Students' experience of the first term in high school

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Introduction

This paper reports on a study undertaken as part of a university-school linkage grant. The experience of students during transition to high school is an interest of one of our partner schools. The broad concern of the school is to understand the views of students about their transition into the first year of high school so that the procedures in place for this transition can be adjusted if necessary. The paper reports on the overall experience of the group of students and then focusses on the profile of students who reported less favourable experiences during the first term at high school. The final section includes findings from interviews with a smaller group of students, some of whom reported that they found the transition rather scary. The findings provide information for the school on issues related to what creates concerns for students and what acts to support a successful transition experience.

Research on the effects of transitions between different levels of schooling has provided a mixed pattern of findings. Early, and some later, studies in US and Australia report declines in several indicators such as perceived academic competence (e.g., Blyth, Simmons & Carlton-Ford, 1983; , self-esteem (e.g., Seidman, Aleen, Aber, Mitchell & Feinman, 1994), anxiety about schoolwork (Harter, Whiesell & Kowalski, 1992), attitudes to subjects (Midgely, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989), task motivation (Anderman & Midgley, 1997), increased bullying (Pelligrini & Long, 2002), poorer emotional health (Lipps, 2005)and perceptions of school environments (Power & Cottrell, 1981)

Set alongside these findings are those that report that some students report increases in perceived academic competence(Harter et al, 1992), improved academic and social self-efficacy (Seidman et al, 1994), maintenance of interest in subjects (Midgley, et al, 1989), increased self-esteem (Nottleman, 1987), development of new social skills (McMaugh & Debus, 1999), and generally positive feelings about the move into high school (Howard & Johnson, 2004) There are reports of positive gains in attitudes and valuing of subjects (Logan & Skamp, 2008), depending on the type of teacher. These findings make clear the importance of understanding the student-school fit (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan,, Reuman, Flanagan, & MacIver, 1993), particularly the classroom environment, teacher's pedagogical approaches and student-teacher interpersonal relationships. These themes emerge in Yates (1999)

interviews with students in Victorian school. Yates concluded that there was a degree of ambivalence among these students about the transition from Year s 6 to 7. The transition worked well for many students, even though there was a sense of separation from a valued primary school environment. There was also ambivalence about the change in curriculum, with some of the repetition in Year 7 being compensated for by involvement in new and exciting subjects.

There are also more recent studies that have focused attention on following smaller groups of students across the time of transition and beyond. These have been carried out in Australia and more recently in New Zealand. In the New Zealand Ministry of Education (2008) study of slightly older students, the transition from primary to high school was described quite positively – *"not the 'disaster that is often feared."* However, in this study this pattern of positive findings was not apparent for all students. For a small group of the students the transition was associated with a greater level of difficulty.

In Howard and Johnson's (2004) study of students in rural schools in New South Wales, the generally resilient students also experienced some degree of difficulty in making friends, keeping up academically, fitting-in to the group, and bullying. These students also worried about such practical matters such as getting lost in a larger school. In another small scale study of students in a different rural area of New South Wales (Logan and Skamp, 2008), in which science students were generally positive about the transition, there were a small number of students who were more negative about the change. These students raised concerns about the decreased opportunities for independent work, differences in the style of teaching and too little opportunity for practical work.

In the light of inconsistency in findings we were interested to investigate the situations of students entering our partner high school. We were also interested to investigate the pattern of responses that would emerge in this South Australian school where the typical transition to high school occurs after Year 7, a year later than in New South Wales but earlier than that described in the recent survey in New Zealand.

Method

Participants

The project involved 174 Year 8 students in a suburban high school in southern Adelaide. The majority of students are drawn from local primary schools in a

predominantly middle-class area. The students completed a survey in the last week of their first term in Year 8 and a small group participated in interviews at the start of Term 4 in the same year.

Procedure

Students completed a survey developed for this project, which included items requiring selection of a response on Likert scales and also open-ended responses. The survey included questions focussed on the areas of social and emotional wellbeing, but also canvassed some of the practical matters noted in previous research. Some of these issues emerged in a previous survey done by these students at the end of Year 7, issues that they indicated might be of concern when they moved in to high school. Items asked them to make an assessment of the state of their social relationships, including their experiences with bullying, whether they were they coping with school in general, with their schoolwork and with homework. In addition the students made overall judgements of whether they found high school welcoming, whether they were happy at school, and what made them happy or unhappy while they were at school. Other items asked the students about new strategies for learning and for coping with bullying.

