

JOINING UP THE JOURNEY

Essential skills and
educational transitions

Supported by the Neville Abraham Foundation



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1. Executive summary

1.1 Context of the project

Skills Builder Partnership works to ensure that one day, everyone builds the essential skills to thrive. Over the last 15 years the social enterprise has grown from a single classroom to working with more than 950 partners including education institutions, impact organisations and employers. Their approach is underpinned by the Skills Builder Universal Framework to support every learner to consistently understand their essential skills and build them across their education and working lives.

Over the last year, Skills Builder Partnership has been supported by the Neville Abraham Foundation to explore ways of joining up the journey of essential skills development for children and young people. This has meant a particular focus on transition points.

1.2 Focus on transition

This report explores the critical role of essential skills in facilitating successful school transitions, defined as the process of moving between educational settings. It also explores how essential skills can be developed during this crucial period. Transition is often a source of anxiety for children and their parents or carers and can lead to a dip in attainment and essential skill development. Vulnerable learners, such as those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with Special Educational Needs, are particularly susceptible to negative impacts.

1.3 Transition and essential skills

Essential skills are defined as ‘those highly transferable skills which are used to complete almost any job and which support the application of technical skills and knowledge’.¹ Skills Builder Partnership works to build eight essential skills : Listening; Speaking; Planning; Adapting; Creativity; Problem Solving; Teamwork; and Leadership.

Essential skills significantly benefit learners, supporting more effective learning, improving employment prospects, increasing earnings, and enhancing well-being². A structured curriculum can accelerate essential skill development, underscoring the benefits of integrating these skills throughout a child's educational journey.

To explore methods which can support more learners to make a successful transition from primary to secondary school learning, two methods were adopted: learning from schools already implementing effective transition activities with essential skills; and trialling new activities and support in institutions.

1.4 Developing new models for essential skills in transition

This document draws together the different case studies that have emerged through this work by looking at three models of transition:

1.4.1 Multi-Academy Trusts

- *Harbour Learning Trust*: A primary school (Healing Primary Academy) with a strong Skills Builder programme successfully integrated essential skills into transition activities with the local Harbour Learning Trust secondary school (Healing Academy), demonstrating positive impacts on learner confidence and staff understanding of incoming learners' strengths.
- *The Challenge Academy Trust (TCAT)*: A secondary school on a Skills Builder programme piloted a Teamwork & Problem Solving workshop for incoming Year 7 learners, effectively preparing them for secondary school and emphasising the transferable nature of essential skills.

1.4.2 Local Authorities

- *London Borough of Islington*: This initiative focused on replicating successful essential skill building across multiple schools, addressing broader issues of attainment and engagement for vulnerable groups, and improving quality assurance. By ensuring consistency across a geographical area, the likelihood of a consistent essential skills journey for children and young people was enhanced.

¹ Ravenscroft, T. & Baker, L. (2020) *Towards a Universal Framework for Essential Skills: A Review of the Skills Builder Framework*. London: Skills Builder Partnership, P.2

² Skills Builder Partnership (2023a) *Essential Skills Tracker*

1.4.3 All-through Schools

- *Academy 360*: integrated essential skills, particularly Teamwork, into transition activities to help learners adjust to their new environment.
- *Bennerley Fields School*: a specialist all-through school, used the Universal Framework to provide a common focal point for learning, promoting an inclusive and personalized approach to transition.
- *Carew Academy*: another specialist academy, explicitly embedded essential skills into their transition and careers programmes, boosting learners' confidence and awareness of skill relevance.

1.5 Themes for essential skills and transition

Research highlights five potential goals for successful transition:

- Bridging curriculum learning
- Helping learners settle into new environments
- Fostering new peer groups
- Linking transition with careers
- Ensuring an inclusive experience

Drawing on the case studies outlined, we were able to pull together key methods by which it was possible to use essential skills to enhance and achieve these goals.

1.6 Key implication and next steps

This report outlines five key recommendations for schools and colleges to leverage essential skills during the primary to secondary transition:

- Firstly, integrate essential skills, using the Universal Framework, into all transition activities like taster days and workshops to foster learner confidence.
- Secondly, encourage collaboration and information sharing between primary and secondary schools on essential skills development, ensuring a smoother handover.
- Thirdly, promote essential skills as a 'common language' to aid social integration and interaction.
- Fourthly, actively link these skills to future careers, helping learners see long-term relevance.
- Finally, senior leadership should champion essential skills development, recognising their value in understanding learners' strengths and supporting vulnerable groups.

