

# The Impact of Transition upon Adolescent Students' Reading and Spelling Achievement

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## Abstract

The common expectation surrounding students and education is that students will advance in their literacy ability as they progress through school. Although there is support for this expectation from large scale longitudinal studies, for some middle school students, advancement in literacy ability is not always the case. The transition from primary to secondary school is identified as a particular challenge for some students and there is evidence that not all students make this transition successfully and, as a consequence, their academic progression may stall or in some instances, decline. This paper presents a snapshot of the findings from my PhD project and focuses on the impact transition, the move from primary to secondary school, had upon Tasmanian adolescent students' reading and spelling achievement as measured by the *Progressive Achievement Test (PAT-R)* for reading and the *Single Word Spelling Test (SWST)* for spelling. The preliminary findings of this semi longitudinal research revealed that there were a cohort of students who were at risk for unsuccessful transition in their reading and spelling achievement. The condition as to why this may have occurred was explored with reference to socio-economic factors and the structure of the school system.

## Introduction

This paper presents some preliminary findings from my PhD research, which was an investigation of the impact that transition, the move from primary school to secondary school, had upon Tasmanian adolescent students' literacy achievement in two key areas: reading and spelling. The challenges adolescents face in regards to their literacy learning has been well documented in the literature and this research was conducted in response to numerous reports that some adolescent students are failing to acquire or maintain basic reading and spelling skills at secondary school (Du Toit & Bouwer, 2009).

Two points need to be stated prior to engaging with this paper. Firstly, it should be noted that this research did not assume that all adolescent learners are failing in the areas of reading and spelling. Rather, this research aimed to explore one contributing factor which has been reported to impact students' reading and spelling achievement: the transition from primary to secondary school. Secondly, this research did not claim that reading and spelling were sole key determinants for literacy success. This paper acknowledged that literacy in today's world is a concept which encompasses a broad and varying range of capabilities which are important for the development of literate and sustainable communities (Dugdale & Clark, 2008). Unfortunately, there was not sufficient scope in this study to explore students' achievement across the broad range of literacy capabilities. Reading and spelling are commonly viewed as basic and fundamental literacy skills due to their applicability to a wide range of texts and situations which equip students for the literacy tasks they encounter later in life (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Reading and Spelling are essential for active participation in contemporary society and therefore these skills constituted the focus for this paper. It is hoped that this project will contribute knowledge to the research field in regards to improving

and enhancing the reading and spelling achievements of young adolescents in Tasmanian and Australian schools as they take an important step in their educational career.

## The Literature

The literacy achievement of adolescent students has become an important topic in the research field, both on a national and international level (Moje, 2008). Researchers, educators and policy makers are becoming increasingly aware of the importance the terms *adolescent* and *literacy* carry when paired together in today's literacy rich educational environment (Alvermann, 2009). The reports from teachers and educators about the number of adolescent students who struggle in the area of literacy have been an increasing issue in education. Past research has stated that student literacy levels in the adolescent years are in decline and some adolescents are failing to acquire the adequate skills needed for active participation in contemporary society (Freebody, 2007; Ailwood, 2001; Lingard; 2003, Mills, 2003; Goiran-Bevelhimer, 2008; Bronzo, 2010). The lack of sufficient literacy skills is a major contributing factor for the difficulties some adolescents experience in secondary school, with many adolescents leaving secondary school early, without the necessary skills to read or spell at a functional level (Snipes & Horwitz, 2008).

Previous research focusing on the adolescent years has emphasised the need for attention to be paid in the area of adolescent literacy achievement (Galton, Gray & Ruddrick, 1999; McGee, 2003). Past studies have found that as students progress through school, the range of student achievement widens whereby for some students, progress slows or even stalls. Key reports have emerged from Australian research which demonstrated growing concern about the declining achievement of many adolescent students, particularly as they transition from primary to secondary school (Culican, 2005). Such research calls for the need to increase understandings of the reasons for the declines many adolescents experience in their literacy achievement in order to close the gap between high and low performing adolescents. As mentioned above, literacy entails many facets and to be literate in today's world, students must be able to engage with a range of sites, locations and events that entail print, visual, digital and analogue media (Luke, Comber & Grant, 2003). While this research acknowledges the multifaceted approach to literacy, this research focused on two key areas which are essential for the development of literacy skills in young adolescent learners: reading and spelling (Maughan et al., 2009).

## Adolescents' Literacy Performance in Tasmania

The National Testing Program Summary Report (2011) revealed Tasmania to be the lowest achieving state in literacy for grade 7 students in 2011. The report ranked Tasmania's literacy achievement second last behind the Northern Territory, with student mean scores for reading and spelling at the lowest they have been in four years. In addition to these findings, the 2010 Tasmanian Education Performance Report also revealed the literacy achievements of students to be below the national average. This report highlighted that some Tasmanian students do not possess basic literacy skills, and as a consequence, literacy in Tasmania has been identified as a concern for educators and policy makers (Tasmania's Education Performance Report, 2010).

