

Crossing the bridge to high school: positive responses to challenge

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Introduction

School transition is recognised as one of life's major change events for children and young people (Felner et al., 1983). It is known most children negotiate a smooth and successful move to secondary school, and that students, families, and teachers are all critical contributors to the quality of transition outcome. There is considerable understanding of the institutional practices that support positive transitions of the student majority.

However, even though there are plenty of available practice examples indicating ways to achieve successful transfers to secondary school, positive transition remains an elusive ideal for some children and families. Research shows that transition can be tough for children who have faced difficulties at primary school, or who experience poor transition preparation and process, thereby increasing their vulnerability to poor engagement in learning at secondary school (Bishop et al., 2003; Cox & Kennedy, 2008; Galton et al., 2003; Nisbet & Entwistle, 1969; Wylie et al., 2006).

The research project outlined here, which is supported by the Cognition Education Research Trust, focuses on the transition of students who have faced learning challenges at primary school, and aims to identify factors perceived by them, their parents/caregivers and teachers to facilitate positive transitions.

Some of what we know

The increasing emphasis on seamless learning pathways and student engagement has ensured a prominent place for transition matters in discussion, research, practice and policy development. Some examples of the issues addressed are: achievement losses (Galton et al., 1999); adolescent socialisation, development and coping (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006); age-environment fit (Eccles et al., 1993); continuity (Galton et al., 2000) and discontinuity (Nisbet

& Entwistle, 1969); drop-out prevention (Catterall, 1998); problem behaviours (Rutter et al., 1979); and self-esteem (Wigfield & Eccles, 1991).

There has been steady interest in achievement losses observed after major transition points in children's school life. The original Observational Research and Classroom Learning Evaluation (ORACLE) Project, completed in the 1970s in Great Britain, showed a general hiatus in progress and evidence of deterioration in students' attitudes on transition to high school. The resultant concern about curriculum and pedagogical continuity prompted the British Government to respond with the introduction of a national curriculum.

Galton, Gray and Rudduck (1999) reported evidence of greater public accountability as a result of national British initiatives. Transition practices improved, especially those involving social and induction strategies. However, findings from the replication of the ORACLE study in 1995-1998 again demonstrated that students experienced interruption in their learning progress (Hargreaves & Galton, 2002). Furthermore, evidence was found of children 'turning off' in their first year at secondary school. There was widespread agreement that transition strategies must also concentrate on pedagogical, curriculum and relationship aspects.

Since then, Evangelou and colleagues (2008) have shown that children settle to secondary school if they feel supported in their change to the new facility, and experience social adjustment and curriculum continuity. Good communication between clusters of schools raises the likelihood of opportunities for sharing practice between primary and secondary schools.

Closer to home, Vinson (2006) questioned principals in New South Wales (NSW) about their transition practices, and found that priority was given to administrative measures, including data transfer and information giving. Social orientation and induction processes, with an emphasis on students' well-being, were well organised; however, although fostering home-school relationships was regarded as important by 70 percent of principals, only 31 percent had systems operating to do this. A majority of principals placed high importance on the development of primary/secondary teams to focus on curriculum, learning and pedagogical processes; however, only 3 percent to 20 percent of principals were actually

involved in active cross-sector engagement. Principals reported that they felt overwhelmed with transition requirements, being both time-poor and skill-poor.

Vinson recommended that the government provide two earmarked staff for each educational district, and ensure that each school have an appointed transition co-ordinator. He suggested (2006:18) that ‘The resultant benefits to the social and economic capital of our state and the increased social justice that would flow from the measure make this a small price to pay.’ It appears that his advice was taken seriously, for in October 2006, the NSW Department of Education and Training’s (DET) new Middle School Strategy, aiming to strengthen primary-secondary connections, initiated state-wide support for transition, and required every public school to establish a primary/secondary transition programme (DET, 2006). The strategy stated: ‘Our teachers will work together collaboratively to promote effective transition in curriculum approaches and welfare practices from primary to secondary schools’ and ‘ensure that effective primary-secondary transition programs are included in every school plan and, where required, in school targets’ (DET, 2006: 5, 11).

The lack of shared understanding of teaching and learning methods between secondary and primary teachers, and the persistent stereotypical views held by each group of ‘how they do it’ in the ‘other’ school, have been identified as having serious implications for learning continuity, especially for students identified as potentially ‘at risk’ (Galton et al., 2000). A small local initiative in New Zealand (Higgins, 2008) was able to illustrate this great gulf, with teachers’ comments indicating little contact by classroom teachers across sectors. However, when relationships formed, many innovative and successful transition strategies evolved to support teachers, families and students. As in Vinson’s study, the participating educators valued a co-ordinated, supportive response to transition, and recommended the appointment of a transition co-ordinator with district responsibilities (Higgins, 2008).