2. Project context

2.1 Educational transitions and their risks

School transition can be defined as the process of moving between different educational settings or stages, including primary to secondary school.

It is best described as a *process* rather than an individual event. In a 'traditional' model of learners moving from primary to secondary school, this typically starts in Year 5 or 6, building to a programme of activities in the new school during the summer term, before they move on to secondary school in September. For some learners, such as those with Special Educational Needs, reviews and planning can take place earlier, with a more bespoke and extended programme of activities.

The process can be a time of anxiety for both learners and their parents or carers. Cited concerns include adapting to a new environment and new expectations, adjusting to a new social context and making new friends, with worries about bullying especially prominent.³

A common theme identified across the research is that getting the transition process right matters. There is a general consensus amongst researchers that transition leads to a dip in attainment for at least the first year in the new school, due to factors such as differing teacher expectations, teaching styles and workload.⁴ This is also replicated in essential skill development. At primary schools without a Skills Builder programme, learners make significant progress in skill development (0.57 steps in 2023). However, when learners start secondary school, progress tends to stall: on average, young people make negligible progress for several years.⁵

Some learners, such as those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with special educational needs or from a minority background within the context of their new school, can be particularly vulnerable to a poor transition, with impacts such as lower academic attainment and higher levels of depression potentially lasting beyond secondary school.⁶

³ Evangelou, M., Taggart, B., Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I (2008) *What makes a successful transition from primary to secondary school? Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education*, Department for Children, Schools & Families, P.24

⁴ Harris, Joanne and Nowland, Rebecca (2021) *Primary-Secondary School Transition: Impacts and Opportunities for Adjustment*, Journal of Education and Social Sciences, 8 (2), p.57

⁵ Skills Builder Partnership (2023b) *Impact Report*

⁶ Ibid. P.3 and 26, and West, P., Sweeting, H., Young, R. (2010) *Transition matters: pupils' experiences of the primary-secondary school transition in the West of Scotland and consequences for wellbeing and attainment*, Research Papers in Education, 25:1, P.42

2.2 Essential skills

Essential skills are those ‘highly transferable skills which are needed by almost everyone to complete any job, and which support the application of technical skills and knowledge’.⁷

They are sometimes known by other names including soft skills, 21st century skills, transferable skills or employability skills.

In their widely used Universal Framework, Skills Builder Partnership define eight essential skills:

- *Listening*: Receiving, retaining and processing information
- *Speaking*: Transmitting information or ideas
- *Problem Solving*: Finding solutions to challenges
- *Creativity*: Using imagination and generating new ideas
- *Adapting*: Using tactics and strategies to overcome setbacks and achieve goals
- *Planning*: Setting clear, tangible goals and devising a robust route to achieving them
- *Leadership*: Supporting, encouraging and motivating others to achieve a shared goal
- *Teamwork*: Working cooperatively with others to achieve a shared goal

Essential skills have been shown to provide a range of benefits to learners, such as supporting more effective learning in school, halving the likelihood of being out of work or training, and increasing earnings, job and life satisfaction. Higher levels of essential skills are also linked with higher levels of self-efficacy, reduced anxiety, improved peer interactions and psychological well-being.⁸

Progress in essential skill development can be accelerated by 3.3 times by applying a structured curriculum of incremental skills acquisition⁹. On this basis, there appear to be significant benefits to providing opportunities to build essential skills across the entire educational journey of a child or young person – the challenge is how to ensure that this happens.

⁷Ravenscroft & Baker, *Towards a Universal Framework for Essential Skills: A Review of the Skills Builder Framework*, P.2

⁸ Essential Skills Tracker (2023), Ps. 5-9

⁹Skills Builder Partnership (2024) *Impact Report*

2.3 Models of supporting educational transitions

Looking from the perspective of research on educational transitions, it was possible to discern five key themes in making transition a successful process:

- **Bridging curriculum learning:** Applying a collaborative approach between the two schools, for example through bridging projects or materials. Transition taster activities provide an opportunity for showcasing a safe, inclusive, purposeful and relevant learning environment.¹⁰
- **Helping learners to settle into a new environment:** Providing a variety of opportunities for induction, taster days, visits between schools and collaborative projects. Engaging parents in school events and discussions around new expectations and routines, and ensuring adequate information sharing between all parties.¹¹
- **Helping learners to settle into new peer groups:** Providing opportunities for learners to collaborate to help them build peer networks. This could include putting in place peer support programmes, and using older learners as ‘buddies’.¹²
- **Linking transition with careers:** Incorporating careers activities into the transition process allows learners to see the experience as part of a longer-term journey, making them feel empowered to make choices about their futures and determine their own direction.¹³
- **Making transition an inclusive experience.** Providing targeted and bespoke transition pathways for vulnerable learners, such as those with SEND.¹⁴

These ideas were combined with insights on how essential skills are built and used to devise and test ideas for using and building essential skills through educational transitions.

