transition. [secondary]

We have little evidence to suggest this. The proportion of pupils achieving above 115 in NNRT in Year 7 is roughly similar to Year 6. [secondary]

**Figure 2. Survey response regarding the progress of disadvantaged MAT pupils in respondents' schools**

**Q1 – More able children from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve their potential in our school:**



Figures may not add up to 100%

This opinion appears to emerge from a wider range of teachers in the response to the survey statement about progress of disadvantaged MAT pupils in respondents' own schools (Figure 2).

The perception that such pupils are making good progress in respondents' schools, whilst not supported by the research literature, also appears to contradict the response in Figure 1. It suggests a certain defensiveness – 'this may be a problem elsewhere, but not in my school' – which may be born of inspection experiences. The support measures put in place by schools were assumed by some ( $n = 5$ ) to guard against such a 'dip': 'If there are robust procedures and provision embedded within the school to support our MAT pupils regardless of eFSM or other factors they should all reach their potential regardless of disadvantage' (secondary).

To gain a picture of the extent to which high-performing disadvantaged pupils at Year 6 are fulfilling their potential at GCSE level – potentially suggesting challenges they may face at transition – we summarised data

**Table 1. Percentage of eFSM pupils achieving L5+ at Y6 in 5 EAS primary schools in 2016.**

	<i>School A</i>	<i>School B</i>	<i>School C</i>	<i>School D</i>	<i>School E</i>	<i>Mean</i>
English	0%	57.1%	8.3%	25.0%	0%	18.0%
Maths	0%	57.1%	16.7%	25.0%	0%	19.8%
Science	0%	57.1%	16.7%	25.0%	0%	19.8%

**Table 2. Percentage of eFSM pupils achieving 5 GCSE grades A\*–C including English/Welsh and Mathematics (L2+) in 2016**

<i>School E</i>	<i>School F</i>	<i>School G</i>	<i>School H</i>	<i>School I</i>	<i>Mean</i>
52.6%	35.3%	38.7%	25.6%	18.2%	34.0%

from pupils eligible for free school meals achieving the highest possible levels in the primary and secondary schools for which EAS had provided data.

At first glance, Tables 1 and 2 appear to suggest that pupils eligible for free school meals are more likely to be high-attaining at GCSE level than at the end of primary school. This might suggest that there is no transition issue for such pupils. However, these figures need to be treated with extreme caution owing to the following considerations:

- this is a very small sample. In particular, the number of eFSM pupils in Year 6 in some of the primary schools was extremely low, rendering statistical information insignificant;
- gaining Level 5 at the end of primary school and L2+ at age 16 may not be of equivalent difficulty or represent the same degree of attainment for the age group;
- since the primary schools in the data sent by the Regional Education Consortium were not necessarily feeder schools for the secondaries, the above tables represent pupils from a range of very different contexts;
- both data sets are from 2016, rather than being five years apart as would be required to examine progression.

The one MAT eFSM pupil identified by School A as achieving L5 in all three subjects in 2011 subsequently achieved 12 A\* grades at GCSE level in School E, again suggesting a lack of transition difficulties:

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There was another boy a few years ago, as well. We didn't take his work to moderation, but he was really, really good. We think he had autistic tendencies as well, although he was never diagnosed. He actually, last summer, came out with 12 A stars, which is amazing, isn't it? He's the son of one of our dinner ladies as well, so we always ask about him. We've got that relationship with mum. And he was a free-school-meal child. [primary, school A]

However, such examples appeared to be extremely rare and – although evidenced – may be disregarded as anecdotal and should not be taken as an indication that all is well with transition. The very rarity of such pupils achieving L5 at the end of primary school is of itself a matter of concern. For those who do, however, our focus group of eFSM MAT pupils in Year 6 expressed positive views about their future secondary schooling and little anxiety about the process of transition:

I think some of (the teachers) will be nice, but I think maybe a few of them will be a bit strict because they're trying to make us do our work and finish our work so we can do good in school. [Year 6 pupil]