The statistics used as evidence for Tasmania's literacy performance are derived from students' results on standardised tests, namely the *NAPLAN* (*National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy*) test. The *NAPLAN* tests are routinely undertaken by all students across Australia in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. These tests are designed to assess students in the same year level on the same test items in the assessment domains of reading, spelling, writing, language conventions and numeracy (National Testing Program Summary Report, 2011). Approximately one million students complete *NAPLAN* tests (National Testing Program

Summary Report, 2011) in an attempt to gather information about the literacy performance of students in Australian schools.

In collaboration with the *NAPLAN* tests, Australian students complete other testing programs such as the *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)*, the *Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)* and the *Progressive Achievement Test (PAT)*. These tests enable the literacy capabilities of students to be compiled and provide an identification of Australia's achievement in comparison to other countries. While data from these tests allows various calculations to be made in regards to achievement, one of the documented trends is that there is a widening gap between high achieving adolescent students and low achieving adolescent students, with students at the lower end continuing to experience declines in their achievement (Hipwell & Klenowski, 2011).

The reports from prominent researchers in the area of literacy and student achievement conclude that the present reports on Australian students' underachievement in the areas of reading and spelling are not surprising. What is surprising is that little change has taken place; high achieving adolescents are still achieving at or above the expected level, but those adolescents who have been classified as "low" achievers continue to fail to achieve the national benchmark as determined by test administrators, authorities and government expectations (Bronzo, 2010).

## Factors Impacting Upon Students' Literacy Performance

While it is effortless to identify the disadvantages of poor literacy skills and emphasise the significance of developing strong literacy foundations, it is important to recognise the reasons why adolescents struggle with literacy. Severe educational needs, disaffection from learning, socio-economic factors, gender and personal deprivation are just a few examples of the variables which may prevent young adults from engaging with or developing sufficient literacy skills. Such variables may be outside the control of an individual and therefore addressing these variables must become a key step ensuring adequate reading and spelling skills are attained (Dugdale & Clark, 2008). Unfortunately, there was not sufficient scope in this paper to address all of these variables in detail. However, this paper was committed to focusing on one key variable which has emerged as significant contributor upon the literacy development of adolescent students: the transition from primary school to secondary school. In addition, this research also explored socio-economic status and structure of the school system as additional contributing factors.

### *Transition*

In an educational context, and in the context of this research, transition, or what has been referred to in this paper as the transition phase, is a time when students move from primary school into secondary school. It is a complex phase which many students engage in on a yearly basis, characterised by the influence of social and institutional factors which can result in a positive or negative experience for the individual (Smith, 2005).

For most early adolescents, the move from primary school into secondary school is not an easy process (Moje, 2008). Transitioning is not simply about finishing one school and beginning at the next but it is a time of considerable change in a young person's life. During this phase, adolescents undergo a variety of both physical and emotional changes and challenges. For many, transitioning is not only about adjusting to a new and larger physical environment; it is also about adapting to new ways of thinking, different teachers and teaching methods, working with a greater range of subjects, adjusting to different expectations and interacting with a large number of peers. A student's ability to cope with these changes is likely to have a significant impact on how they feel about school and how they progress through secondary education (Cox & Kennedy, 2008).

Investigations into the impact of transition have identified that during this phase, some adolescents experience stress, low self esteem, apathy, decreased motivation and a decline in attitudes towards school work and school life (Moje, 2008). The Australian and international literature surrounding the effects of transition upon students' academic attainment has presented substantial agreement that the transition phase can have a considerable impact upon the achievement of students as they move from primary to secondary school (McGee, 2003; Nield, 2009; West & Schwerdt, 2012). Common findings amongst the literature have suggested that there is a consistent achievement loss associated with transition (Alspaugh, 1998).

### ***Socio-Economic Status***

A wealth of information currently exists surrounding adolescents and their achievement in school which suggests that socio-economic factors (SES) have a considerable impact upon students' academic performance and their future life chances (Reyes, Gillock, Kobus & Sanchez, 2000; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003; Jindal Snape & Foggie, 2008). Due to the significance of SES on students' education, SES was chosen as a focus for this paper. The literature states that students from low SES backgrounds do not perform as well as their peers from middle or high SES areas during the transition from primary to secondary school (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). The numerous changes accompanying transition have been found to be particularly damaging to disadvantaged students and as a result many students from low SES areas find it difficult to adjust in the year following transition (Reyes et al., 2000). McGee et al., (2003) claim that a student's achievement may be more related to SES than to any other factor.

As mentioned above, it has been proposed that an achievement gap exists between the privileged and the not so privileged (West & Schwaerdt, 2012). Students living in poverty or low SES communities have been found to perform below the expected levels in literacy, with many of these students unable to pass standardised tests or perform basic classroom activities. More specific to this paper, it has also been stated that children from poor families and/or attending schools in poor neighbourhoods are more likely to experience reading difficulties as they progress through school (Snow and Biancarosa, 2003). What is particularly concerning for educators is that many students from low SES regions who are struggling in the areas of reading and spelling rarely catch up in the years following transition (Maughen et al., 2009).