In New Zealand, little research had been reported until very recently, as highlighted in a comprehensive literature review produced by McGee and others in 2003. That same year, Bishop and colleagues (2003) published findings from their unique investigation of Year 9 and 10 Māori students’ experiences in secondary school. Although transition was not a prime focus of the research project, their published report declared transition to be one of the most important influences on Māori students’ experience at secondary school, and stated that

school structures and relationships with teachers could create barriers to successful transitions.

The impact of transition on school performance was the focus of a comprehensive chapter in the longitudinal New Zealand study, 'Competent Children, Competent Learners'. Although those students most at risk of poor performance had already demonstrated disengagement at primary school, time taken to settle into high school was highlighted as being negatively associated with attitude levels. Those students not at their school of choice were also less settled (Wylie et al., 2006). Like Cox and Kennedy's (2008) New Zealand study, the importance of positive teacher/student, home/school and peer relationships was confirmed, while curriculum, pedagogical and environmental factors were identified as important to school engagement. Both studies identified a minority of children who found transition particularly challenging, and failed to match the progress of their peers in secondary school.

Themes of risk and resilience do feature in the literature. Catterall (1998), for example, followed the progress of students whose achievement and level of confidence when finishing primary school indicated they were at risk. Progress was tracked and analysed at secondary school, according to academic and commitment resilience and drop-out rates. Family support, student involvement in extra-curricular activities, and school responsiveness were all identified as important to recovery from risk. Significantly, it was demonstrated that risk is individually experienced and changeable. The tendency to group-label, which perpetuates a problem-focused response to children's needs on a wholesale level, thus ignores the resiliency factors that many children individually exhibit.

Roderick and Camburn (1999) also tracked students to secondary school, investigating the effect on student progress of intake factors, including primary school experience, pupil readiness, and familial support structures. Their findings that students' success at secondary school depended on good attendance, work completion and examination passes are hardly surprising. However, they also showed that once children started to fail at high school, recovery was extremely difficult, and dropping out was often the inevitable outcome. With a focus on school effects and student engagement, the importance of ensuring children's learning needs were catered for on arrival at the new school became apparent. Early

transition experiences and school practices at high school appeared critical to long-term successful outcomes.

What's happening now?

In recent years, New Zealand's Ministry of Education (MOE) business plans and strategies have emphasised participation, engagement, achievement, presence and retention. With reference to transition, *Ka Hikitia – Managing for Success* states that schools are required to 'work more effectively to engage Māori students and their whānau, hapū and iwi, support their transition into secondary school...' (2008a: 22). The MOE Special Education Business Plan states that transition between education settings is key to attaining continued presence (2008b: 2). Initiatives have included 'Team Up', a programme for parents providing web- and paper-based resources for all aspects of school planning, and there has also been support of localised transition practice initiatives (see Higgins, 2009).

The commitment to school transition in Australia continues today with the NSW government assigning \$11.5 million in November 2008 to expand the support already in place for initiatives such as orientation and induction, taster classes, data transfer, and pastoral care (NSW Government, 2008). The provision of district transition co-ordination is regarded as a priority in NSW, while a centralised enrolment scheme for the state ensures that all children are aware of their secondary school placement before the end of their primary school year. In Victoria, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) recently designated transition a priority area for system improvement (DEECD, 2009a), allocating special funding to school research projects to investigate primary-secondary transition (DEECD, 2009b).

In the United Kingdom, the latest White Paper (CM 7588) from the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) celebrates the establishment of cross-sector partnerships: 'Secondary and primary schools working together on transition from Year 6 to Year 7 have made a significant difference to the learning experience of children and young people' (2009a: 45). Family-school partnerships are regarded as a critical element in transition support, with support of parents and families in transition mandated in the DCSF School Admissions Code: 'Children **must not** be disadvantaged because their parents have

difficulty accessing the school admissions process or do not engage with the process of applying for a school. [Local authorities] **must** provide an independent service that is focused on supporting the families who most need support in navigating the secondary school admissions process' (2009b: 73; bold in original). Parents have free access to a Choice Advisor who will help them navigate the change to a new school.

It may be that the government transition structures described above would have positive utility here in New Zealand. In a recent communication, a secondary school deputy principal, Frank (not his real name), raised three important points. First, he had become increasingly worried about the number of children who were simply 'turning up' at the beginning of the new school year without having been through the enrolment process. These children were typically sent home until a formal enrolment was completed and a uniform purchased; as a result, they missed important transition induction experiences. Secondly, curious to know more about a large number of students recently stood down or excluded from school, Frank looked back at the students' enrolment history. What he found was intriguing: each of the disciplined students had been a late enrolment at high school, and therefore would not have been present on the first day of school. Lastly, Frank had started to notice that when supports for children who had been identified as being potentially vulnerable in learning or other domains were in place at the beginning of the Year 9 school year, progress in both learning and behavioural domains was smoother.