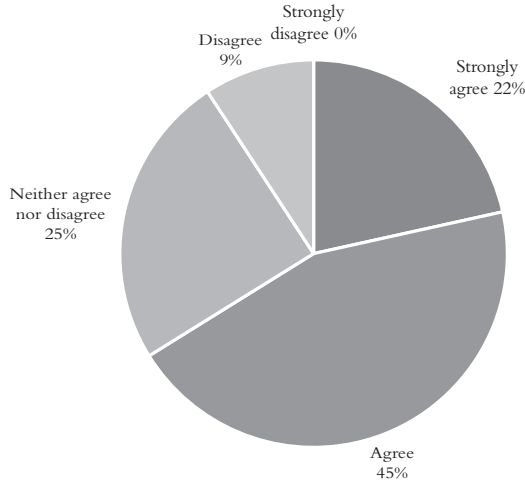
This lack of apprehension about the anticipated 'strictness' of the teachers appeared to reflect a confidence in their own abilities and positive orientation towards study: 'I'm sort of looking forward to singing and languages, because I'm already learning to speak Japanese' (Year 6 pupil). One pupil was even looking ahead to higher education, seeing their secondary experience as a step towards that goal:

I think because this is a very good school. Everyone trains for high school to get into university, but they feel like getting As all the time on the tests, but that's not going to happen all the time. [Year 6 pupil]

Another referred to the preparation being given by their primary school for the transition experience, though not perceiving this as a source of anxiety: 'They're building it up for me, ready for high school, but I never feel under pressure' (Year 6 pupil). One pupil did acknowledge that transition could be a challenge for some pupils, if not for themselves: 'but some people are really worried about going to high school, which is a very common thing' (Year 6 pupil). It could be argued that children finishing primary school are usually positive about the next step in their education, and that such confidence may not necessarily indicate that they will not suffer a post-transition dip in attainment. This is borne out from the survey responses (Figure 3), where the majority of respondents acknowledged the need for targeted support for disadvantaged MAT pupils during transition.

**Figure 3. Survey response regarding the need for targeted support for disadvantaged MAT pupils during transition**

**Q5 - More able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds require targeted support during transition:**



Figures may not add up to 100%

However very few clusters claimed to offer such support or make specific provision in their transition plans, claiming that their individualised approaches naturally catered for the needs of all pupils (Figure 4). Some schools ( $n = 2$ ) claimed to have started putting in place specific strategies to support MAT learners (whether disadvantaged or not) during transition:

We have introduced a range of MAT transition activities throughout Y6 including STEM days. [primary]

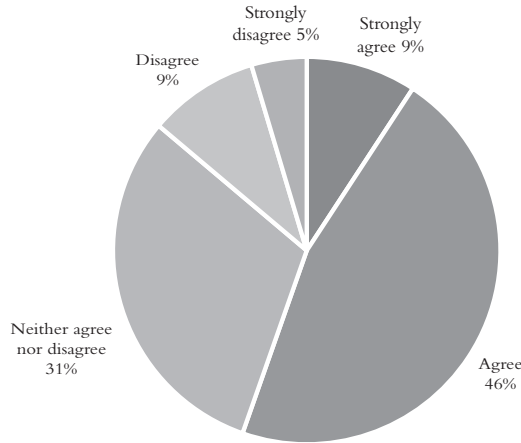
We are currently reorganising our school to focus on MAT children, especially those from FSM backgrounds. [secondary]

One secondary interviewee mentioned bringing MAT learners from feeder primaries into the secondary environment early as an enhancement activity: ‘We’re running maths MAT this year; we’re just starting it. It’s an early project. More or less, we’re looking for the best mathematicians they have. We’re bringing them into the secondary school’ (secondary). This

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**Figure 4. Survey response regarding the need for targeted support for disadvantaged MAT pupils during transition**

**Q7 – Our cluster's primary–secondary transition plan supports more able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds:**



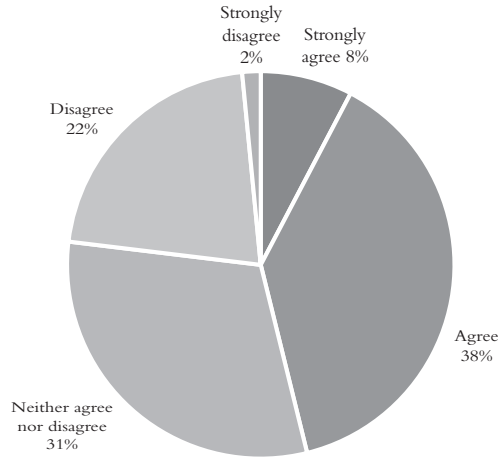
initiative was echoed in the specific provision for this group during transition claimed by one primary interviewee: ‘this year we have provided more opportunities for MAT pupils to spend time at the secondary school’ (primary). Although not a specific transition strategy, another secondary interviewee pointed to MAT provision which is geared towards disadvantaged pupils: ‘We’ve got the Brilliant Club. Do you know the Brilliant Club? We’re working with Bristol University. Thirty-three percent of the students in the Brilliant Club have to be free-school-meal students’ (secondary). Extra visits to secondary schools were also provided for pupils with particular needs, or from disadvantaged backgrounds for whom the PDG could be used to fund this additional support (Figure 5):

we make sure the vulnerable kids come up, and we actually do lessons for a week for transition with them. [secondary]