¹⁰ Evangelou et al, *What makes a successful transition from primary to secondary school?* Ps. 32-34 and Kaur, T., McLoughlin, E. & Grimes, P. (2022) *Mathematics and science across the transition from primary to secondary school: a systematic literature review*, International Journal of STEM Education, 9 (13), P.9

¹¹ Kirsten Mould (2021) *EEF Blog: Supporting pupils through transitions – a trio of challenges*, Education Endowment Foundation

¹² The British Psychological Society (2020) *Back to school: Using psychological perspectives to support re-engagement and recovery*, P.8

¹³ The Careers and Enterprise Company, *Transition Guide from Primary to Secondary: Enhancing careers education and supporting parental engagement*, P.2

¹⁴ Kirsten Mould (2020) *EEF Blog: Getting transition right (part 2 of 2) – how my school is applying evidence to promote positive learning behaviours*

2.4 This research

Two methods were adopted to explore joining up the journey across educational settings. The first of these was to learn from schools who are already investing in joining up the journey through effective transition activities building essential skills. The second was to trial activities and provide additional support to leaders in institutions to make connections across the educational journey.

These were then applied across three models of education (Multi-Academy Trusts, Local Authorities, and All-through Schools), as well as working with schools from our network who either already invest in essential skills as part of transition, or wanted to do more in this area.

This report shares the case studies of these efforts as well as other learning and insights.

3. Multi-Academy Trusts

Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) are groups of academy schools in England, operating as not-for-profit charitable companies. They vary significantly in size and composition, ranging from small local clusters to large dispersed trusts, and can include a mix of primary, secondary, and special schools. This diversity allows for different models of support and collaboration.

MATs are important models for trialling innovative approaches to primary-to-secondary transition due to their centralised governance and shared vision. They can facilitate easier curriculum bridging, resource sharing, and consistent professional development across their schools. This organisational structure enables piloting new strategies, like integrated essential skills programmes or joint transition activities, with greater ease and scalability compared to individual schools. Their ability to standardise approaches and learn from various school contexts within the trust makes them ideal for developing and refining effective transition practices.

Through this pilot we worked with two different MATs: *Harbour Learning Trust* and *The Challenge Academy Trust*.

3.1 Harbour Learning Trust

The first model piloted was a Multi-Academy Trust, which included a primary school on a Skills Builder programme (Healing Primary School), while its secondary school counterpart (Healing Academy) was not.

Healing Primary School has been enrolled in a Skills Builder programme since 2018 and has achieved the highest possible Skills Builder Award. Melanie, Assistant Principal and Trust Employability Lead, spearheads the programme at Healing Primary School. Through her steadfast commitment to essential skills for all, she has championed the benefits of developing these skills in learners.

Melanie stated, “I had seen the impact of building essential skills on learners at Healing Primary, and believe that this is an opportunity that all learners should have, especially in deprived areas—these are essential skills for success.”

During their transition week activities, the primary school learners took part in Skills Builder’s *Operation Moonbase Challenge Day* at Healing Academy. Learners applied their essential skills to a brief to design a new society on a distant moon called Utopia. They consider what makes a successful society, select citizens, create a helpful animal, and build a 3D model of a new city.

Working in allocated groups, the day allowed Healing Primary School learners to experience how essential skills, already familiar from their time in primary school, would continue to be developed in their new secondary setting. Learners felt confident in engaging in high-quality discussions, accompanied by open conversations about thoughts and feelings, with all learners feeling confident to contribute in a safe and inclusive environment.

Observing this enabled Healing Academy staff to view and understand the incoming learners' strengths beyond academic performance, focusing instead on their skills and interests. Healing Academy Associate Assistant Principal and Transition Lead, Jonathan noted how confident and articulate Healing Primary learners were when presenting their ideas, and feels that they may lead their year group peers next year.