### ***Structure of the School System***

Due to the reported academic difficulties many students face as they move campuses from primary to secondary school (referred to as an external transition), this paper also aimed to investigate whether such difficulties were minimised for students who remained on the same campus (referred to as an internal transition) during the transition phase. The literature surrounding the impact that transition can have on students' emotional, social and academic development has presented a general agreement that one of the main contributing factors to the difficulties faced by students during the transition phase is the adjustment and change to a new school environment (Cox & Kennedy, 2008; Nield, 2009; West, Sweeting & Young; 2010). Research has identified that the structure of primary and secondary schooling is quite different, not only in terms of the physical organisation but also in terms of teaching practice (Hawk & Hill, 2001).

Traditionally, the primary school environment is considerably smaller than a secondary school environment, with fewer classrooms, smaller grounds and a smaller number of students and teachers. The nature of the primary school setting is also regarded as more nurturing than secondary schools, whereby students are well known to their teachers, their needs are readily catered for and their peer groups have been established throughout the

primary school years. The structure of a secondary school however is quite different. Secondary schools are typically larger, they have more teachers and students. It is therefore understandable that the transition from primary to secondary school brings a number of uncertainties and it is these uncertainties that make the transition so challenging for many adolescents.

Students who experience an external transition are required to adjust to a number of changes that are not as prevalent for internal transitioning students. For some students, the move to a new environment and the opportunity to make new friends is an exciting and rewarding experience. However, the majority of the research literature states that many students who transition externally find the move very challenging (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Mizelle & Irvin, 2005). Not only are students required to leave their familiar primary school environment and adjust to new rules and regulations, but they are also required to break the bonds they had previously developed with their primary teachers and peers (Neild, 2009). Making new friends, developing new relationships with teachers, coping with new forms of curriculum delivery and teacher expectations present additional stresses for these students (McGee, 2003). Moving to a new school may also bring fears of being bullied, getting lost or not being able to cope with the demands of secondary school work (Mizelle, 1999).

However, not all students who experience an external transition have negative experiences. For some students, the move to a new environment presents new and exciting opportunities. However, for others it can cause feelings of uneasiness and anxiousness. The way students adapt during the transition phase therefore depends on the interaction between the nature and of the new environment and that of each student individually (Reyes et al, 2000). As a result, examining the structure of the school system was an important focus for this paper.

## The Research

### The Aims

The overall aim of this research was to investigate the impact that the transition from primary school into secondary school had upon adolescent students' reading and spelling achievement. To further explore this aim, the following research questions were investigated:

- Do students who transition internally experience fewer declines in their *PAT-R* and *SWST* scores during the transition phase than students who transition externally?
- Do students from higher socio-economic areas perform better on the *PAT-R* and the *SWST* across the transition phase than students from low socio economic areas?

### The Method

#### *Quantitative Design*

This paper was located within a quantitative paradigm as student test scores were the primary forms of data. However, the findings reported in this paper were derived from a wider mixed-methodological framework used for my PhD project which utilised both quantitative and qualitative data. The sole focus on the student quantitative data was deliberate as the reading and spelling achievement of students was the main focus point for this paper which was based on the first phase of the data collection.

## The Collection of Data

### *The Participants*

Ten co-educational Tasmanian government schools were selected for this research. The chosen schools comprised of three Kindergarten to grade 10 district schools, three grade 7 to 10 secondary schools and four Kindergarten to grade 6 primary schools. Participants were 244 grade 6 students who externally transitioned from a select government primary school into a feeder government secondary school or internally transition within a district school. The participants were aged between 11 and 13 years.

### *The Instruments*

Two instruments were used for the collection of data. These were the *Single Word Spelling Test (SWST)* and the *Progressive Achievement Test in Reading (PAT-R)*. The *SWST* and the *PAT-R* tests are highly established standardised tests within Australian schools and are familiar to many students and teachers. These tests were chosen as instruments for the present research as they complimented the established literacy programs existing in classrooms, preventing any unnecessary disruption to students and teachers as well as providing standardised reading and spelling scores.

### *Data Collection*

The researcher approached the Principals of four primary schools and three district schools and invited them to participate in the study. Upon consent, grade 6 teachers were sent information packs outlining the aims of the study along with sufficient copies of the testing instruments. Between the seven schools, 244 grade 6 students were administered the *SWST* and the *PAT-R* test, which were completed by the students in their normal classrooms and administered by a testing officer. Each student was given a student identification number and this was placed on each individual students' test paper to enable students to be identified the following year.

One year later the researcher contacted the Principals of three 7-10 secondary schools and three district schools (the district schools were the same as those contacted the previous year). Methods for administering the tests were consistent with those used in the previous year. Student participants were identified via student identification number and each test was completed a second time by the same student sample after the transition into grade 7 had taken place.