In this report we focus attention on a subset of these items that addressed four issues: (1) Overall judgement about happiness at school; (2) Levels of coping with school, schoolwork, homework, and being in the schoolyard; (3) Positive features of the social environment, such as having friends, feeling safe, feeling welcome, feeling that they belonged in the school; and (4) Negative features of the social environment, such as bullying, and finding the transition experience lonely or scary. The focus of each of the items of interest in this report here is shown in Table 1.

Profiles generated by cluster analysis

We were interested to see if we could identify different profiles among the students who held the more negative views of their experiences in the first term of school. This analysis involved the identification of low scoring students using three different procedures, each of which produced a list of students with low scores..

1. A cluster analysis of students on the variables described above in Table 1. Responses on the variables were standardized and then clustered using SPSS Hierarchical Clustering, with Ward's method and a squared Euclidean distance measure. A cluster analysis of cases, set to a 2 cluster solution, was supported. Of

the two resulting groups, one was much smaller than the other and comprised 26 students.

2. Student scores on each cluster were calculated by summing the items in the cluster and the extreme scorers were identified. The direction of each of the items was checked for consistency and no reversal of item scores was required.

3. Finally, students whose raw scores on the items described above were also examined to ensure that no one would be missed in the above approaches.

All students in the three lists were profiled. The students who were common to all three lists or to two of the lists were examined and profiles prepared. In this report we give examples of the different profiles and then report the views provided related to one of these profiles, the profile associated with finding transition to have been a scary experience. These views were generated from interviews with these students.

To generate the student profiles we standardized scores on the target survey items and graphed the standardised scores, to show their responses on items on a scale of 1 to 10. We then made the judgement that on some items a standardised score below 5 indicated a concern being expressed by the student. On other items a standardised score above 5 was taken as indicating an expression of concern. In the displays that follow, standardised score bars that indicate expression of concern have been coloured red. The remaining response bars have been coloured green

Interviews

In discussion with school staff a decision was made to conduct follow-up interviews with students who had expressed concern that the transition experience was scary. Twelve students participated in interviews, six of whom reported transition as scary, and six who reported that they had not found the transition experience as scary. The interview questions first sought students reports of the orientation day at the high school, the first day and first week at the new school and then focussed more directly on difficulties experienced by the student or other students. The final questions focussed directly on whether the transition had been a scary experience. The focus in reporting of the interview data in this paper is first on issues that students reported as contributing to make the transition experience scary and then on procedures that were reported as being helpful to students in making the transition .

Results

The general view of transition

The general picture emerging from the survey is shown in Table 1 where the percentages of responses that fell into the positive, neutral and negative ranges of the response scales are indicated. In that table we see that at the end of the first term in high school most students rated their experiences in a positive manner on most items. Most rated themselves as quite happy while at school. Most also gave positive ratings of their experiences in making friends, coping in the yard, feeling safe from bullying, and coping with school. Most students did not rate their transition period in this first term as a lonely experience.

With regard to the level; of bullying, 11.5% of students reported a frequency of bullying of greater than once per week. Although this is of concern for the school, this figure for the incidence of frequent bullying is lower than that shown by previous surveys toward the end of Year 8 in this same school.

Although the school sets out to create a positive community for its students, especially for Year 8 students, there was some ambivalence about this in the reports of 8-9% of students who did not report that they found the school a welcoming place, or a place in which they felt that they belonged.

The final three items in Table 1 returned the least positive patterns of response. Sizeable percentages of students reported negative views about their success in coping with homework and schoolwork and reported that they had found the period of transition somewhat scary. Although the reference of this term 'scary' is ambiguous, it was chosen because this term had been one of the most common predictions made by these students when they looked ahead from their last weeks in primary school when they completed our Year 7 survey in December 2007 with most of these students. We took up the students' interpretations of the term in our more recent interviews with some of the students.

Table 1. The pattern of students' responses on the target survey items.

