

School Transfer from Primary to Secondary Education

Dr Persianis' Talk at book launching of Iacovos Psaltis

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I am very glad that I am given the opportunity to present to you today Dr Iacovos Psaltis' new book "School Transfer from Primary to Secondary Education: a survey into the feelings of children transferring from primary to secondary education and the perceptions of parents and teachers".

I hold Dr Psaltis in great esteem both as a man and as a professional. He is a modest, conscientious, hardworking and likable person and a learned professional with a high sense of responsibility, a combination of characteristics not in abundance in Cyprus today.

He is very much concerned about the present problems and difficulties of Cyprus education and he feels he has a responsibility to make suggestions and proposals, which would contribute to its improvement. I am sure you all know of the book he published a few months ago under the title "Educational Reform: Theory and Praxis", in which he makes a critical appraisal of the recent proposals and attempts for educational reform. The new book I am presenting to you today reflects similar concerns about Cyprus education. The explicit ambition of the book, in his own words, "is to add an alternative dimension to the problem" he deals with.

The new book is the product of a longitudinal survey into the feelings, difficulties and problems of children transferring from primary to secondary education, which was conducted from 2002 to 2003 in two rounds. The first round took place in June 2002 a few days before 1200 top year pupils finished their primary schooling, and the second in February 2003 eight months later, after the same pupils attended secondary school for six months. The main instrumentation in this survey was effected through the administration of two questionnaires, while for triangulation the author employed essays, diaries and interviews with parents and teachers.

The book consists of two parts. The main part is the presentation of the survey and comprises five chapters. The first chapter contains the terms of reference and the statement of the problem. The second cites the pertinent literature from Cyprus, Greece, the UK and other parts of Europe, the USA and other parts of the world. The third chapter presents the design of the investigation and the measurement techniques. The fourth contains an analysis, interpretation and discussion of the results and the fifth summarises the conclusions and puts forward some very interesting recommendations.

The second part of the book presents a detailed Induction Programme developed by the author in his capacity as an assistant head teacher and later as a head teacher, liaising between gymnasia and their feeder primary schools.

The survey looked into a great variety of areas related to the problem of transfer in an effort to be as comprehensive as possible. Thus, it examined the aims and objectives of primary and secondary education, the attitudes of the pupils, the effects of the transfer on pupils' attainment, the process of adaptation, the curriculum continuity, the induction programmes, the age of entry into secondary education, the catchment areas, the effects of transfer on the attitudes and progress of children at secondary school, and the perceptions of teachers and parents. All these parameters constitute an enormous number of variables, which of course make the survey very complicate. On the other hand there is no doubt that a comprehensive survey has to look into as many variables as necessary.

In reviewing and analysing the data from the Survey, the author had the great advantage of personal experience of the many facets of the whole process, the human relations involved and the personal feelings generated in the interface of the various groups of interests participating in the whole process. Dr Psaltis was involved in the process for a long time and experienced it in many capacities: as a teacher, as a gymnasium assistant head teacher, as a liaison between the gymnasium and their feeder primary schools, and as a head teacher.

In these capacities he experienced vividly the personal and practical problems of pupils, he participated in meetings convened at the Ministry of Education for the discussion of the problem, he attended pertinent seminars, and he took part in the Teacher Union

conferences and in Parents Associations meetings. He had also the opportunity to learn about the European initiatives on the matter and to be involved in the European Educational Programme Comenius 2. This personal involvement helped him not only to read into the problem theoretically but also to experience the emotions and the perceptions of those involved in the process of school transfer (parents, primary school teachers, secondary school teachers, administrative officers of the Ministry of Education, pupils and others).

Dr Psaltis was also lucky enough to be in the right position when the problem of transfer from primary to secondary education was highlighted by the 1985 Government decision to extend compulsory education until the age of 15 and thus introduce a 9-year compulsory education. This meant that there was a pressing need for urgent measures to be taken that would make the transfer from primary to secondary education as smooth and effective as possible.

Committees were established and measures were proposed. The first of these measures was the construction of a unified curriculum that would be put immediately into practice at 14 primary and 14 secondary schools in the context of a Pilot Programme that would last for three years and would be duly evaluated at the end of the three-year period. Dr Psaltis followed the trial period and the results of the evaluation very closely.

The results of this Survey, as they are presented in this book, constitute a very analytical and enlightening picture of the problem, which indicates clearly the kind of educational measures that can and should be taken so as for school transfer to stop becoming the cause of “sad experience” or a “trauma” for quite a few students. Some of the findings of the survey, such as the concerns and interest of pupils before entering the gymnasium and a few months later, the dissonance between pupils’ and teachers’ conceptions of the problem and the priorities and the impact of the problem on children’s self-concept, are really very fascinating.

Very interesting are also the recommendations. The most important recommendation of the study is surely the proposal that the transfer from primary to secondary education should not be treated as an event covering only the short period between transferring from primary to secondary education but as a process across the year to year transition

of the whole schooling career. This, in fact, is the “alternative dimension to the problem”, which the author had the ambition to add. Two other important recommendations are that, first, the issue of school transfer should be signalled as a concern not only for teachers, pupils and their families, but for the rest of the schooling constituents as well, and, two, that if the transition is smooth, there is “a strong possibility that secondary education could serve as a stimulant” instead of causing adverse effects.

Overall, the Research Project can be described as very valuable for the Ministry of Education, because it provides a full scale programme for dealing with this problem. Theoretically also the Project is very interesting, because it deals with an aspect of one of the most central problems of Cyprus education, that of discontinuity.

Discontinuity in Cyprus education is mainly the outcome of historical circumstances. As a result of these circumstances primary and secondary education had a completely different administrative and pedagogical history. During the British administration primary education was administered by the colonial government while secondary education was independent and was mainly offered by community schools funded by students' fees and the Orthodox Church of Cyprus. This separation resulted in deep differences between the two levels of education: differences in orientation, philosophy, pedagogy, modes of teacher recruitment, initial and in-service training, and conceptions of schooling. Teachers of the two levels have had also separate trade-unions and different and very often conflicting interests.

This separation is also reflected in the structure of the Ministry of Education, where there are two completely separate administrative departments, the Department of Primary and the Department of Secondary Education.

The disadvantages of this separation were highlighted by the 1997 educational Report on Cyprus education drafted by a Committee of UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning. Since then the Ministry has come out with several plans and proposals intended to cope with the problem but all of them were met with fierce opposition by the two separate trade unions and vested interests in the Ministry of Education. This again indicates very strongly how deep the whole problem of discontinuity is.

Discontinuity explains also the author's final conclusion that since 1985, that is for more than twenty years, "not much progress has been made in the way of bridging the gap between primary and secondary education."

The same is also true of several other sincere efforts for educational improvement, such as the introduction of a system of school and teacher evaluation, the introduction of a system of in-service teacher training and the introduction of mixed ability teaching. All efforts failed to gather support from teachers and finally collapsed.

The Ministry's failure to avail itself of Dr Psaltis' findings and proposals does not in any way diminish the value of these findings and proposals. On the contrary, it multiplies the Ministry's responsibility. Until recently we did not have the relevant knowledge and understanding of the problem and we failed to comprehend the significance of taking the proper action in the transfer of pupils from primary to secondary education. Today, thanks to Dr Psaltis' valuable survey, we know. Therefore, failure to take the suitable measures is henceforth entirely unjustified for both the Ministry and the schools. I hope this failure will be rectified in the near future. I am sure this will be a great satisfaction and moral reward for Dr Psaltis.