### *The Analysis*

Data was analysed quantitatively and this analysis enabled some preliminary results to emerge. Student test scores from the *SWST* and the *PAT-R* tests were collected from all students in each of the schools. Two sets of raw scores were collected for each participating student: the first score from grade 6 and the second from grade 7. Raw scores were analysed in SPSS through a multivariate analysis of variance (*MANOVA*) followed by repeated measures analysis of variance (*ANOVA*). To complement these results, correlations were further calculated between two demographic variables (type of school and SES ranking) and the two repeated measures of proficiency in literacy (*PAT-R* Year 6/Year 7 and *SWST* Year 6/Year 7).

## Preliminary Results

### Student PAT-R scores across Transition

Across the target group of 10 schools, based on the same cohort of 244 students, there was an overall decline in student *PAT-R* scores from Mean = 22.74 in Year 6, to Mean = 21.60 in Year 7. A repeated measures analysis of variance (*ANOVA*) indicated that the decrease in test scores was statistically significant ( $F=14.491(1,196)$ ,  $p<.001$ ). This finding revealed that overall, student test scores declined from the end of primary school to the end of first year of secondary school in terms of their reading as measured by the *PAT-R*. See Figure 1.

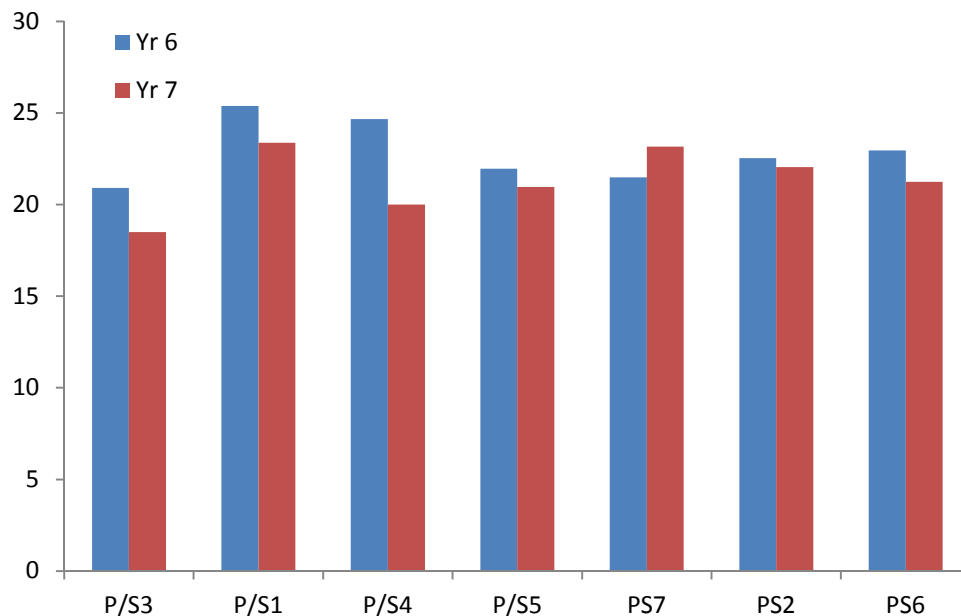


Figure 1. Mean *PAT-R* scores for individual schools for Year 6 and Year 7.

Figure 1 reveals that students in all but one school experienced a degree of decline in their *PAT-R* test scores following transition, whereby students' skills in reading declined as they transitioned from primary school into secondary school. Figure 1 reveals that the greatest decrease in *PAT-R* test scores occurred at P/S4, followed closely by P/S3, P/S1 and PS 6. Only one school, PS7, experienced improvement in *PAT-R* scores from one year to the next.

### Internal and External Transition

A repeated measures *ANOVA* revealed a significant main effect for type of school progression ( $F=4.74$ ,  $p<.05$ ) whereby students from external primary schools obtained significantly higher scores on the *PAT-R* than students from internal transitioning schools. However, as can be seen in Figure 3, students who transitioned externally experienced a greater decline in *PAT-R* scores than students who transitioned internally.

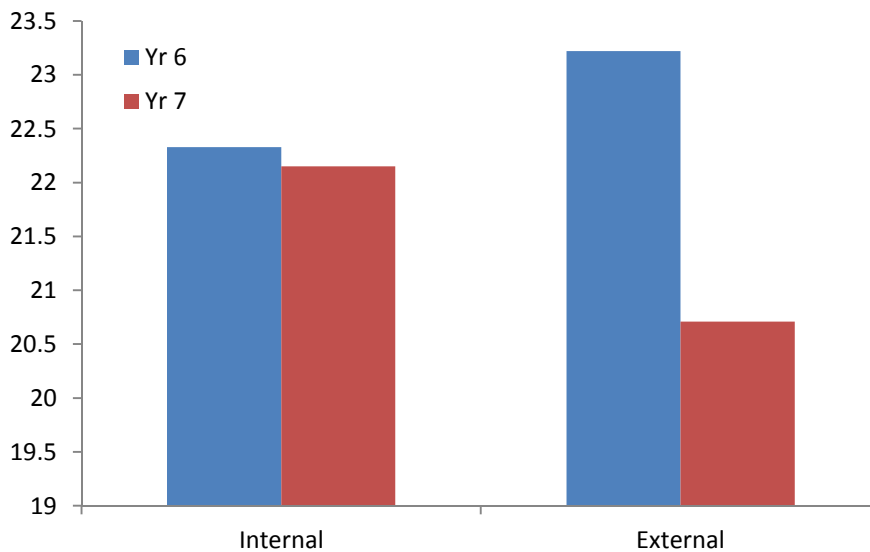


Figure 2. Average of mean *PAT-R* scores for on campus and off campus schools.

