

PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS AND PARENTS INVOLVED IN PRIMARY TO SECONDARY SCHOOL TRANSITION PROGRAMS

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Abstract

This study, conducted as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education, has confirmed previous research that most primary students look forward to the new experiences and challenges of secondary school, make the transition from primary to secondary school with a minimum of fuss and thrive in this new context. However, some students may approach this time with apprehension and do not make the transition easily. Transition programs, of different formats and complexities, based on both Australian and international research, have been introduced in some schools to facilitate transition. The aims of this research were to investigate and compare the perceptions of students, parents and teachers involved in several of these programs and to examine the extent to which transition programs can alleviate issues associated with transition between primary and secondary schools. Although executive staff and teachers also provided valuable information and perceptions this paper only addresses the perceptions of students and parents.

Surveys which included scale items and open-ended questions were completed by students, parents and teachers in each school and interviews conducted with executive or nominated staff members. The responses from each school were compared to each other and to previous research.

The results of the study raised questions about the issues that need to be addressed in transition programs, the effect of different programs on transition and a gender difference in the pre and post conceptions of students and parents about transition.

Introduction

Research and reports on transition from primary to secondary school suggest that for most students it is an exciting time, a stimulus; they enjoy the new experiences and challenges, having a variety of teachers, a choice of subject matter and making new friends. For others, it may be a daunting and confusing experience which can have long lasting effects. Transition from primary school to secondary school is an important time; one that Vinson (2006) says is not well recognised; a time too of great physical and emotional change for the student;

and that initial enthusiasm may wane if the momentum is not continued (NSW DET, 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Kiddey & Robson, 2001; Barber, 1999; Nisbet & Entwistle, 1969; Vinson 2006; Fouracre, 1993; Ferguson & Fraser, 1998; Carrington, 2006).

Researchers including Carrington (2003) suggest that the needs of students in the middle years of schooling are not always met by the traditional primary and secondary school which were often “designed a long time ago, for a different social and economic world” (Northern Territory Government, 2005, p. 86). It is claimed by Carrington (2003) that students of the 21st century too are perceived to be very different to the students for whom these structures were designed. They bring different skills, backgrounds, experiences and knowledge of technology that may not have been considered when the present school structure was designed and according to Deering, (2002. p.2) students are maturing physically, “five years earlier than for children 100 years ago.” The age at which students make the transition matters, as does their gender and cultural background. It was found that the perceptions and expectations of parents, caregivers and teachers are not necessarily the same as the students but may have a bearing on the students’ reactions to it.

Previous research (Braggett, 1997; Galton, Gray & Ruddock, 1999; Vinson, 2002) has outlined the specific needs of students at transition, the differences between primary and secondary school and the “gaps” students need to bridge for a successful transition; including the physical or environmental gap, the personal (social and developmental) gap and the educational (curriculum and pedagogy) gap. These have been summarised in Table 1. This research however focussed like others (Kirkpatrick, 1993, 1997; Green, 1997) on the perceptions of students of these transition elements and their importance in the process.

Table 1: *Gaps* to be overcome by students as they make the transition from primary school to secondary school

Physical	Personal	Educational	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • new environment • larger year group • larger school • moving around for each lesson, not one home room • greater travelling to school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • drop of self esteem • pastoral care • new friends / relationships • co-ordinating workload • parental involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • different cultures • organisational structure • designed for a different age • more rigid timetable • presentation of curriculum • continuity of learning • increased literacy demands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • records of achievement being passed on • formal assessment and examinations • reporting • regression in student output in Year 7 • new subjects • many specialist teachers instead of one main teacher

Currently programs designed to facilitate transition through these changes range from brief orientation sessions eg a visit from the principal of the secondary school to the pupils in primary schools in their drawing area or an orientation day at the beginning of the first year in the secondary school and minimal programs within the primary school by the classroom teacher to specific “middle schools” or specifically designed transition programs that run over a term, semester or whole year.

The context of this research was three Kindergarten to Year 12 independent schools (with particular emphasis on the years 5 - 8, the final years of primary and the first years of secondary school); one with no transition program, one with a formal Middle School (Years 5-8) and one with a Special Transition program administered in the final year of primary school. In addition to the perceptions of students this study also included the views of parents and staff about transition. One difficulty documented throughout the literature, both in Australia and internationally, is a definition of “middle school/ years”. The term may refer to a specific age distribution, to the first years of secondary school or to a specific school structure encompassing the final year/s of primary and the early years of

secondary school. The main rationale for the development of a middle school program is based on research on human development that says that students in the 10 to 14 years age group are homogenous in relation to their physical, social, emotional and intellectual needs (Weller, 1999).