Item	Percent responses in positive range %	Percent neutral responses %	Percent responses in negative range %
Face most like you at HS	87.9	8.6	3.5
At least one good friend at HS	97.7	0	2.3
Feel safe from being bullied or harassed at HS this year	92.5		7.5
If bullied or harassed this year, recent incident lasted no more than 1-2 days	91.4		8.6
Coping in the school yard?	90.8	8.6	0.6
Moving from PS to HS has been a lonely experience	90.7	4.1	5.2
Frequency of bullying at HS this year less than once per week	88.5		11.5
Coping with bullying at HS this year?	87.8	8.7	3.5
Feel like you belong at HS	78.1	13.0	8.9
Coping with school in general	75.4	22.2	2.3
Find HS a welcoming place.	73.4	18.3	8.3
Moving from PS to HS has been a scary experience	60.2	22.8	17.0
Coping with schoolwork at HS	53.8	39.1	7.1
Coping with homework at HS	39.5	43.0	17.5

Table 2. Most frequent nominations for what leads to happiness and unhappiness at
school.

What makes you Happy and Unhappy at HS?

Happy (frequencies)
- Being with friends (83)
- Special subjects (30)
  - Technology, Home Ec, Art, English, PE
- Teachers (25)

Unhappy
- Homework (47)
- Nothing (28)
- Schoolwork, assignments, tests (23)
- Teachers too strict, mean, bit harsh (22)

The pattern of response to the coping with homework indicator was supported by the responses of the large group (n=174) to the open-ended questions, "What makes you happy at high school?" and "What makes you unhappy at high school?" that were included in the survey at the end of Term 1. Table 2 includes the most frequent responses to these two questions. Homework was by far the most nomination for unhappiness, being nominated 27% of the respondents. The importance of friends is highlighted by the nomination of this as a reason for being happy at school by almost half the students.

Profiles of student concerns

The profile analysis of the concerns of students who gave the least favourable responses to the target items provided detailed representations for each students case. Here we will refer only to four common profile patterns (see Figures 1 – 4) by way of illustration.

Profile 1 describes the pattern of responses of a student who is gave low coping scores related to schoolwork, homework and school in general. Profile 2 shows a profile of concern about belonging at school and finding the high school a welcoming place. In addition this student reported finding the transition scary.

Figure 1. Profile 1

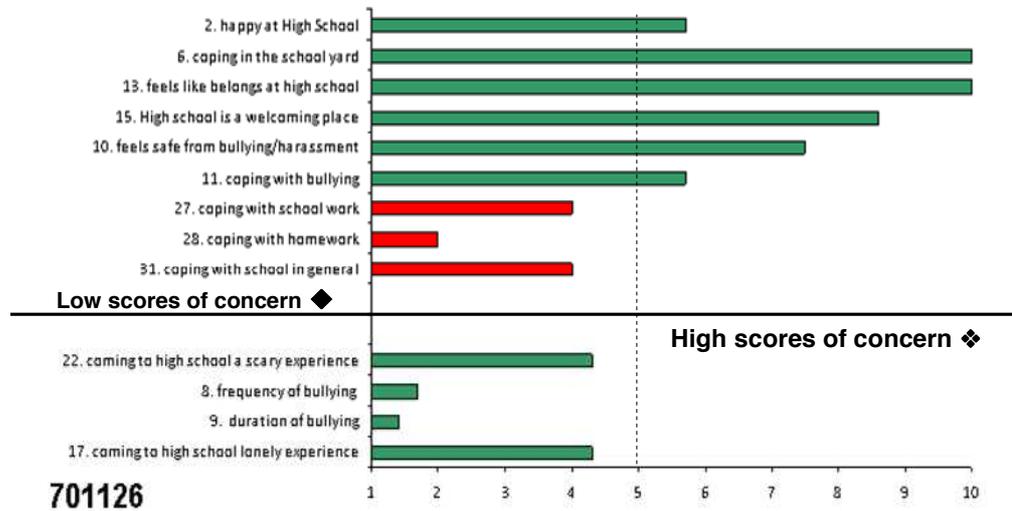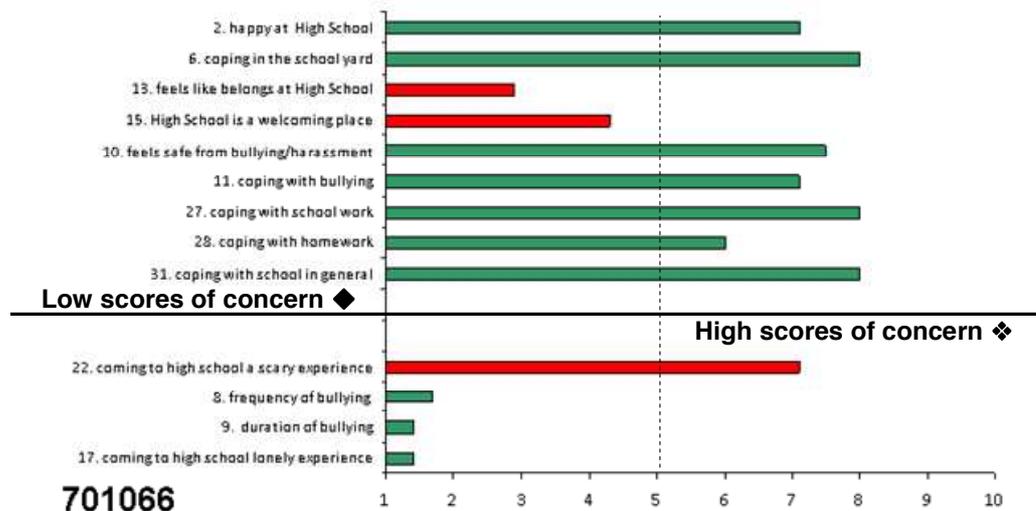## Profile: Not coping with homework, school, schoolwork