As can be seen in Figure 2, while overall *PAT-R* scores were higher in Year 6 for students from external transitioning schools ( $M=23.22$ ), these scores declined in Year 7 ( $M=20.71$ ). In comparison, while students who transitioned internally achieved lower *PAT-R* scores in Year 6 than external schools ( $M=22.32$ ), these students only experienced a slight decline in their *PAT-R* scores when re-tested in Year 7 ( $M=22.15$ ).

### ***Socio-Economic Status and PAT-R***

A repeated measures *ANOVA* identified a significant main effect for SES rating ( $F=4.17$ ,  $p<.05$ ) which revealed that students who attended the top SES schools obtained significantly higher *PAT-R* test scores after the transitioning into secondary school than students who attended the middle or low SES schools. This can be seen in Figure 3 which illustrates the *PAT-R* achievement levels of students in low, middle and high SES schools.



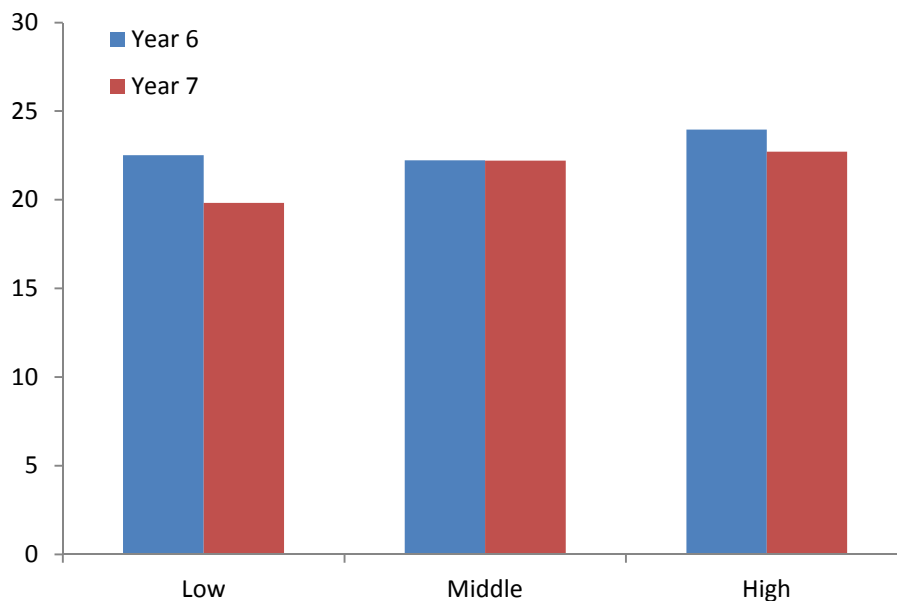


Figure 3. *PAT-R* achievement across low, middle and high SES schools.

When examining the results presented in Figure 5 of *PAT-R* test scores and SES, it was useful to begin with a comparison of student test scores on the *PAT-R* from Year 6 and Year 7. When looking solely at the Year 6 test results, it appeared that the socio-economic area the school was situated in had no impact upon the students' *PAT-R* test results. Interestingly, Figure 3 reveals that unlike the Year 6 test results, students' *PAT-R* achievement in Year 7 post transition did appear to be impacted by the socio-economic area of the school.

When interpreting the findings in regards to the impact of ICSEA and *PAT-R* achievement post transition, Figure 3 illustrates that the schools with the greatest decline in achievement from Year 6 to Year 7 were those schools situated in the lowest SES areas. These findings suggest that students in low SES schools experienced the greatest amount of impact as a result of the transition into secondary school, whereby their achievement in reading and comprehension significantly declined.

### Students' *SWST* Scores across Transition

A repeated measures *ANOVA* revealed that student achievement on the *SWST* increased during transition, such that the overall cohort of students obtained significantly higher spelling scores from Year 6 ( $M = 31.41$ ) to Year 7 ( $M = 31.76$ ), ( $F = 6.305 (1,215)$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Follow up analysis were further conducted to identify differences in *SWST* scores across each individual school, see Figure 4.