A survey of primary and secondary principals by Vinson(2006), found a high percentage were interested in providing programs but only a small percentage were actually implementing them because:

- of lack of time and resources (funding and staffing);
- of lack of communication between schools, and
- the primary school being “devalued by high schools” (p. 6).

Methodology

Three independent schools that catered for students from Kindergarten to matriculation were specifically chosen for the different program types that reflected those in the literature and for gender balance. The reasons for the introduction of the programs in each school were quite divergent. All schools had an intake of students at the commencement of the secondary component.

A complementary mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods was used in the collection of data through interviews, and surveys with scale items and open-ended questions. Open-ended questions that allowed students and parents to express their feelings and opinions pre and post transition commenced the questionnaire. The open-ended questions were matched to the specific program in which they were involved. Students and parents in all programs were then asked the same question involving a series of items about transition using a Likert scale. The issues here addressed the physical (environmental), social and educational issues previously mentioned. This order was important as opinions were expressed before suggestions of the issues of transition were mentioned. Table 2 shows an example of several open ended questions and Table 3 shows the scale question.

Table 2: Sample of student open ended questions

	Questions
Before transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you looking forward to secondary school? • What are you looking forward to in secondary school? • What concerns do you have about secondary school? • Do you think you are prepared for secondary school? • What aspects of primary school helped prepare you for secondary school?
After transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Were you looking forward to secondary school? • What were you looking forward to in secondary school? • What concerns did you have about secondary school? • Is secondary school what you expected? • Do you think you were prepared for secondary school? • What didn't you know before coming to secondary school that would be helpful for all students to know?

Table 3: Sample of scale questions

How do you think you will find the following in Year 7?	Very hard	Hard	Ok	No problems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • moving from room to room for lessons • finding rooms • homework • tests / exams • having a number of teachers • discipline • following the timetable • being in a larger year group • travelling to school • making new friends • having more subjects • the extra reading 				

The Sample Schools

School A was an Independent K-12 girls' school that initially appeared to have no documented transition program between its primary and secondary components, other than an orientation afternoon for both continuing and new students. However, after collection of data from students about to complete their final year of primary school it was found that these students had participated in a "resilience" program which had provided them with strategies that could assist in the transition. These participants were then deemed to have participated in a *minimal program*. A second set of participants then completed the surveys early the following year before the resilience program was conducted. Students in this

school were also surveyed after a year in the secondary school. Parents at this school were not surveyed as it was deemed inappropriate when no program was offered.

School B was an Independent co-educational K-12 school with a documented Year 6 - 9 Middle School program with Year 6 being the final year of primary school. Students and parents of students were surveyed about their perceptions of transition:

- before entering the middle school program,
- before entering secondary school, and
- after transition.

School C was an Independent K -12 boys' school with a documented transition program. Final year primary students here spent part of every week in the secondary school being taught by both their class teacher and secondary specialists teachers. (The students in the final year of primary school in this school were actually one year older than those in Schools A and B, but they had only experienced the same number of years of schooling.) While the students were in the secondary school they participated in all the activities offered there and were treated as senior school pupils. The program here was called the "Special Transition Program" throughout the study.

In each school too it was possible to compare students who had participated in the program with those students who entered the school in secondary school but had not participated in that school's particular program. Tables 4, 5 and 6 show the number of students and parents who participated in each school.

Table 4: School A participants

School A	Year 6 No program	Year 6 Minimal Program	Year 7 No Program	Year 7 Program
Number of Students	22	28	13	12

Table 5: School B participants

School B	Year 6	Year 7 No Program	Year 7 Program	Year 8 No Program	Year 8 Program
Number of Students	47	40	29	29	32
Number of Parents	40	40	27	14	

Table 6: School C participants

School C	Pre Secondary No Program	Pre Secondary Program	After secondary No Program	After secondary Program
Number of Students	16	41	11	20
Number of Parents	2	7	7	17

Findings

Three major findings emerged from this study. These involved the:

- perceptions of students and parents about **the issues** involved in transition,
- **effect of the programs** on transition, and
- **gender** difference in the pre and post conceptions of students and parents about the transition.

1. The Issues

The majority of students in this study who were moving into secondary school looked forward to new challenges, more freedom, the new friends they would make, the new subjects they would encounter and having different teachers. This is consistent with studies by Kirkpatrick (1993; 1997) and Graham and Hill (2003).

Previous studies by for example Galton et al. (1999), Galton & Pell (2003) and Vinson (2006) have indicated that the physical and social needs of students are

being met by existing transition programs, but educational needs still need addressing.