The PDG grant covers part of that as well; we do use the grant for that. It’s also used, then, for those visits that the children take, the TAs are released so the non-contact time with the class, then, they are used to take the children over for their visits. [primary]

**Figure 5. Survey response regarding use of the PDG to support disadvantaged MAT pupils' transition**

**Q9 – We use the PDG to support more able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds during transition:**



Figures may not add up to 100%

However, the PDG was not seen as relevant to supporting transition in all schools, as evidenced by the following two comments by primary school interviewees:

They are supported from PDG in school but not during transition because there has never been the need to. [primary]

Many of our PDG pupils are more able – we support them all regardless of transition. [primary]

Additionally, several schools ( $n = 3$ ) saw supporting low-achieving pupils as a higher priority for PDG expenditure. One secondary claimed to use the grant to raise weak academic performance: 'They are not usually the main priority – under-achievement of this vulnerable group is' (secondary). In contrast, a primary interviewee highlighted social and emotional support: 'We use our PDG to support and develop our FSM children's well-being so that they are ready for the next step in their learning journey' (primary). One primary did claim specific use of the PDG for transition,

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however this appeared to target lower achievers rather than MAT: 'Funds are allocated from the PDG grant to facilitate visits and support staff to prepare the pupils for the transition process' (primary).

The anxieties likely to be experienced by pupils facing transition were addressed by 'looking at the issues that years five and six are concerned about' and 'Involving year seven pupils who've been through it' in visits to secondary schools. One of the Year 7 disadvantaged MAT pupils in the focus group extolled the benefits of contact with pupils from other year groups: 'In year seven, you get to know all the year nines and eights. You get to speak to them. In primary school, if you're in year six, you wouldn't really see year fives' (secondary pupil).

Overall, it would appear that, despite survey responses in Figures 3–5, clusters tend to target *either* MAT *or* vulnerable learners during the transition process, whilst assuming that those in the intersection between these groups will be included through this twin-pronged approach. Information sharing between primary and secondary teachers prior to transition was regarded as essential by all respondents to ensure that particular needs were highlighted and met: 'Communication between settings is key. Our plan identifies all pupils with ALN / MAT, whether disadvantaged or otherwise' (primary).

Attention to individual strengths and needs during this information sharing appears to be an impressive feature of at least three of the cross-phase clusters represented in the interview group: '[we have] a transition meeting between the head of year seven, and you give specific information on those children. It's like levels, emotional and social issues, any background information you can give about that child' (primary). A similar arrangement, perhaps focused more on academic achievement, was reported by a different primary school:

the (secondary) tutor comes and meets with myself and the parallel teacher and speaks about the children individually. We have forms to fill in on every child; we have to put their levels, their test results, and any other relevant information on there. We have that tracked as well, so we can say, 'You need to look out for this, this, and this'. [primary]

A more informal strategy involving multiple conversations was evident in another cluster:

We spend a lot of time talking to high schools when the children are going in year six and often say, 'This child needs this ...' 'We know this needs this ...' Or, 'This child is going to need this ...' [primary]

Such information is also transferred in written form:

You know what's coming up; you know what kids that you need to keep an eye on; you know what kids need what types of support. They'll give us, if you look through the form – I'll give you a copy of this one – you get attendance, punctuality, comments, and in the nature ALN, the primary staff will be pretty honest about what happens. [secondary]

Again, the assumption appears to be that with such rigorous attention to detail, MAT pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds will inevitably be identified and supported, despite the lack of attention to them as a specific group requiring a targeted approach.