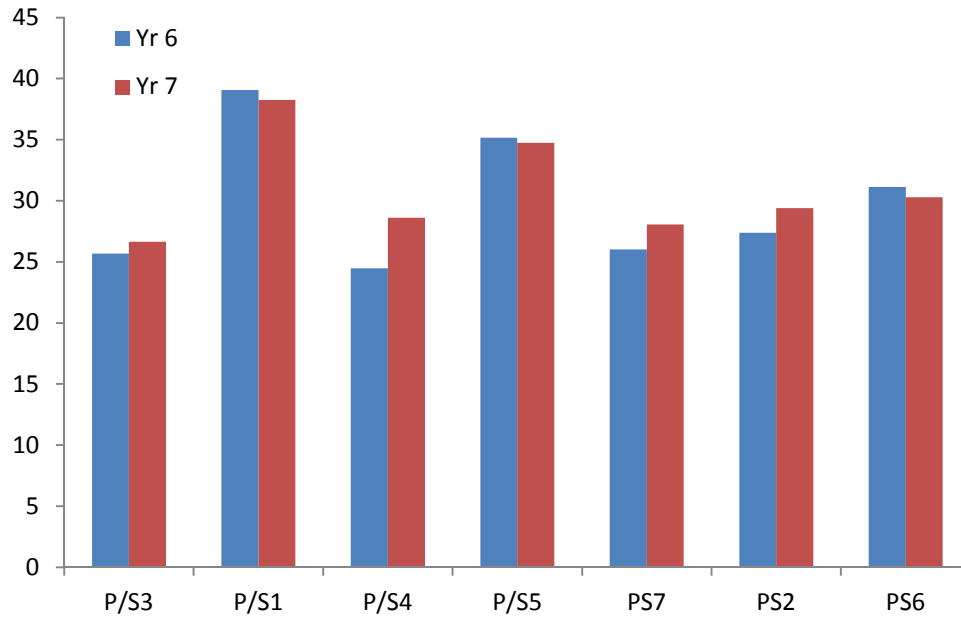


Figure 4. Mean *SWST* scores for individual schools from Year 6 and Year 7.

Figure 4 revealed that four schools (P/S3, PS7, PS2, P/S4) increased in *SWST* achievement from one year to the next. The remaining schools, PS6, P/S1 and P/S5 experienced a decline in their *SWST* achievement as a result of transition.

### Internal and External Transition

Similar trends were evident when examining whether type of transition (internal or external) had an impact upon students' achievement as determined by the *SWST*. A repeated measures *ANOVA* revealed a significant main effect for transition ( $F=9.95, p<.001$ ) whereby students who transitioned externally obtained higher *SWST* scores overall than those students who transitioned on campus. See Figure 5.

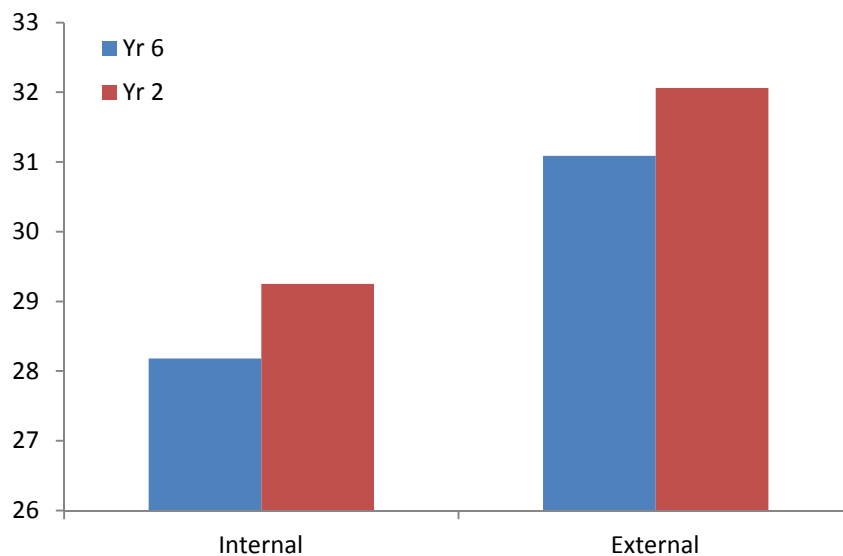


Figure 5. Average of mean *SWST* scores for internal and external schools.

The results revealed that while students from the external transitioning schools achieved higher *SWST* scores overall ( $M = 31.09$ ), the increase in *SWST* scores was greatest for students from internal transitioning schools, with an increase in test scores of 1.07 compared to 0.97 for external transitioning schools. These results suggest that although students who transitioned externally achieved higher *PAT-R* and *SWST* scores than students who transitioned internally, the transition had the greatest effect on students who moved campuses, whereby levels of achievement in reading and spelling were not maintained once students had entered secondary school.

### ***Socio-Economic Status and SWST***

A repeated measures *ANOVA* revealed that the between groups main effect for SES rating was significant ( $F=5.27$ ,  $p<.01$ ) whereby students in the top SES schools obtained significantly higher *SWST* scores during transition than students who attended the middle or low SES schools. This comparison can be seen below in Figure 6.

