



PHOTOS: ROY KILGILL

Giving pupils a realistic taste of life at 'big school' does not have to be scary. **Nick Morrison** looks at a programme designed to ease the transition between primary and secondary

A chocolate fountain lies at one end of the island, with a volcano at the other. Plumb in the middle is an expanse of tree houses, and a pirate ship anchors just off the coast. The volcano end would normally be the one to avoid, but it's spewing out tropical juice rather than molten lava, so it's probably safe enough.

Newly washed up on the shore, the children explore their unfamiliar surroundings, sampling the chocolate, carrying out experiments in the underground lab, dancing in the private club and tending to the chicken farm.

Welcome to a desert island as imagined by Year 6 pupils at New Chapter School in Milton Keynes. But there is more to this exercise than straightforward role-play. The survival skills they are developing are not so much for building their own shelters and catching their own food, but to help them cope with life at secondary school.

Even in a modest-sized primary – New Chapter School has about 275 pupils – by Year 6 most children are in settled groups. They pair up with friends in class and hang around with the same people at break times. That will all change in September, as they move on to different schools and friendship groups disperse. Rather than let that take them by surprise, this afternoon is giving the pupils a taste of what secondary school will be like.

"I worked with people I don't normally like," says Glory, 11, who took part in this morning's session. "We all had different opinions and we didn't always agree, but that's good. If you're with your friends, they just agree with anything, but this way you get to do things you wouldn't normally do."

Bethany, also 11, agrees. "It is really good to learn teamwork and to get on with people you wouldn't normally work with," she says.

Breaking up is hard to do: Year 6 pupils in Birmingham line up for a Mission Impossible activity designed to help them cope at secondary school

Smooth moves

"I wouldn't choose to work with the people in my group, but they had some good ideas."

The desert island scenario is part of Mind the Gap, a programme aiming to ease the transition from primary to secondary school. It was put together by Artis, an organisation dedicated to promoting creativity in schools through the performing arts.

Artis has been working in schools for the past five years, but this is the first year it has focused specifically on transition. Nigel Mainard, co-founder of Artis and the organisation's head of professional development, says Mind the Gap was a response to demand from schools, created in association with the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust.

The programme has been taken up by 10 secondary schools this year – including Milton Keynes Academy and the Q3 Academy in Birmingham (pictured) – who then commissioned Artis to work with their feeder primaries, about 1,500 children in all. Focusing on skills, including leadership, teamwork and questioning, it aims to challenge children while they are still in a familiar environment. Artis will then visit the secondary schools at the start of next term to run a second session, giving the children the chance to work in their new school with people they already know.

"Transition can be quite a stressful time for pupils, so we looked at what we could do to make it easier," says Mr Mainard. "The performing arts are the perfect medium for working in groups: they engage the children and challenge them, but they are also enjoyable, and that helps to embed the learning. All our specialists are highly skilled performers, and it is important for children to experience that aesthetic quality."

Running the desert island scenario at New Chapter School are Plunge and Zing – all Artis's specialists have onomatopoeic names – also known as Verity Hewlett and Neil Callaghan. "There's plenty of scope for the children to show off, but it isn't about the individual, it is a collaborative attitude," says Ms Hewlett, who played Victoria in the Chan-



Helping hands: an Artis performer engages and then challenges children to develop teamwork skills

nel 4 television drama *Queen Victoria's Men* last year. "It's not about them learning a dance or a song, but how to work in a team with people they wouldn't normally work with."

"It's very dry for the children if you keep asking to see their teamwork skills; but with the arts you can see these skills develop and the children have ownership of them."

The session begins with each pupil adopting a character for a reality television-style show. After being interviewed "on camera" about what skills they would bring to the island, they have to work out how to get there,

crossing the floor of the school gym in their chosen mode of transport, whether it is a rowing boat, a speedboat or, for one group, the rather less collaborative jet ski. Once there, they create their ideal desert island, which they then explore, before each group creates their first their own dance and then their own rap.