To smooth learners' experience of teaching and learning between primary and secondary, the 'pedagogical bridge' within transition appeared to be being addressed in cross-phase clusters through a series of visits, training events, agreements on common programmes and approaches:

We've got clear-set targets which we agreed as a cluster three years ago, where we wanted the cluster to go; that's all primary-school heads and the secondary school. We sat down, we had a working party that put this together, looking at key priorities for us as a cluster ... We also have teach-meets that are organised within the cluster. One of the nice things you see is they're organised at different primary schools and secondary schools. We look around each other's schools; everyone brings something to the table and puts on a micro or an annual presentation. [secondary]

This common approach to pedagogy was echoed in the comment of one of this school's feeder primaries, in this case referring to a specific programme:

We do have some common strategies that we use. It's not in here, but it's called Doctor Ice, and it's deepening thinking, role-modelling, impact on learning, challenge, and engagement. We bring that in to our lessons. We use those words a lot. 'You've got to deepen your thinking now. I'm going to make sure you're thinking about this. I'm going to challenge you now. What impact has that had on your learning today?' Those are the sort of things that we bring in to our lessons, and the comp are doing the same sort of strategy. [primary]

In some cases, a 'primary approach' to timetabling and the structure of the school day for pupils starting secondary school is being used to smooth the perceived discontinuity in approach: 'There are a few schools that have been trying different things, more of a year six, I suppose, curriculum in year seven, with one teacher and you stay in the same room' (EAS Transition Co-ordinator). Conversely, in another example a secondary

school has provided activities for primary teachers to use when preparing a MAT pupil identified during the information-sharing process for transition:

They actually liaised with the school after that, because moderation takes place in May, and they gave the class teacher who was teaching her then additional activities that she could do with the child to reinforce this level-six maths. [primary]

The extent to which the above initiatives in pedagogical continuity supports MAT learners from disadvantaged backgrounds was not known by the interviewees, however they appeared to be appreciated by some of the Year 7 pupils in the focus group:

we were doing the topic in class, so we learnt about it. Then Sir chose five of us to do it. We had to stand up in front of everyone in the class, and then we'd say about each pillar that we had. [secondary pupil]

Most schools accepted that they need to further develop their MAT strategies, especially in areas such as learning and teaching pedagogy, primary–secondary transition, target-setting and social/emotional support. They also recognised that there is a specific need to focus on MAT learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Given that they also believe that their current policies are inclusive and cater for all learners, this appears to be an area of confusion. Schools increasingly recognise that to support all learners, including MAT students, it is necessary to address well-being issues, before or simultaneous to securing cognitive progress.

### Discussion

The data above suggest that, in support of the findings of West et al. (2010), pupils coming from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are likely to experience additional difficulties during primary–secondary transition, whether or not they are high attaining at age 11. Whilst there are many positive features of the transition plans ( $n = 10$ ) and practice enacted by these schools, as noted by Estyn (2010), there is as yet insufficient focus upon the needs of MAT learners both during and after the transfer to secondary school (Estyn 2011, 2012) to ensure that they make the progress of which they are capable.

The OECD (2017) highlight the importance of the link between learner's engagement and learning, being built on a strong foundation of self-esteem and sound social and emotional development improvement,

citing priority areas to address, to ensure that schools meet the learning needs of all their students. The schools in our sample did appear to be taking such needs seriously through transition, though perhaps without sufficient tracking of the well-being of particularly vulnerable groups. Donaldson (2015) stresses that the new national curriculum in Wales should be a ‘learning continuum’ from ages 3–16 without phases and key stages, to ensure consistent approaches to pedagogy which appear to be starting to be implemented in some of the study schools. In practice, this would mean that traditional transition arrangements, from primary to secondary, will need to be rethought and developed as a matter of course, with further emphasis on collegiality and partnership between schools. Whilst there is significant evidence of increasing partnership between primary and secondary schools in the sample, the continuing mistrust of achievement data being passed over is a source of threat to further progress.

### *Conclusions and Recommendations*

Our research suggests an emerging ‘theory of change’ that could frame a revised strategy for overcoming the impact of poverty on educational achievement across primary–secondary transition. This should be based on the necessity to:

- develop a definition of MAT across geographical clusters of primary and secondary schools that uses consistent criteria and embraces both ‘able’ and ‘talented’ dimensions in an appropriate way. It would be desirable for the clusters to be provided with a framework for school MAT policies and through its partnership with *National Association for Able Children in Education* (NACE) a quality kitemarking process for these policies. Reference should be made in the framework to both well-being and pedagogy and the strategies to be employed in supporting both these areas should be strongly evidence-based. There should also be specific reference to meeting the needs of disadvantaged MAT learners and to engaging the parents and families of MAT learners who come from disadvantaged backgrounds
- undertake early identification of MAT learners in nursery/reception classes and develop a discrete data-set developed that would enable MAT learners to be tracked and monitored from Year 1 to the end of secondary school. Within the early intervention element of the strategy the