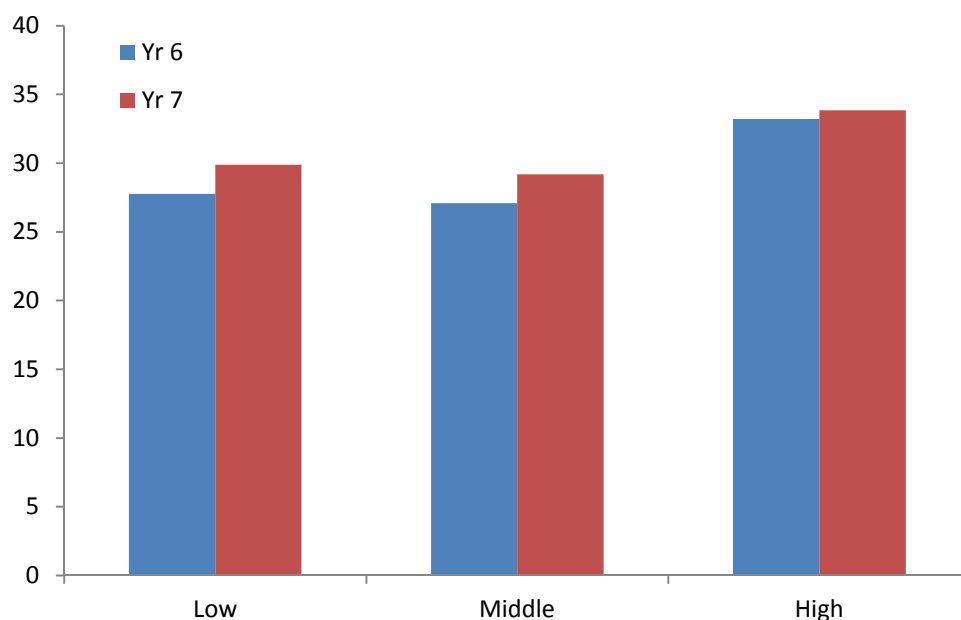


Figure 6. *SWST* achievement across low, middle and high SES schools.

As Figure 6 reveals, overall *SWST* achievement scores increased in low, middle and high SES schools. While the high SES schools achieved the highest *SWST* scores in both Year 6 ( $M=33.21$ ) and Year 7 ( $M=33.83$ ), the low SES schools experienced the greatest increase in *SWST* scores overall.

### **Discussion**

As stated above, the overall aim of this paper was to report the impact that transition had upon adolescent students' literacy achievement with a particular focus on socio-economic factors and school structure. Within the context of this research, three tentative findings were identified:

1. The transition from primary school into secondary school did have an impact upon the reading and spelling achievement of adolescent students overall, whereby students' *PAT-R* scores declined and students' *SWST* scores increased across the transition phase.
2. Students who transitioned externally experienced greater declines in their literacy achievement during the transition phase than students who transitioned internally.
3. Students from low socio-economic areas experienced the largest decline in *PAT-R* achievement across the transition phase. No relationship was evident between socio-economic status and students' performance on the *SWST*.

## Student Achievement across the Transition Phase

### *Students' PAT-R Achievement*

When looking at the current student sample overall, the analysis revealed that student achievement on the *PAT-R* test significantly declined during the transition phase. These findings indicated that students' skills in reading were effected as a result of moving to secondary school, whereby their achievement declined post transition, to such an extent that the students' skills in reading went backwards, with students achieving lower *PAT-R* scores in grade 7 than they did in grade 6. Declines in reading achievement following the transition into secondary school have also been identified by previous researchers (Mizelle, 2008; Pervin, 2005) who found that students did less well in reading after they had undergone transition with a consistent dip in reading progress (Galton et al., 1999; Alspaugh, 1998). These findings were quite alarming and researchers have found that students who struggle in the area of reading in their adolescent years are 20% more likely to drop out of school (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006) or to experience severe learning problems (Snow et al., 1991 cited in Du Toit & Bouwer, 2009).

Several researchers have attributed the decline in students' reading ability across transition to a number of factors. These have included: lack of motivation (Du Toit & Bouwer, 2009), lack of curriculum continuity between primary and secondary schools, disparities between primary and secondary teaching methods (Galton et al., 1999), socio-economic status, the structure of the school environment (Alspaugh, 1998) and developmental factors associated with the adolescent years (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Although the reading achievement of students in the early adolescent years has been explored by a number of researchers, the influence of transition upon students' reading attainment has not been studied comprehensively (Du Toit & Bouwer, 2009) and therefore further research is needed in this area.

### *Students' SWST Achievement*

Unlike students' achievement on the *PAT-R* test, the results revealed that when examining the students' spelling capabilities overall, students spelling capabilities increased during the transition phase. These findings could suggest that the transition from primary to secondary schools does not have an adverse effect on the spelling capabilities of students.

Previous research has suggested that students who experience reading difficulties also demonstrate impairments in their spelling skills with poor readers continuing to show deficits in their spelling skills throughout adulthood (Maughan et al., 2009). Findings from the present study did not support those of previous researchers. This research revealed that although the cohort overall experienced a decline in their reading achievement, many students did not experience this decline in their spelling achievement. The majority of the literature surrounding adolescents' spelling achievement focuses on adolescents with disabilities or dyslexia and therefore further research needs to be conducted in the area of spelling achievement and attainment for students without cognitive impairments.

