The Transition to High School: A Journey of Uncertainty

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the stories of the transition to high school for thirteen students from four primary schools in regional New South Wales. Interviews, journal keeping and questionnaire data were used to elicit the students' expectations of their high schools during their final weeks of primary school. These methods were also used to follow-up the students' thoughts of high school during their first three terms of Year 7. A discussion of the variety of concerns students express before making their transition to high school, and the students perceptions of their high schools will be presented. The students' different perceptions of their high schools raises the question; "Do students perceive their 'uncertainty' of their high school environment as an ultimately 'good' or 'bad' aspect of their transition?". This paper will explore the data that has been gathered in order to understand this journey of uncertainty from a student perspective.

Introduction

Throughout our lives we encounter, and endure to various degrees, a range of transitional experiences. For example, most of us make the transition from home to preschool, and later from school to work, many of us become familiar with career changes or experience becoming a parent. While these experiences can have a great impact on an individual's life and have been explored in many studies, the transition to high school or the point at which we leave primary school is also a transitional experience that requires exploration.

Adolescence can be a confusing time for students due to the many physical changes that occur to the human body. While there is a great deal of research that explores the changes encountered by adolescents, more often than not, research has failed to explore the wide range of *contexts* in which changes occur. This is particularly true when exploring how students feel about making the transition to high school. While some studies have included the variable of gender and how this affects student perceptions of transition, often the

research fails to take into account other important variables such as geographic location and the sometimes dramatic increase in school size.

Both school size and geographic location are important issues for students and parents who live in rural Australia to address when it is time to decide upon an appropriate and accessible secondary school. As many small schools are situated in rural areas it is important to understand how the thousands of students from both rural and small schools that make the transition to high school each year perceive this momentous step during their formal education.

Defining 'Rural'

While there is a great deal of research on rural areas in America, England and Britain it is important to be aware of the different cultural and geographic contexts within which various definitions are based. Australia is both "one of the world's most urbanised <u>and</u> sparsely populated countries" (White-Davison, 1999, p. 16). Elsewhere in the world the terms urbanised and sparsely populated are mutually exclusive, but in Australia the population is not evenly distributed across the country" (White-Davison, 1999, p. 16). These considerations make it difficult to first, apply rural definitions from other countries to Australia and second, makes it difficult to produce a widely accepted and 'fitting' description of what 'rural' means as different industries, groups, services etc. produce definitions to fulfil varying purposes.

It was decided therefore, that using a 'rural' definition that was specifically designed to reflect the unique circumstances of Australian society would strengthen this research. The Access/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) was chosen for this reason. The ARIA is an instrument that was designed to interpret remoteness in Australia as the degree of accessibility a populated community has to a service centre. The term 'service centre' refers to availability of services related to education, health, police, retail and wholesale business, entertainment and recreation. It is important to note however, that the index is not a measure of 'rurality'. The ARIA instead relies upon a continuum to classify areas as Highly Accessible, Accessible, Moderately Accessible, Remote or Very Remote. While the ARIA index does not take into consideration the type of road nor the services that are available at each service centre the ARIA can be useful in developing a definition of rurality.

For this research, communities that had an ARIA index over 3.21 were classified as being 'rural'. These communities were located in the mid-West region of New South Wales and are identified by the ARIA index as being 'Moderately Accessible' as they have "significantly restricted accessibility of goods and services and opportunities for social interaction" (Department of Health and Aged Care, 1999, p.3). Please note though, that this research did not attempt to understand the transition to high school from students from more remote or isolated areas of New South Wales. These students often have quite different modes of undertaking their education, for example, distance education, School of the Air and homeschooling. Grouping students with considerably different degrees of access to and modes of education would not acknowledge the unique circumstances of either the students in 'rural' or 'remote' areas.

Why study *rural* students in transition?

While there is a large volume of research that explores the experiences of students during their transition to high school, more often than not, this research is based within a quantitative paradigm and considers students only in large metropolitan areas. Additionally,

often the research explores the experience of students on the basis of only a few variables such as gender or academic grades. The inclusion of 'rural' students and their personal perceptions of the transition will broaden the available literature on this topic.