By gaining insights from the Challenge Day, Healing Academy is joining a Skills Builder programme next year, and aims to help all Year 7 learners connect the essential skills they develop in daily life and at school to their future career paths.

For Jonathan, building essential skills across the two schools will “help to join up skill development, of the skills needed in daily life and in school.”

3.2 The Challenge Academy Trust

The second Multi-Academy Trust model involved several secondary schools participating in a Skills Builder programme, while their linked primary schools were not existing Skills Builder partners.

Four secondary schools within The Challenge Academy Trust enrolled in a Skills Builder programme for this academic year. Working with Anna, the Trust Employability Lead, and Stacey, the Stakeholder Engagement Officer, a Teamwork & Problem Solving workshop was developed. This workshop aimed to introduce learners to two essential skills before they started in September. This initiative was part of a wider strategy to embed essential skills within the Trust's transition programme. The workshop was piloted at Anna's school (Sir Thomas Boteler Church of England High School) before being rolled out, alongside a Challenge Day, to Year 7 learners in all TCAT secondary schools participating in a Skills Builder programme in September.

Staff delivering the sessions felt that the workshops helped learners to collaborate with new peers, increasing their confidence in a new environment. They also believed the workshops provided an effective way for teachers to recognise the strengths of new learners beyond academic achievements. The engaging nature of the activities, built around success criteria based on essential skill steps, allowed learners to see that they would have ample opportunities to build and use essential skills. Although the session did not have an explicit careers focus, it did prompt discussions about the essential skills required for future careers.

Supporting an effective transition from primary to secondary school is a key priority for TCAT, and Stacey believes essential skills play a crucial role in both this. Including essential skills within the transition process meant they could be introduced early in the learners' secondary journeys, laying the groundwork for further skills development.

Stacey commented: “A strong transition programme is the basis of a strong start at school; the more that we can get to know learners, and they can get to know their new school, processes and procedures, the smoother the start will be. The essential skills can be applied in real life—they are adaptable and transferable. That’s why it’s key to build them into our transition programme, so that we can support learners in situations related to transition and their broader school journey.”

4. Local Authorities

In the English education system, Local Authorities (LAs) are democratically elected bodies responsible for a range of statutory duties regarding education, including school admissions, special educational needs provision, and safeguarding. While their direct control over schools has lessened with the rise of academies, LAs still play a crucial role in coordinating services and supporting maintained schools within their geographical area.

LAs vary significantly in size, demographics, and the specific challenges they face, leading to diverse approaches in educational provision. This localised understanding makes them important models for trialling innovative primary-to-secondary transition approaches. They can leverage existing networks between their maintained schools, facilitate information sharing, and implement area-wide initiatives that cater to the unique needs of their communities. Their ability to foster collaboration across multiple, often independent, schools within a defined area allows for the widespread piloting and evaluation of new transition strategies, potentially leading to scalable and impactful solutions.

Given that most learners will remain within a local authority area during their primary to secondary transition, consistent approaches to essential skills at that local authority area can help provide important consistency.

4.1 London Borough of Islington

Skills Builder Partnership have had a long-standing relationship with an Islington primary school, William Tyndale Primary School, for over a decade. During that time, the primary school has become a flagship partner with every learner in the school receiving consistent, high quality opportunities to build their essential skills across their time in school.

However, the school saw an opportunity to join up the journey of essential skills development after children moved on to secondary school - keen to ensure that they continued to be able to practice and apply their essential skills.

This borough-wide collaboration supports the goals of Islington borough council, which aimed to increase the alignment between schools and to engage wider partners. The vision was set out to create a shared model of essential skills development for learners throughout their time in education in Islington.

The work to date has involved several key activities. We started with an initial presentation at a Headteachers' forum, an existing mechanism for communication. This was followed by one-on-one conversations with head teachers to discuss the Skills Builder approach and its benefits.

We also held three working group meetings with council staff, local providers, and head teachers. This process resulted in applications from 14 schools, and we have already conducted initial planning meetings and some initial training sessions with a few of them.

This intensive period of consultation and engagement has been essential to create the alignment and engagement from across this wide set of stakeholders. However, we can now see this has created the foundations for future developments.

Looking ahead, our next steps involve launching a Skills Builder Accelerator Programme for all 14 schools across all phases. We will also be holding three additional in-person meetings with head teachers. To support these schools, we will be providing resource packages to create more opportunities for their learners. We also hope to conduct skills assessments using the Hub and Benchmark tools.