Students in this study did not anticipate or experience great difficulty with the *physical* aspects of transition. The *physical* areas of concern mentioned prior to transition eg *finding rooms, moving rooms* and *reading a timetable* were not mentioned in the after-transition surveys. This may, to some degree, be attributed to orientation sessions and the use of homerooms by all schools at some point in their program. Despite Wyndham (1957) reporting that homerooms were essential for smooth transition, more recent research by Howard and Johnson (2005) found that students and parents were reluctant to make many changes to the present traditional secondary structures. In this study many students, parents and teachers mentioned the benefits of homerooms (the safety and security, students not getting lost or being late and being able to display work), but many students expected to move around, were looking forward to this and saw the advantages of moving from class to class.

Many students in this study reported *making friends* as an aspect of positive anticipation and enjoyment of secondary school. Parents of students in all schools believed *making friends* had not been a concern and although students had found this aspect slightly more difficult than anticipated it was not a major area of concern in this study.

The responses to the scale item questions showed the area of largest concern or the largest *gap* to be an educational one. Previous research (Fouracre, 1993; Galton et al., 1999; Galton, Gray and Ruddock, 2003; Galton and Pell, 2003; Hawk and Hill, 2004; National Literacy Trust, 2006; Vinson, 2006) has also identified the *educational* area as the one of most concern during transition with particular regard to the 'dip' in achievement. This study did not look at this 'dip' and neither was this the intention of any of the transition programs being used.

The areas of most concern within this *educational* aspect in both the surveys and open-ended responses were *homework* and *tests and examinations*; the average response to *homework* being perceived a *difficulty* was 36% of students prior to transition and many respondents mentioned it in their open-ended answers. This result was not as high as Kirkpatrick's (1993), Fouracre's (1993) and Graham and Hill's (2003) students however, the after-transition reality of this concern declined for Graham and Hill and Fouracre's (1993) students, while 34% of students in this study continued to find it a *difficulty* and Kirkpatrick's respondents remained "continually frustrated".

It is said that students move from a "state of 'consistent' education and are then thrown into one of inconsistency and unsettled organisation" (NSW DET, 2005b p. 64). This was apparent in this study as both students and parents mentioned the nurturing environment of the primary school, where pastoral needs were more easily identified by having one teacher and students and parents knew what was happening and expected of them and their children. Kiddey & Robson (2001) discussed inconsistency between teachers of different subjects who may have inconsistent standards and expectations with which the students needed to cope. After transition to secondary school students and parents in this study also commented that students did not always know what was generally expected of them and would like this aspect included in orientation/transition programs. Not only was *homework* an issue but "unco-ordinated" homework from different teachers was also mentioned by these students and in the literature as a problem.

The introduction of *tests and examinations* in the secondary school has been discussed in the literature as part of the different cultures of the primary and secondary school (Hargreaves & Earl, 1990; Carrington, 2002), but little has been said about *tests and examinations* being a concern for students. Before transition, new students to each school were less concerned about *tests and examinations*; many of them not experiencing them previously, so it could appear

that having some knowledge of exams before transition, for example, actually makes students more concerned about the prospect. However, in most cases after transition the level of concern had declined for continuing students to below that of the new students. This study has therefore identified *tests and examinations* as an issue that needs to be addressed in transition programs; students mentioned experience with exams as a factor in aiding their preparation for secondary school and many asked for exam practice.

Organisational skills, including organising time, belongings and the workload, were perceived as a concern by many students and parents in this study. In fact, students here believed if they were organised with their belongings and time, they could achieve the expectations of workload and being independent. This aspect has not been identified in other research.

Students in Green's (1997) study found the work easy and the workload light in secondary school, however, students in this study and Kirkpatrick's (1997) study found a great increase in the workload, which was not necessarily challenging or as hard as they expected.

Many transition programs have a small number of teachers in the early stages of secondary school in order to aid transition, but students in this study reported looking forward to having more teachers. Like Kirkpatrick's (1993) students they believed they were well prepared for this and many were looking forward to the diversity of "personalities rather than teacher expertise" (p. 4). Parents and some students, as in Cocklin's (2000) study, however, reported liking having a home teacher at least in the first year of secondary school, to ease them in more slowly.

2. Effects of the Programs

In School A there were few differences in the expectations of the students involved in the minimal program and those new to the traditional secondary

school before transition. However, the responses after some time spent in the secondary school, show that both groups found it a lot easier than expected, with those continuing from the minimal program finding it relatively trouble-free. One of the aims of the 'Resilience through Humour' program was to help students makes friends and although the continuers were more concerned about this aspect compared to the new students prior to transition, the after transition results were reversed, with continuing students finding they had no difficulty at all. Concerns about *discipline* were not high before or after transition, but continuing students found *discipline* more difficult than expected, and those new to the school easier. This may be due to a level of complacency and familiarity with the school among the continuing students, or to a difference in expectations of students between the primary and secondary sections of the school. This group were also the only students unperturbed by *tests and examinations* and further investigation by the researcher found that these students had experienced tests and examinations and had been counselled in test / examination technique during their final years of primary school.