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Figure 2. Profile 2

Profile: Concern about belonging

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In Profile 3 three indicators of concern all focus on bullying: low coping with bullying, frequent bullying and bullying that had lasted for some time. The final

profile is focussed just on concern about the scary nature of transition. It is this profile that became the subject of interviews with a small group of students.
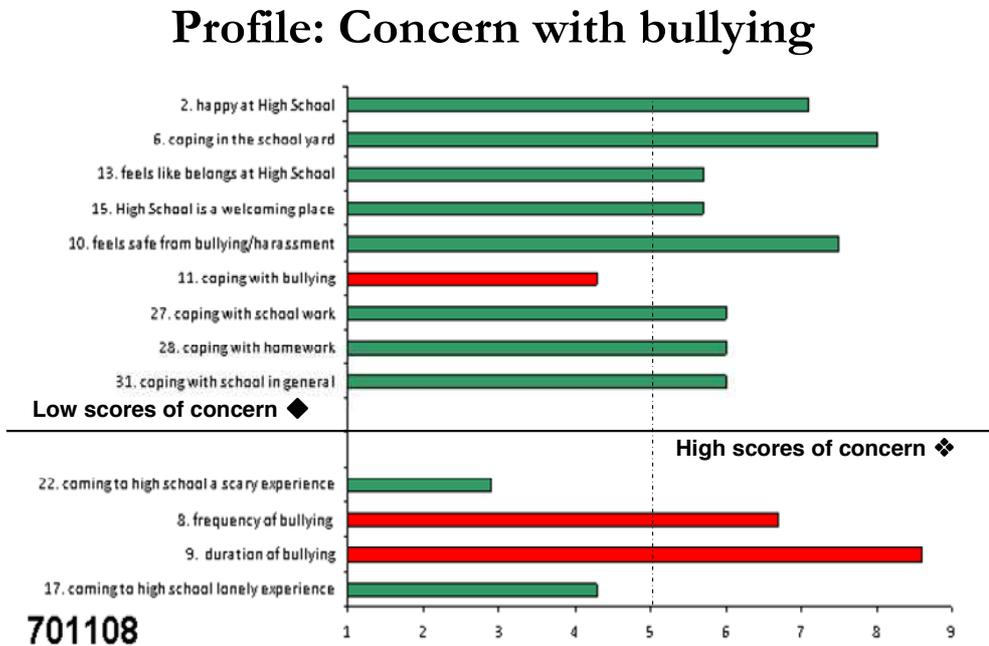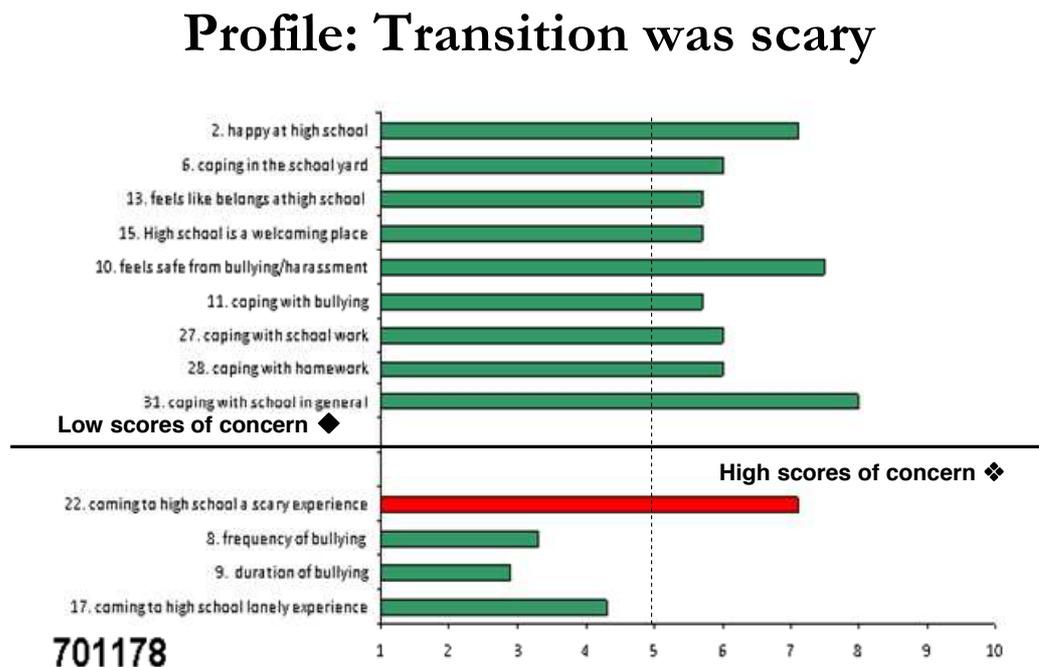
Figure 3. Profile 3.