Beyond the schools, we are exploring opportunities to align the essential skills-building activities of other impact organisations in the borough so that learners are not just learning those skills in the classroom but practicing and applying them in music, sport and more.

5. All-through Schools

All-through Schools in the English education system provide continuous education from primary to secondary phases, often from ages 3 or 4 up to 16 or 18, on a single site or closely linked campuses. They vary in their specific age ranges, governance structures (e.g., maintained schools or academies), and specialisms, including those for learners with Special Educational Needs.

This integrated model makes them important for trialling innovative primary-to-secondary transition approaches. The inherent continuity reduces the anxiety often associated with moving schools, offering a familiar environment and consistent teaching staff. All-through Schools can foster a unified curriculum and shared pedagogical approaches, allowing for seamless essential skill development and consistent pastoral care across key stages. This unique structure enables them to design, implement, and refine bespoke transition programmes with greater coherence and sustained impact than fragmented traditional systems.

However, there are often additional challenges where there are new intakes into those schools in the transition between primary and secondary stages - and those learners who are new additions at this point can often feel disadvantaged.

We explored models with three different all-through settings:

5.1 Academy 360

Academy 360, in its first year of the Skills Builder programme, had introduced essential skills to most year groups, explicitly embedding them in Year 9. Assistant Principal Claire wanted to integrate essential skills with the school's transition offer to build learner resilience as they adjusted from the primary to secondary phase.

Approximately 30 Year 6 learners, along with new learners from several feeder primary schools, joined Year 7. The chosen essential skill focus was Teamwork. Using the Teamwork icon and language of the Universal Framework, this essential skill was embedded into three days of transition activities. These activities aimed to support learners in adjusting to their new environment and included a puzzle day facilitated by an external company, and subject-specific challenges.

Learners were allocated to groups with peers from different schools. They were rewarded for demonstrating effective Teamwork with a stamp, and those who accumulated the most stamps at the end of each day received a prize. This approach proved effective in encouraging learners to work collaboratively with those they didn't know, with the use of the Teamwork icon and language providing common ground, as well as an icebreaker and conversation opener.

For Claire, essential skills also help support broader transition goals: "When learners are making the move up to the secondary phase or coming into the school, we want them to embed into the Academy 360 way and our values; essential skills provide a way of doing this and a common language."

As learners transition to secondary school, whether from Academy 360 or a feeder primary school, the school wants to make it clear that these are the skills they will be developing when making this change.

5.2 Bennerley Fields School

Bennerley Fields School, a specialist all-through school for learners aged 2-16, is in its inaugural year of a Skills Builder programme. Here, 'transition' means adapting to new learning phases and teachers. Rachel, the Careers Lead, wanted to embed essential skills within the school's transition offering, creating a common focus for both current and future learning, all meticulously aligned with essential skill development.

The Skills Builder Universal Framework provided the perfect solution, fostering an inclusive approach to transition by cultivating a learning environment where every learner embarks on their own personal journey, building the same essential skills but at varying stages of development.

As Rachel puts it, "essential skills provide a lens through which learners can view their learning journey across the school. They provide a tangible example of where their learning will be taking them and which skills they will be developing. Knowing what skills they will practice and learn allows them to make sense of their journeys."

Rachel orchestrated a dynamic Teamwork and Problem Solving transition workshop, complemented by a Challenge Day. This innovative approach offered learners a clear insight into their next stage, viewed through a familiar lens. The activities sparked high levels of engagement, allowing learners to perceive essential skill-building as both enjoyable and a regular part of their routine. Learners were grouped into small teams, and encouraging them to share their ideas, rooted in essential skills, significantly aided their integration into new peer groups.

This approach also benefited staff, giving them the invaluable opportunity to observe how learners applied essential skills and their level of development, laying a strong foundation for further skill-building in the upcoming academic year. The activities also sparked discussions about future career interests, forging vital links to future learning, such as an upcoming engineering project and the crucial role of essential skills like Teamwork and Problem Solving within it.

5.3 Carew Academy

Carew Academy, a specialist institution in South London, caters to 7-18 year olds with a wide array of learning needs. They have seamlessly woven essential skills throughout their curriculum, supported by clear visuals and simplified language. Their transition programme is robust, featuring dedicated days in new classes at the end of term, and culminating in a 'Careers and Next Steps Week' every June.