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development of *high-quality teaching* should be a particularly high priority. This could be achieved through developing a new strand within the Excellence in Teaching framework focused on excellent teaching in challenging circumstances, the retention of high-quality teachers in the most disadvantaged schools and the deployment of high quality teachers to disadvantaged schools in the region from more privileged areas as part of their professional learning and leadership development;

- develop *leadership* in transition issue at school and consortium level through each primary/secondary cluster in the region appointing (through secondment) a designated leader for this area of work, funded through pooling of the PDG funding. These appointees should lead the strategy at cluster level and to be part of a wider leadership group across the regional consortia. To develop their role, they should undertake and provide high-level professional learning. Professional development should also be in place for School MAT Coordinators and to provide opportunities for teachers and teaching assistants to undertake professional development in this area, and especially in relation to social and emotional development and the importance of effective transition and support;
- refine *data and intelligence systems* to provide schools with a more rounded socio-economic profile of the communities they serve and the backgrounds of their learners, including data sets that demonstrate the inter-relationships of various forms of vulnerability experienced by students (including poverty, gender, ethnicity and ALN). This would also require more reliable teacher assessment data to be developed across Key Stages 2 and 3;
- put in place strategies to maintain and develop partnership with parents/carers. This is seen as a key factor in successful transition. Schools in the region should participate in the development of *multi-agency partnerships* in the new Children First areas in the region, as a way of bringing schools more closely together with other community partners and agencies. This would also be useful in relation to building greater partnerships with parents/carers and families;
- develop an *employability* element of the strategy to include an appropriate place for enterprise education in the curriculum, stronger employer engagement and independent careers advice and a strengthening of vocational routes alongside other progression pathways (Egan, 2017b).

This small-scale research study on a relatively neglected and niche area of education policy and practice – the progression of MAT pupils through

primary–secondary transition – suggests that in the main these young people are not well served by the education system. The combined effects of poverty, high-stakes accountability and a lack of attention paid by over-stretched schools to the specific needs of these pupils leads to significant learner potential being unrealised.

### *Acknowledgement*

The authors wish to acknowledge the support of the Education Achievement Service (EAS) of south-east Wales in making this research possible.

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## APPENDIX 1: ONLINE SURVEY QUESTIONS

### **EAS & Cardiff Metropolitan University: Research into more able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds**

This questionnaire forms part of a research project that has been commissioned by the Education Achievement Service (EAS) for south-east Wales. It is being undertaken by the School of Education at Cardiff Metropolitan University.

The research is intended to inform support offered to schools in the future so they can better support more able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve their potential.

#### **Please note that:**

- Your decision to participate in this research is voluntary.
- You are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.
- You are under no obligation to complete the questionnaire.
- All personal responses will be confidential and anonymised.
- By answering the questionnaire you are giving your consent to take part in the research and for any data to be used anonymously in reports, publications and presentations.

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**PART 1 - Transition issues for more able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds:**

Q1. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements on a 5 point scale:

More able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve to their potential in our school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

Q2. Please expand your answer to Q1 here:

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Q3. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements on a 5 point scale:

More able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds sometimes slip backwards in the transition from primary to secondary school in our cluster.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

Q4. Please expand your answer to Q3 here:

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Q5. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements on a 5 point scale:

More able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds require targeted support during transition.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

Q6. Please expand your answer to Q5 here:

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Q7. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements on a 5 point scale:

Our cluster's primary-secondary transition plan supports more able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.	<input type="radio"/> Strongly agree	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Neither agree nor disagree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly disagree
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Q8. Please expand your answer to Q7 here:

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Q9. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements on a 5 point scale:

We use the pupil deprivation grant (PDG) to support more able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds during transition.	<input type="radio"/> Strongly agree	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Neither agree nor disagree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly disagree
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Q10. Please expand your answer to Q9 here:

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*APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STAFF WITH  
TRANSITION RESPONSIBILITY*