Jarrett (1995), Riehl, Pallas & Natriello (1999) and Schiller (1999) concluded that "students in urban school systems, with their mobile populations and extensive school choice programs, are likely to experience more chaotic transitions than are those in rural or suburban districts" (cited Schiller, 1999, np). However, there is a clear lack of research that focuses on the extent to which the location of a school affects students.

Moreover, Cotterell (1992, p. 40) concluded from his study of school size and its affect on transition that students who made the transition from small to large schools perceived the greatest decline in environmental quality while students from large primary schools perceived the least change in the classroom environment. However, the 'small' schools included in this study had a minimum of 150 students. Furthermore, these small schools' were sourced from within a major city of Australia. So, while this is an interesting and important study, it may not represent the experiences of students from schools with less than 150 students or those communities outside of major Australian cities.

As Eccles and Midgley (1989, p. 162) state, "until more studies are conducted with contrasting and carefully specified samples, it will not be possible to determine the extent to which size and location of school are important mediators of transition effects". The inclusion of 'rural' students as a focus point for this research will allow educators to understand the transition to high school for rural students and additionally assist the comparison of rural students and their urban or metropolitan counterparts.

In summary, rural students and their transition formed the basis for this research in order to explore the transition for students in rural contexts and from a student perspective. In addition, as I also made the transition from a relatively small and rural school to a much larger high school, this research provided an avenue to understand the transition with appropriate critical reflection upon this period of time in my own life.

In light of the previous research, the research question that was generated for the qualitative paradigm of this study was:

How do rural students perceive and explain their transition to high school?

Methodology

This study was conducted using a mixed methodology. Thirteen rural students and seven parents agreed to assist in this research as case study participants. The case studies aimed to develop a rich description of rural students' experiences of transition. Data collection was in the form of informal semi-structured interviews and journal keeping for both students and parents. Case study data collection began during the final weeks of Year 6 (2001) and will be completed within these final weeks of the students' first year of high school (2002).

While this paper only considers the information provided by the rural students and parents in terms of the case studies, it is important to note the experience of students making the transition to high school in larger, more urbanised centres has not been ignored. The transition experience of urban students was monitored through the use of two questionnaires. The first questionnaire was administered during school hours (the actual time negotiated with the Principal of each school) to approximately 290 students during their

last four weeks of primary school. These schools varied in terms of student population sizes and distance to larger regional or capital centres. The questionnaire aimed to determine if there were any difference between groups of students in terms of self-esteem and perceived quality of school life. The results of these questionnaires will be presented at later conferences.

Data Analysis

The case studies have produced a large amount of data which has been analysed using the constant-comparative method of analysis based within the principles of Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Constant-comparative analysis is the process "whereby data from similar and different sources are constantly compared" (Battersby & Cocklin, 1989, p.4) and has been chosen for its ability to "represent reality" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23). The selection of this method allows for the generation of a theory of the transition experience grounded in the students' lived reality. This method of analysis also provides a means for participant voices to be prominent in order to produce a meaningful analysis of the findings within their unique rural context.

Findings

Is the transition to high school for these students from small rural schools a 'journey of uncertainty'? It could be argued that 'uncertainty' is created through a limited knowledge or lack of experience of events or phenomena. In terms of the students in this study, in many cases their 'uncertainty' was created from a lack of knowledge of the *organisational* and *social cultures* of their future high schools. In addition, the students' *personal feelings* about leaving primary school and entering high school greatly contributed to their feelings of 'uncertainty'. These three themes provide additional support for the categories that evolved in previous research (Adaptation to Organisational Culture, Adaptation to Social Culture and Personal Reactions and Adaptations) that studied the transition to high school for one group of rural students from one primary school (see Johnstone, 2000a).

Adaptation to Organisational Culture

A great deal of emphasis has been placed on assisting students to understand the organisational aspects of high school by individual schools. For example, all of the students mentioned that they had attended 'Orientation' programmes prior to their entry to high school. There were many differences between the programmes particularly in terms of duration and timing from those that began their Orientation program in Year 5 with students attending high school classes once a week, to those that only allowed one day for students to become Orientated with the school.