This pivotal week serves to embed essential skills through practical, real-world examples, setting learners up for deeper engagement in the new academic year. This is achieved via subject-specific lessons and focused workshops, such as linking Aiming High with future aspirations and honing Speaking and Listening skills for external interview practice.

Integrating essential skills into their careers week has dramatically boosted awareness of their real-world relevance. Activities like using Teamwork to identify common ground within new peer groups have been particularly effective, even encouraging engagement from learners who typically find social interaction challenging.

As Carlton, the Careers Lead, explains, "embedding essential skills within careers week gave greater awareness of the language and the examples of where jobs, careers or life pathways use skills that can be practised day to day."

For sixth formers, explicitly embedding essential skills into lessons and assemblies focused on core pathways has significantly increased their confidence in taking their next steps, as they have recognised the transferability of these skills into new contexts. Consequently, essential skills have become a 'golden thread' and a shared language across the Academy, reinforcing existing provision and offering a flexible framework for personalised learning journeys.

6. How essential skills fit into transition

Throughout the project, we gathered and shared best practices from schools and colleges we work with. We offered additional support and training alongside their programmes, created and circulated a resource guide, and ran a webinar to facilitate peer learning.

After activities were completed, feedback was collected via a Google Form. We identified five themes for how essential skills supported transition:

1. Bridging curriculum learning
2. Settling learners into a new environment
3. Settling learners into new peer groups
4. Linking transitions with careers
5. Feeling the transition is inclusive

Respondents were invited to provide further detail on their responses where appropriate, and a meeting was held with some schools to obtain additional information as required.

6.1 Bridging curriculum learning

By serving as a unifying theme, essential skills can connect curricula; offering a consistent focal point for learning across both settings and for reflection on strengths and areas for development.

By introducing them to learners as early as Year 3 and 5 respectively through their outreach work with local primary schools, Ormiston Bushfield Academy and Blythe Bridge High School use essential skills to frame each school's learning journey from an early stage.

This shared understanding is further embedded through the work that is done with Year 6 learners and parents. Ormiston Bushfield, for example, ensures that the role of essential skills in the curriculum is communicated through the school prospectus and in parent events. This helps to ensure that by the time they begin Year 7, learners have already built an understanding of the core element that underpins the culture, values and curriculum of their new school. Having this focal point and understanding of what to expect in their new curriculum helps reduce one area of learner anxiety about moving to a new school.

Essential skills also provide a clear and consistent focus for new curriculum learning by making its purpose and relevance clear. This is expected practice at both Ormiston Bushfield and Blythe Bridge, and was achieved by making essential skills a core component of Year 7 transition week activities; embedding them within taster lessons and rewarding learners for their use through teacher nominations or collecting signatures on an essential skills 'transition passport'. This approach allows learners to see curriculum learning in the new setting through the lens of the essential skills that they will be developing and their interests, rather than simply academics.

Essential skills also provide a framework for both learners and teachers to reflect on individual strengths and how these relate to curriculum learning, before learners make the formal move to the new setting.

As Gemma, Lead Practitioner at Ormiston Bushfield, notes, through embedding the skill steps into transition activities and rewarding essential skill use, "[t]he common theme of skills allowed for easier planning... whilst recognising that everyone has strengths in terms of their skill set." This approach was also beneficial for teachers, who were able to discover more about the new learners' abilities and interests, making it easier to adapt their teaching, and providing useful insights that can be carried forward into Year 7.

6.2 Settling into a new environment

Building essential skills through the Universal Framework equips learners to overcome challenging situations in a new school by providing a step-by-step approach to building skills that foster adaptability and resilience when approaching transition.

Building essential skills with learners helps build their confidence and their ability to articulate how they are feeling at a time of potential anxiety.

As Bex, Skills Leader at Barnton Community Primary, explains, "the most important parts [of transition] are personal—having confidence, forming new relationships... it is these that will make the transition successful, and essential skills are at the core."

She has observed that the school's Year 6 learners, who are the first cohort to have built all eight skills across their entire school journey, demonstrate greater confidence, self-awareness, and resistance to peer pressure. This was echoed by other schools; Toft Hill and Thorn Grove Primary both noted that through building their Listening and Speaking essential skills, learners were more willing and able to share their feelings and anxieties around transition.

This foundation of essential skills becomes even more powerful when they are modelled by older peers in the new setting. Both Ormiston Bushfield Academy and Blythe Bridge High School use 'Language Leaders' and 'Skills Leaders' respectively as aspirational role models in their transition work. This not only provides incoming learners with aspirational role models, but also gives the older learners a chance to develop their own essential skills.