The Middle School program appears to have a different effect on the students. Those moving into the structure had few concerns (except for *homework, tests and examinations* and *discipline*) and females expected it to be easier than males. After the first year of Middle School levels of anxiety declined in almost all areas for females moving into the secondary component, except for *tests and examinations* which increased in concern. This group expected transition to secondary school to be much easier than any other group surveyed. Experience of the first year of the Middle School however, did not appear to allay concerns for males except for the element of *discipline* that dropped.

After transition to secondary school, female students reported that they had found the transition as expected, with similar levels of concern to before transition and their concerns for *tests and examinations* diminished. In contrast, male continuers had found the transition more difficult than expected, with

increased levels of concern in almost all areas; they perceived more difficulty than all other groups; even those with no preparation.

Almost all males in School C were found to be looking forward to moving into the secondary school. Those continuing from the Special Program were not as enthusiastic about the benefits of their program, believing it could be longer and more informative; many also feeling the only advantage had been *having extra teachers*. However, the perceptions of the students after they moved to secondary school, were different. Their recorded experience was much easier than expected and they acknowledged the merits of their program in aiding transition.

This research indicates that female students respond well to any program. In contrast, males in the Middle School structure did not respond to their program, but males in School C did respond noticeably to the Special Transition Program. This difference cannot be attributed directly to the different programs as there was only one school with each program.

Most parents of students who had been through either the Middle School program or the Special Transition Program were full of praise for their program. Parents of students who had experienced a formal transition program felt their children were more ready for the transition than those who had not experienced a program. However, the parents of male students in the Middle School thought their sons had made the transition well, and the parents of males in the Special Program thought the transition had been more difficult than their sons reported.

3. Gender

Fouracre (1993) and Galton et al. (2003) found that females were more satisfied with progress after transition than males whose satisfaction tended to decline. Satisfaction of academic results was not questioned here, but this study did find

that females made the transition more easily on the whole than males and seemed more settled after transition.

In this study gender plays a major role in the way students perceive the move from primary to secondary school both before and after transition. Before transition female students anticipate the transition to be easier than males - all the students who did not appear to be looking forward to secondary school were males. The males appeared to miss the nurturing environment of the primary school. Male students too believed more strongly than female students that they needed preparation prior to moving into either the Middle School structure or secondary school.

After spending some time in the secondary school the majority of students stated that they were enjoying the variety of subjects and teachers, the freedom and making friends, but there were also gender differences in how they perceived the transition. A program of any kind appears to make transition easier for females. Conversely, the results for males are ambivalent, with males in one program finding the move much more difficult than anticipated and the other much easier than expected. Females new to a school also seem to make the transition slightly more easily than new males. This difference may indicate that not only do male students have different needs to female students at this age, but that males respond to programs in different ways. However, as mentioned, this may not be due to the program itself but to characteristics of the schools not included in the study.

More parents of males also believed that students needed preparation for transition than parents of females. After some time in the secondary school a similar discrepancy appears as the parents did not respond that their children had experienced as much difficulty as the students themselves had reported.

The special needs of students in adolescence were not discussed in this study but age may have played a part. Research has shown that females mature faster than males at this time, (Nisbet & Entwistle, 1969; Deering, 2002) up to two years faster, so the fact that females appear to have made the transition better may be attributed to gender, and the males in the Special Program being actually a year older than the males in the Middle School, may also account for the difference here, although they had both spent the same amount of time in school.

Implications

Students have shown in this study that they are looking forward to many aspects of secondary school and that they are coping with most aspects of transition well. They are prepared for hard and challenging work, but this does not necessarily mean just a larger workload. The educational aspects of concern, *homework, tests and examinations* and *organisational skills*, mentioned by all groups in the survey need to be considered when designing transition programs.

Gender differences have emerged in this study. This study indicates similar reactions by female students to all programs but different responses to different programs by males. Although there has been much research on gender difference and strategies have been implemented to enhance boys' education within Australian schools, this difference in reactions also needs to be considered when structuring appropriate transition programs.

Vinson said that the move from primary to secondary school is "less well recognised as a transition of significance" (2006, p.1), but some students said that it was not "as much of a 'big deal' as suggested in junior school" (student response). Despite recognising the benefits of the reported programs there were also some parents and students who agreed that transition to secondary school is a "stepping stone on the way to becoming an adult" (NSW DET, 2005a, p. 1) and like Churchill and Carrington (2000) an important and necessary step towards greater maturity which doesn't need to be completely smooth. A balance

therefore needs to be made when designing transition programs to both recognise the importance of transitions but also make them as smooth as possible.

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