At the time of the first interviews in Year 6, all students had attended their Orientation day or days. Nonetheless, the students still expressed many concerns about the organisational culture of high school. Many of the students stated their apprehension regarding the increased number of teachers with which they would be dealing with, getting lost in their new environment, what to do on their first day of high school and an increased amount of homework at high school. However, the students concerns regarding the number of teachers and finding their way around their high school were quickly dispelled during the first few weeks of high school. It is interesting to note though that during second term some parents and students commented that homework was still the cause of some difficulties. This was particularly evident for one student, Daniel. Daniel's mother believed that the homework that

had been given in his primary school years was "too eratic" for him to form "good habits" and as such he had difficulty completing homework and undertaking the recommended number of hours per night the high school recommended for year 7 students.

One student, Rachel, had attended her future high school since Year 5 on a weekly basis as part of 'middle schooling program' established between her high school and several small rural feeder schools. Rachel participated in set classes taught by high school teachers in the areas of woodwork, English, agriculture, design and technology and cooking. Rachel believed that this assisted her in getting to know her way around high school and some of the work that was expected. However, Rachel believed the middle schooling programme did not prepare her for the 'realities' of high school in terms of the large increase in her workload. In addition, she stated that she did not believe that the middle schooling project was worthwhile, as it did not allow her the freedom to interact with other students in the high school. Rachel's comments highlight the second category - Adaptation to Social Culture.

Adaptation to Social Culture

For those students who were fortunate enough to have peers from their primary school attending their high school, there was not a great concern for adapting to the social culture of high school. However, of interest were the students' perceptions of other older students. In most circumstances, older students who were known to the Year 7 students provided a sense of supportiveness. In this instance, students and parents commented that a brother or sister already attending the high school would be able to provide assistance to the Year 7 student as necessary. This was particularly important for Daniel who stated that not only did he 'hang around' his brother during his Orientation day, but also said that he would approach his brother for "anything that was a problem" when he was at high school.

The sheer number of other students at high school was a concern for many of the students. Additionally, older unknown students at high school were perceived by some of the students as possible bullies, particularly for those students who had been 'bullied' or tormented during their Orientation days. This was an event experienced by Caylee, who stated during her interview;

> *"... in primary school you don't have as many [people] and you have older people in high school and I'm just sort of scared of them...".*

Personal Reactions and Adaptations

The category of Personal Reactions and Adaptations enables an understanding of the transition as a personal event for these students. Disregarding the emotions the students feel is to disregard that the transition is experienced by each *individual* student. Often literature describes the transition to high school from a group perspective. For example, considering the most *prominent* feeling expressed by a cohort of Year 7 students and generalising this statement to include all the students in the cohort. Therefore, the inclusion of this category has once again been based on the premise that these feelings form a core facet of the transition for these students and as such, need to be rightfully acknowledged (Johnstone, 2001c).

The students used various terms to describe how they felt about going to high school with 'scared' and 'nervous' being prominent terms. The students used these terms to describe their feelings related to the organisational and social cultures of their high school. However, regardless of these seemingly 'negative' terms the students used to describe how they felt

about making their transition, many of the students also described themselves as being 'excited' about going to high school and that it was time to "move on" because primary school had become boring. In addition, parents supported students' comments by mentioning that although their son or daughter was a little scared about entering high school, they were also excited and 'ready to move on'.

At the time of the final interviews, generally all parents and students had positive comments to make about their transition to high school. As recorded by one student in a journal entry; "its the first couple of days of [high school name] & I'm lovin it" (sic).

Discussion

The findings from this research highlight the variety between students in terms of their expectations and the realities of their transition to high school. While the students mentioned their concern related to the organisational and social cultures of their high school and their personal feelings towards their transition, it is important to note that not all students expressed the same concerns. While some students seemed to be more concerned about the increase in their workload or harder work, other students seemed to be more concerned about social relationships and 'fitting in'. The transition process is a highly individualised experience and in order to assist students to make a smooth transition, it is necessary that the students' needs are understood. That is, what does each students want to *know* about before they enter high school?