Essential skills also provide a structure for reflecting on and managing challenges that learners may face in their new setting.

For Mark at Toft Hill Primary, who ran the workshops between a Challenge Day and Year 6 visits to their secondary schools, essential skills provided a clear framework for transition activities that was previously missing when provision was provided solely by the 6 local secondary schools: "Essential skills...make the purpose of [transition activities] clear... taking away the unknown and showing learners they have the skills for it. We will definitely be continuing next year."

Another important role that essential skills play in supporting learners to settle into a new environment is by providing a common frame of reference that is instantly recognisable. When a single learner from Harvills Hawthorns Primary attended transition days at Q3 Academy Tipton, the shared language of essential skills provided a connection to the new school, facilitating conversations and helping to forge new relationships with staff members.

6.3 Settling into new peer groups

Essential skills have an important role to play in the social element of transition, and reducing the anxiety that learners may feel around this. Building essential skills such as Speaking, Listening, Teamwork and Leadership prepares learners to build new peer groups and adapt to new social situations. A focus on essential skills during transition activities also allows learners to discover their peers' unique interests and abilities; fostering a collaborative atmosphere and a shared sense of purpose.

Building essential skills helps better prepare learners for adapting to new social settings and meeting new peers.

At Barnton Community Primary School, Bex feels that her learners are well prepared for this element of transition, as building essential skills such as Leadership and Teamwork had not only supported them in developing into “confident, friendly and outgoing” individuals, but has provided them with opportunities to practice structured group work effectively in curriculum learning, enabling them to participate confidently in new group settings during transition activities. For Hannah Williamson, Headteacher at Acomb First School, building essential skills such as Teamwork, Problem Solving and Speaking and Listening meant that learners could identify frictions and resolve them, which is highly valuable when fostering new peer groups.

Essential skills also serve as common ground for individuals who may not know each other, supporting educators to provide opportunities for learners to learn more about one another. In this context, essential skills can serve as a conversation opener in what might otherwise prove a challenging situation for learners. A number of schools, for example, used a ‘find someone who’ bingo activity based around essential skills as an icebreaker at the start of their transition days. This theme of essential skills as common ground also ran through broader transition activities. Thornhill Academy for example, noted that some of the key collaborative moments of the school’s transition days occurred during taster lessons when reflecting on and celebrating the use of essential skills. This helped to reinforce the message that all learners possess these skills and will be continuing to build them across their school journey.

A focus on essential skills also fosters a common sense of purpose and collaboration in transition day activities. For most schools participating in the project, the integration of learners into new peer groups is a key objective, delivered through the deliberate mixing of groupings. Using essential skills to facilitate activities, such as skill workshops and Challenge Days, in which learners had to work together to solve problems and answer big questions, encouraged both collaboration and communication through the sharing of ideas, increasing learner confidence in a new group setting.

6.4 Linking transition with careers

A focus on essential skills encourages learners to reflect on their future goals and interests and how they might achieve these. In this context, transition is best considered as a key milestone in a learner's journey towards the future goals and aspirations. By incorporating essential skills into transition plans, they have a key role to play in showing learners how they will be prepared for life beyond school.

By bridging academic and career learning, essential skills help learners to view transition as part of their broader life journey, and support their induction into the careers programme of their new setting. Essential skills provide the foundation of Blythe Bridge High School's all-encompassing careers programme. Introducing learners to essential skills from as early as Year 5, through workshops run by learners Skill Leaders, encourages reflection around future goals and aspirations and how these might be achieved in their new school from an early stage. In a similar way, Thornhill Academy chose subjects like drama for their transition lessons, which learners may not have fully experienced at primary school, and aligned them to essential skills to provide a focus on interests and opportunities that can be pursued across the school beyond academics.

Essential skills also link transition to careers learning by providing a focus for reflection on interests and future ambitions within and across the school journey. At Acomb First School, Year 4 learners use essential skills in a specially created booklet to track their ambitions, interests and career encounters, which are showcased at the end of each year in a project. These are used to create a skills and interests profile that is shared with their new school. For most Acomb learners, this is Hexham Middle School, who use essential skills as the basis of a personal development journal to reflect on their knowledge, strengths and experiences before transitioning to secondary school at the end of Year 8.