## Impact of SES on Students' Test Scores

### *SES and Students' PAT-R Achievement*

Preliminary findings revealed that students who attended schools in high socio-economic areas achieved significantly higher *PAT-R* scores during the transition phase than students from schools situated in middle or low socio-economic areas.

These findings are consistent with previous research which attributes socio-economic status as a major contributing factor to student achievement (Dugdale & Clark, 2008; McGee et al., 2003). Tasks such as reading and writing have been highlighted by educators and researchers as areas of concern as a result of transition and it has been proposed that students who are already underachieving in reading and writing are more likely to be affected by the move from primary school into secondary school (Cox & Kennedy, 2008), whereby underachievement is most common in low SES schools.

### *SES and Students' SWST Achievement*

An examination of the overall cohort's achievement on the *SWST* revealed that, similar to the *PAT-R* results, students from schools situated in the high socio-economic areas achieved the highest *SWST* scores across the transition phase. However, it was also found that students from the low SES schools obtained the largest increase in *SWST* scores during transition. These findings could suggest that SES was not an influencing factor upon students' skills in spelling during the transition phase.

These findings are in contrast to previous research which found that students from low income backgrounds perform lower in reading and writing achievement than students from high income areas (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). As discussed above, there has been considerable agreement in the literature that students from low SES backgrounds show impairments in their reading and spelling skills as they progress through school and what is particularly concerning is that these students rarely catch up (Maughan et al., 2009). However, while this was the case for reading, this research found that students from the low SES schools achieved the largest increase in *SWST* scores across transition.

Overall, these findings could suggest that the socio-economic area in which a school is located does have an influence upon the literacy achievement of students in regards to reading but SES appeared to have little or no influence upon students' spelling achievement. These findings both support and contrast those of previous research which has focused on the relationship between SES and students' literacy achievement. Further research could be conducted in this area which focuses on the relationship between SES and students' literacy achievement, specifically in the area of spelling. Currently, there is little information exploring at risk children and their transition from primary to secondary school and therefore this area is in need of further research (Yadav, O'Reilly & Karim, 2010; West, Sweeting & Young, 2010).

## On Campus and Off Campus Transition

Findings from the present research revealed that the transition into secondary school had the greatest negative impact on the reading skills of students who transitioned externally, whereby these students experienced greater declines in their *PAT-R* achievement than students who remained on the same campus during transition (See Figure 3). These results demonstrate that the physical move from a primary campus to a secondary campus was particularly disruptive to students' levels of reading achievement. In regards to students' achievement on the *SWST*, preliminary findings revealed that students who transitioned

internally experienced a greater increase in their *SWST* achievement across transition phase than those students who transitioned externally. These findings could suggest that although spelling skills did not decline for the overall cohort, the spelling capabilities of those students who transitioned internally were more positively affected by transition than those students who moved campuses.

These findings are consistent with previous researchers who have found that students who experienced an internal transition had a more successful transition into secondary school than students who physically changed locations (Ferguson & Fraser, 1999; West & Swerdt, 2012). It has been found that students who undergo an internal transition are less likely to experience declines in their achievement (Alspaugh, 1998) or deteriorations in their learning experiences (Ferguson and Fraser, 1999).

While these findings are evident within the transition literature, the vast majority of transition research tends to focus on the transition from elementary to middle school (grade 5 to grade 6) (Burgess et al., 2008) or from middle school to secondary school (grade 8 to grade 9) (Reyes et al., 2000; Du Toit & Bouwer, 2009; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). A gap currently exists in the literature which has compared the literacy achievement of students from grade 6 to grade 7 in internal (K-10) and external schools and therefore further research is needed in this area.

## Responding to the Research

Preliminary results from this research identified a number of tentative findings in regards to the impact that transition, the move from primary school into secondary school, had upon the reading and spelling achievement of adolescent students' within the present sample as determined by the *PAT-R* and the *SWST*. Acknowledgement however needs to be made that these findings were preliminary findings based on a small scale study which was situated within a larger PhD project. While the current findings present some important insights into the impact the transition phase can have on adolescent learners, some of the results may be unique to this sample and therefore further research is required in this area.

Due to the importance literacy has in the world and its influence amongst many facets of society (Dugdale & Clark, 2008), it is vital that educators work towards improving and sustaining acceptable levels of student literacy achievement in the areas of reading and spelling. Despite the growing need for literacy skills, research suggests that "many adolescents today read no better, and perhaps marginally worse, than a generation ago" (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, pg. 3).

In order to support adolescent students and prevent them from being left behind as they make an important step in their educational career, it is vital that understandings of the best ways to support students during transition are developed, with particular emphasis on understanding why many students find reading and spelling in the adolescent years so challenging. To enable this informed understanding, an investigation into how educators can improve the transition phase for students in order to decrease the achievement drop in literacy is very important. It is hoped that after the findings from this paper have been finalised and further interrogated, contributions can be put forward as to how to prepare adolescent students for one of the most important steps in their education, the transition from primary school into secondary school.

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