The study by Johnstone (2001c, p.3) suggested that transition programs that made extensive "use of the internet in the form of email or 'chat' sessions with students from other feeder schools may be one way to overcome the major disruptions to student social networks" as well as some aspects of the organisational culture. A transition program that is being developed by one high school uses real-time Internet classes with a feeder school to provide incoming Year 7 students with more of an idea of high school classes. While the results of this research are yet to be published, preliminary analysis suggests positive outcomes in terms of student adaptation to high school. However, this school does not attract a large number of students from rural areas and so the challenge is still waiting for a school that is willing to implement a similar program for students in rural feeder schools.

The majority of the students had limited experiences in making 'transitions' and more specifically, changing schools. Caylee was one student however, who was quite experienced in making transitions, in particular the transition between different primary schools as her family had moved frequently during her primary school years. Nonetheless, her experience of leaving and entering various primary schools did not allay her concerns of entering high school. As Caylee stated regarding her entry into numerous schools; "Yeah. I settle in pretty well but I'm just scared of high school...". In addition, Rachel commented that she was 'nervous' about entering high school although she had attended her middle schooling program for two years prior to her transition. Therefore, it appears that the process of 'transition' is still a concern for students regardless of the type or number of transitions they have experienced.

In addition to the analysis of the qualitative data, the questionnaire has also provided some interesting information that raises questions regarding the cause of 'uncertainty' for some students. The questionnaire required students to complete a cover page that included the name of the high school in order to complete a follow-up questionnaire, however many students did not indicate their high school, indicated a high school that they ended up not attending or as indicated by the instructions, provided the names of high schools that they *may* attend. It has been acknowledged that the students may have intentionally provided the names of high schools that they would not attend or not indicate their intended

high school as a method of avoiding a follow up questionnaire. However, it is still likely that many of the students were unable to provide this information accurately at the time they completed the questionnaire simply because they were not sure of the high school they would attend or because they were waiting for confirmation of acceptance from other high schools. In addition, those who indicated a high school different to the one they had attended may have already attended Orientation programs for a specific high school only to discover that they would attend a different high school. The 'journey of uncertainty' may be even more pronounced for students in these positions.

One of the interesting findings of this research are the feelings the parents held regarding their son or daughter's transition to high school. Parents have strong feelings about their child's entry into high school and as such, seem to be the neglected participants in this 'journey of uncertainty'. While most parents conveyed their excitement or accepted that their children were growing into young adults, one parent, Mrs Casey, stated that this stage in her son's life had "just come so quick". Mrs Casey became quite emotional when speaking of her own feelings regarding the transition and additionally commented that *she* did not feel prepared for her son to enter high school as she also had not been able to attend the Orientation day to which parents had been invited. While some high schools Orientation days include parents to some degree, acknowledging that students are not the only participants in the transition may alleviate some of the anxieties that parents or other family members may have about this momentous change.

In conclusion, middle schooling programs, Orientation days and older siblings or close friends may allay some of the 'uncertainites' that some students may have regarding the transition to high school, but not all uncertainties will be able to be addressed and overcome. While the uncertainty that these students feel prior to their transition can cause a great deal of nervous anxiety, it is also important to note the role that uncertainty plays in the transition. While transition programs provide some idea of the cultures of the high school, there are only so many things that can be demonstrated through such a mock situation. It seems the only way to really experience what the transition to high school 'is like' is to actually go through the experience.

The question should be asked though, does the 'uncertainty' of the transition also contribute to the excitement the students feel towards the transition? As Measor and Woods (1984, p.170) state "it would be a mistake to aim for an entirely smooth, continuous transition, particularly in the terms of the social culture". They argue that schools:

... should not try to do too much, that there are some things pupils need to learn for themselves. What is needed, we suggest, is a supportive framework within which those lessons are learnt (Measor and Woods, 1984, p. 43).

In conclusion, it can be argued from the collected data that the notion of 'uncertainty' plays a dual role for students during their transition to high school. It not only allows the students to expect great changes in their educational lives based on greater challenges but it allows students to become excited about venturing into similar but somewhat unknown territory. Perhaps if the negative connotations underlying 'uncertainty' are reduced through effective transition programs that aim to provide a supportive framework as suggested by Measor & Woods (1984), the positive aspects of 'uncertainty' can provide the students with the enthusiasm and positive outlook with which they can enter their final years of compulsory schooling.

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