Profile: Concern with bullying

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Figure 4. Profile 4

Profile: Transition was scary

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Interviews

Causes for concern

The most common cause of concern for students in the interviews, both those who found transition scary and those who did not, was with making friends. We see that expressed in the words of S4 and S3:

Iit was pretty scary. Umm, not knowing anyone obviously and [n] like…having all different teachers and different classes (S4)

> *Cos they won't know where they're going, and, some of their friends might be going to different high schools, so… you…have to make more friends. (S3)*

In our data this focus on the critical importance of friends was present at the end of term 1 and again at the time of the interviews early in Term 4. Indeed the concern was present on the transition day at the end of 2007 when students visited the then Year 7 students visited the high school for a day of orientation activities:

> *I didn't like transition day… didn't know anyone in the class…I was sitting there by yourself, with everyone talking to their friends…(S6)*

In the early days of the new school year there was also a concern with the older, larger, students who were seen to be able to exert both positive and negative effects. S6 reported that *"I had a couple of Year 9 friends and they guided me along and showed me some things."* Students who were in sporting teams also reported that knowing the older students in those teams was helpful.

However, the older students could also be a cause for concern and S3 had devised a strategy for avoiding trouble from these students:

> *All the bigger people were there, so yeah. If you, started to annoy them, then they'd start getting angry at you…Try not to not to know the older people, and you might be OK (S3)*

> *The year 8 guys would go out and then the year 9 or year 10 guys would come out and [they wouldn't] be nice to them, they'd just pushed them around and stuff (S2)*

The latter problem led S2 to suggests that the school uses different recess and lunch times for the Year 8 students in future years.

The program of activities devised by the school to introduce new students to the their teachers and their new curriculum areas was also seen in both positive and negative ways. This involved a series of 20-minute lessons on the first day. This worked well for S5 who was newly arrived from England:

> *We did 20 min lessons…they should do that [again next year] …that got me an idea of whether I was behind or not (S5).*

However, the same experience proved traumatic for S6 who was a student with some learning difficulties

> *The English [lesson] wasn't that good , we did some writing thing and I'm not good at writing and we had to read it out and it was fair embarrassing (S6)*

The situation of this latter student, who gave the most negative account of those students interviewed, was somewhat unusual in that he indicated in the interview at the start of Term 4 that he was still missing his primary school. He had found transition

> *Pretty hard, very difficult….in a new area, scary, I was so used to my primary school … different teachers, different friends a lot of swapping around, very confusing sometimes … 3 pretty good friends from primary   but I was in a different class to them…I'm still missing primary school a lot, like I got more sleep cause it finished early, the buses were fair scary (S6)*

One other cause identified as making transition scary was the prospect of getting lost. This had been a relatively frequent prediction made by these students in their earlier survey responses during 2007. It was still of concern to some at the end of Term 1 and was reported by S1:

> *Finding my way around the school I guess…sometimes…[that's how] I had to always use this map. (S1)*

This concern about quite practical difficulties, such as getting lost was also reported in the account of Howard and Johnson (2004).