1. Could we please have a copy of your cluster's primary–secondary transition plan? If you have it with you, could you please talk me through it?
2. Does your transition plan try to make any special provision of the needs of particular groups of pupils during the transfer from primary to secondary?
3. In your cross-school moderation of Key Stage 2 data, have you been able to identify any eFSM or similarly disadvantaged pupils with particularly high achievement?
4. If so, are you aware of any 'dip' in performance for these pupils, either as they approach transition or during secondary school? If so, what factors do you think might be contributing towards this?
5. How does your school work with more able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to prepare them for (primary)/ensure they continue to thrive after (secondary) transition?
6. Does your school or cluster use the pupil deprivation grant (PDG) to support transition?
7. What in your view could schools be doing better for these pupils, either in terms of pastoral care or pedagogy, to provide a better continuum through transition?
8. Could you please identify a group of more able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds in Y6 (primary)/Y7 (secondary) that we could interview about their expectations/experience of transition?

*APPENDIX 3: PUPIL FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE*

*Years 4 and 6*

1. What do you like about school?
2. What subjects are you good at?
3. Are you looking forward to going to secondary school?
4. What do you know about (name) comprehensive?
5. Have you been on a visit? What did you like about it?
6. What subjects are you looking forward to there?
7. What do you think will be different about being at (secondary school) compared with (primary)?

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8. What do you think the teachers will be like?
9. Is there anything worrying you about going to secondary school?
10. What could (name) primary do to help you prepare for going to secondary school?
11. What could (name) comprehensive do to help you settle in when you get there?
12. Do you think you'll still be good at your subjects there?
13. What would you like to do when you grow up?
14. How do you think (name) comp will help you get there?

*Year 7*

1. What do you like about school?
2. What subjects are you good at?
3. Are these the same subjects you were good at in primary school?
4. How well do you think you're doing?
5. Is there anything holding you back from doing even better?
6. What did you know about (name) comprehensive before you came here?
7. Did you go on a visit from primary school? What did you like about it?
8. What is different about being at (secondary) compared with primary school?
9. Was there anything worrying you about coming here?
10. What could your primary school have done to help you prepare for going to secondary school?
11. What could (name) comprehensive do to help you settle in when you get here?
12. What would you like to do when you grow up?
13. How do you think (name) comp will help you get there?

APPENDIX 4: CODES USED TO ANALYSE INTERVIEW  
TRANSCRIPTS

<i>Code name</i>	<i>Definition</i>
MAT-def	Definition of 'More Able and Talented' according to interviewee
Disadvantage-def	Definitions of disadvantage used by teachers, particularly alternatives to eFSM
Tracking	Reference to mechanisms for measuring and tracking MAT learner experience and progress
Environment	Maximising MAT performance through the learning environment
Curriculum	Planning for MAT in the curriculum
Pedagogy	Ensuring MAT provision through teaching, learning and assessment
Extra	Reference to extra-curricular provision for MAT learners
Performance	Performance of MAT learners in the curriculum (progress and standards)
Pupil-voice	The use of pupil voice to enhance and capture the impact of extra-curricular provision to MAT learners in school
Learner-profile	The capture of MAT pupils' own impressions of progress through learner 'profiles', 'passports' and 'contracts', and the link from this to measures from the STT
School-level	School-level provision for ensuring maximum opportunities for MAT learners
Partnership	Beyond-school partnerships for supporting MAT learners across the community
Curriculum	Planning for MAT in the curriculum
MAT-aspiration	Aspirations expressed by MAT pupils
MAT-extra	Extra provision for MAT learners
MAT-identification	How teachers identify MAT learners
MAT-likes	Positive attitudes expressed by MAT learners

*More Able and Talented (MAT) Disadvantaged Pupils*

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MAT-PDG	Use of Pupil Deprivation Grant to support MAT learners
MATP-transition	Experiences/attitudes towards transition expressed by MAT pupils
Parents	Engagement with parents, comments on parents' role.
Transition+ve	Positive opinions of transition arrangements
Transition-dip	Comment on any dip in performance by pupils either before or after transition
Transition-extra	Extra provision for particular groups during transition
Transition-feedback	Feedback on pupil performance from secondary to primary schools following transition
Transition-ideas	Ideas for other transition activities/provision
Transition-moderation	Issues in moderating pupil levels between primary and secondary schools
Transition-pedagogy	Reference to harmonising pedagogy between primary and secondary to smooth transition
Transition-Tdiscussion	Primary and secondary teachers meeting together to support transition
Transition-Tvisit	Visits from secondary teachers to primary schools to support transition
Transition-visit	Visits by primary pupils to secondary schools pre-transition

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