Essential skills also play a key role in preparing learners for milestones beyond the transition itself. At Hexham Middle School, essential skill-based activities like Challenge Days and interview preparation help Year 8 learners prepare for their GCSE options choices, which they will make in the first year of secondary school. As Assistant Headteacher Paul notes, these lifelong skills provide an "opportunity to reflect... before moving on at an important transition point," making them a "legacy" of the school. This long-term value is also evident when learners move from Key Stage 4 to 5; Ormiston Bushfield Academy has found essential skills integral to helping learners articulate their interests and achievements in personal statements and interviews.

6.5 Making transition inclusive

Essential skills have a crucial role to play in ensuring that transition is an inclusive process. There is evidence that learners with special education needs or disabilities can find transitions more challenging than their peers. For learners facing the uncertainty of a new school, essential skills offer a stable foundation for communication and self-belief. This approach not only empowers learners to manage the emotional challenges of transition but also provides educators with a more complete picture of who their new learners are.

Essential skills can support all learners through the transition process by supporting the development of an accessible common language, helping to create a 'golden thread' that learners can recognise and identify with. Several schools, from both mainstream and inclusive settings, cited that building essential skills such as the Speaking and Listening enabled learners to articulate their needs and concerns to staff effectively. This in turn, coupled with a focus on skills such as Planning and Adapting, has increased learner self esteem and helped them to feel confident and comfortable during a period of change. Some schools, such as Hexham Middle and Blythe Bridge High, have taken this a step further and used the language of the Universal Framework to create essential skills-focused interventions to raise the aspirations of targeted groups of incoming learners.

By providing the opportunity for learners to showcase themselves; their abilities and interests beyond a traditional classroom setting, essential skills support educators to build a profile of the whole learner that can be shared across settings. The clear language and stepped progression of the Universal Framework ensured that all learners actively engaged in essential-based activities such as skills workshops and Challenge Days, enabling them to showcase their range of talents and interests. From this, schools such as Healing Academy and Toft Hill Primary were able to identify particular skill strengths and areas of interest, with some learners 'shining' in unexpected areas. Based on the knowledge gained of learners from transition activities and a year of building essential skills, Toft Hill have created individual profiles that have been shared with their new schools in transition meetings.

7. Implications and next steps

Here are 5 key recommendations for schools and colleges to use essential skills to support the primary to secondary transition process, based on this report:

(1) Integrate essential skills into transition activities:

Explicitly embed essential skills, using the Universal Framework's common language and icons, into all transition-related activities. This includes taster days, workshops (like 'Operation Moonbase' or 'Teamwork & Problem Solving'), and curriculum bridging projects. This consistency helps learners recognise and apply these skills in their new environment, reducing anxiety and fostering confidence as highlighted by Healing Primary Academy and The Challenge Academy Trust. Skills Builder Partnership is providing further resources towards this end, such as the transition resource pack and workshops.

(2) Foster collaboration and information sharing between schools:

Encourage primary and secondary schools to collaborate on essential skills development during transition. This could involve secondary staff observing primary learners essential skills in action (Healing Academy), or primaries sharing learner profiles detailing essential skill strengths with secondary schools (Toft Hill Primary and Acomb First School). This ensures a smoother handover and allows receiving schools to build upon existing skill foundations.

(3) Use essential skills as a 'common language':

Promote essential skills as a shared language for understanding behaviour, fostering collaboration, and initiating social interactions. Activities designed to build teamwork and problem-solving skills with new peers, rewarded through methods like 'transition passports' or stamps, can act as effective icebreakers and help learners feel more comfortable and integrated into new social settings, as seen at Academy 360 and in various school feedback.

(4) Emphasise the link between essential skills and future careers:

While not always the primary focus, actively connect essential skills developed during transition to future career aspirations and broader life pathways. This helps learners see the long-term relevance of their skill development and empowers them to view transition as part of a continuous journey. Examples like Acomb First School and Hexham Middle School's personal development journals and Carew Academy's careers week show how this can be achieved.

(5) Champion essential skills at a leadership level:

Senior leadership within schools, and across Multi-Academy Trusts and Local Authorities, should champion the integration of essential skills into transition programmes. This includes recognising that essential skills provide a non-academic lens to understand learners' strengths, particularly for vulnerable groups. Tailor transition pathways to be inclusive, using the Universal Framework to support all learners in their personal development and build self-esteem, as demonstrated by specialist schools like Bennerley Fields and Carew Academy.

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