Things that worked

In addition to the assistance provided by older students and teachers during the transition, and the provision of a map in the school diary, there were a number of

specific activities that this school organised that were supported strongly in the interviews. Most of these were concerned with the organisation of group or team activities that allowed students to make new friends. A PE game organised for boys on the transition day was viewed positively, as were activities used in class by teachers to pair students up. The example that received the most favourable report from almost all students interviewed (even S6) was Pool Day staged in the first week of school. The students' accounts indicate why it was seen in a positive light:

> *Pool day and that helped me make …new friends…. We walked to the train station and I kind of was talking, like to different people that I hadn't really met before …there was some where you had to sit in like a ring and you had to pull yourself across to the other side of the pool, … you had to drag someone back or, something like that. You just laughed, and you got to know 'em a bit, 'cos you hung out with them outside the pool. (S2)*

> *Pool day…You have to work as teams. .do races and stuff like that…when you're not doing something you just relax and talk. (S5)*

> *The Pool Day was very good…make heaps of friends…teamwork stuff, water polo..they should do that again (S6)*

Useful advice

Although our focus in these interviews was on understanding the causes for the concerns about the reported scary nature of transition, students also provided interesting analyses of their new situations when they were asked to give advice for students who would enter the high school in 2009. We refer to only two related categories of this advice here. The first concerned reasons why some students might experience difficulties in the schoolyard:

> *The people who look different, like they had maybe different opinions about things. They maybe, like didn't wear their hair straight or didn't put heaps of makeup on…For boys, it would probably be the, ones who aren't strong and aren't tough and have maybe different things, like they'd maybe have glasses or something, (S2)*

The second analysis focussed on the goals that students might set for themselves early in the year:

> *I would talk to [the] my friends and get their opinion on what they wanted to be. Like, I asked one of my friends… she said she wanted to become like a "plastic". Like someone, like a doll, and I don't see why and she's the one who turned bad, but yeah, I would just make sure your friends are on the same page as you, so that you can stick close to them. (S2)*

Discussion

Although we have identified areas of concern for the students who gave the least favourable reports of their transition experience, it is important to realise that the overall profile for the large groups of students coming into this high school from different schools and countries was largely positive. In this respect our findings support those of Lipps (2005) in his review of Canadian research and the findings of the recent New Zealand Ministry of Education (2008) study. The brief report from our interviews on what works well for students during transition shows that this school has established useful procedures for the majority of students in this first year at high school.

McMaugh and Debus (1999) titled their paper on transitions of students with disability *'Just make friends, that's the most important thing!*. To a significant extent this advice is also that given by students in our project. As students make clear in their reports on what makes them happy at high school, their success, or not, in making friends in the new high school environment is seen to be critical in making a successful transition. The procedures set in place by the school in the early days of the transition for facilitating the formation of friendship were highly valued by students, including the student who gave the least favourable account of transition in interviews.

Friendship can also be seen as playing a role in the sense that students have about the high school as a place to which they belong, that they find welcoming. This sense of belonging emerged as an important area of concern for students in this project whose reports about students were among the least favourable.

As is also apparent in recent reports of primary-secondary transitions for Australian students at different year levels (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Logan & Skamp, 2008;

Yates, 1999), there are other issues that impact upon this success. Practical matters of movement around the new environment, interactions with teachers and with the others in that environment, particularly the older students who have already established their hold on a piece of the turf, also create concern. The importance of the latter concern is shown in the impact of bullying for students in this project.

The relatively brief follow-up we have been able to do on the concerns of the students about the scary nature of the transition has provided important information for the school to use in its planning for the coming transition. We also see that it will be important to follow-up on the other profiles of concern identified in our analysis. Although bullying is an on-going concern for all schools, our findings also point to the need for further research on the concerns students express about their relatively low levels of success in coping with schoolwork and homework. Homework is ubiquitous yet it seems to be an area of students' lives that is relatively unexplored. We know from other research reported in this symposium that students in this school and in our other partner schools generally do not have detailed knowledge of strategies for learning. This has direct implications for homework, because in doing their homework students must assume most of the responsibility for directing their learning. We see homework as a key area in which students act as their own teachers, and for which they need well-developed pedagogical knowledge (Tran & Lawson, 2007).

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