Transition work for New Chapter School has an added twist this year because many of the children will transfer to a school that is still being built, says Karen Kilshaw, the interim head. Although the pupils will be split among six secondary schools, the majority –

30 out of the 45 in Year 6 – will go to Milton Keynes Academy, where construction work is still going on.

"This [transition activity] is particularly significant for us because of the new academy opening," says Mrs Kilshaw. "We have a raft of children transferring to a building that doesn't yet exist, and that makes transition even trickier, so something like this is crucial."

She says Year 6 pupils can be reluctant to reveal their concerns about moving to a new school, given their position as top dogs in the primary school, but involving experts from

TRANSITION RESOURCES

- **Workbook for primary schools to help the transition to secondary:**
www.tes.co.uk/transition-workbook
- **Video on how one secondary school aims to ease transition:**
www.tes.co.uk/transition-video
- **Reading On – a resource for English teachers:** www.tes.co.uk/readingon
- **PowerPoint for small-group work, particularly aimed at more vulnerable pupils:**
www.tes.co.uk/transition-discussion

outside the school can make it easier for the children to own up to their fears. Role-play exercises also give the pupils the chance to rehearse being in a new school, even if it is only in their heads.

"The artistic element takes away the focus on hearing about something and instead you are doing something, and that active participation gives the children more ownership of it," says Mrs Kilshaw. "It is an opportunity for them to almost play at being in a new school, but without anybody else knowing that is what they're doing."

Although New Chapter School does more transition work now than it has ever done before, what happens in primary schools and what goes on in secondaries are still sometimes unrelated, says Tristan Thorp, a Year 6 teacher. Artis's return visit in September will help link the activities, he says.

"We might do a project here and the kids take it up to their new school, but it's never looked at," he says. "They were really excited when they heard they would be doing another session in September."

He says working in new groups particularly helps children who will end up in secondary school form groups with none of their primary school friends. "The whole point is working in a team and it almost doesn't matter who is in the team," he says.

Bethany, who came up with the idea of a cookie tree on their island, says she enjoyed

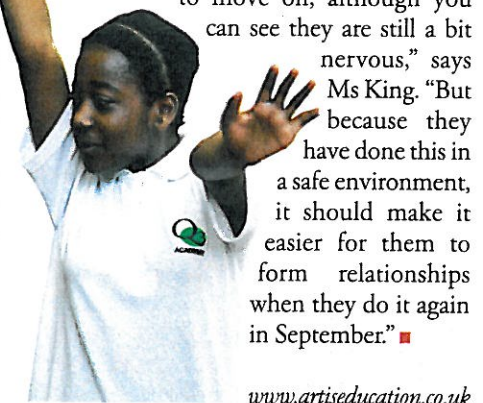
looking at the different trees, while Glory remembers jumping through the waterfall and carrying out experiments in the lab, activities that helped her connect with members of her group. "It helps you to know how to talk to new people," she says.

September's session will again involve a desert island, although then, instead of arrival and exploration, the emphasis will be on how to survive. "They will have to think of ways of organising the island and make it prosperous; and it will give them the chance to work with completely new people," says Ms Hewlett.

"When you get to the top of primary school you feel like a mini-adult, but when you get to secondary school you can feel completely lost. Even if it is just for the first few days, we can remind them of the fun they have had on the island."

Part of today's aim is to give the pupils a taste of what happens when they shed their inhibitions, says Mr Callaghan, who is an actor too. "We want to encourage them to have a go and hopefully they will be able to take that openness to their new school," he says. "It is a shortcut to them feeling they can be who they are in a new setting."

As the session closes, the children have one last task: taking the key to the treasure from their blindfolded teacher. Becky King, the teacher in question, has a cardboard baton to fend off approaches, but is soon undone. "Some of them are definitely ready to move on, although you can see they are still a bit nervous," says Ms King. "But because they have done this in a safe environment, it should make it easier for them to form relationships when they do it again in September."



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