Frank felt that the growing positive relationship with feeder schools, which enabled good data transfer and some curriculum continuity, was paying dividends for children transitioning to Year 9. He added that information enabled better placement and learning support to be assigned in timely fashion. This last point illustrates the value of asking what is working well for schools, so that other schools can learn from success experiences.

The research study

The present study will explore the transition from Year 8 to Year 9 of children who have learning support needs and/or are considered to be vulnerable for social, cultural or emotional reasons. The central research question is:

What home, school and personal practices do students with learning support needs, their parents/caregivers and teachers perceive to be helpful for positive transition from Year 8 to Year 9?

Context

The study has been conceived within the strength orientation of positive psychology and humanistic psychology, which Taylor described as the ‘psychology of inclusion’ (2001: 22). It is founded on the belief that only through inclusive practice involving all members of the school community will the participation of all students be increased (Ainscow, 2005). The strength approach, increasingly advocated in recent years (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), is not new to educational research. For example, Rutter and colleagues (1979) identified variables that appeared to make a positive difference to behaviour and attainment, including community heterogeneity, classroom management strategies, and leadership styles. Such findings provide educators with quality information that enables the formulation of preventative, supportive systems and policy.

Research design and methodology

The reported experiences and perceptions of students and parents/caregivers in transition, and of teachers in relation to pedagogical and systemic practices that enhance transition, will be examined using a case study design and mixed methods approach. No hypothesis will be tested in the present study; the goal is to ‘gather information to build a description of what is “going on”’ (Bouma & Ling, 2004: 90). The focus will be students who have been identified by their primary school as having learning support needs in transition, and those people who are involved in the transition process. The principal objective is to focus on participants’ personal experiences and views.

The research will be structured around an entire school district containing three ‘pyramids’ of mainstream state schools, each comprising a secondary school and contributing primary, full primary and intermediate schools. With around three to four main feeder schools per secondary school, there will be approximately twelve schools involved altogether

– a near complete set of schools within the chosen area. Four main participant groups comprise the sample for the investigation: students with identified needs transitioning from primary to secondary mainstream settings; parents or caregivers of these students; Year 8 teachers (pre-transition); and Year 9 teachers (post-transition).

Data collection is based on surveys and interviews. The study incorporates three main data collection phases. The first two phases require students and their family members to complete a questionnaire before and after the move to secondary school. Student surveys will be delivered orally. Year 8 and Year 9 teachers also complete the questionnaire in these first two phases. A third phase will involve a small sub-sample of all four participant groups, who will be individually interviewed to explore further the main question: ‘What helps?’

Research progress

At the time of writing, no specific results are able to be reported, as data analysis is still in progress. It is possible to say, however, that good relationships and good knowledge around transition appear to be emerging as foundational to positive experiences and constructive transition process. The research will express how teachers, students and family members have found these and other aspects beneficial to their transition experiences, and helpful to settling into secondary school.

Research potential

Transition to secondary school is an important step for every child. Nearly a decade ago, Mizelle and Irvin (2000) highlighted that although evidence about appropriate practice is ‘compelling’, there is still a lack of investment by many schools into this critical period. This statement is still pertinent today.

There is general agreement that well-planned transition practices enhance the learning experience of children in secondary school. It is clear that transition practices within schools benefit from government backing. There has been considerable investment by governments, through their continued support of specific primary/secondary transition practice initiatives, and through sponsorship of research.

However, the recurring pattern of incidental findings with regard to the poorer transition of children with learning or other difficulties has not been adequately addressed in research or practice. Cox and Kennedy (2008) reported that some secondary teachers found it difficult to plan, support and build relationships with children whom they experienced as low achievers. It would be interesting to know about the school factors that enable teachers to cater for children with challenging learning needs in transition.

We also know that home-school relationships are critical in transition, especially for children potentially at risk. Yet Cox and Kennedy (2008) state that the teachers who took part in their study reported little contact with parents of low achieving students. It follows that knowing which supportive factors can facilitate positive teacher-parent/caregiver relationships would have change-making potential.

Third, Cox and Kennedy (2008) report briefly on factors which, students felt, had assisted their transition, and noted that more needs to be known about what is important to all participants in the transition process. Through a strength orientation, which moves the focus from children as the 'problem', there is considerable opportunity to enhance our understanding of transition, particularly of more vulnerable young people.

Fourth, the Cox and Kennedy study measured adjustment (success) in terms of school achievement and attitude. No criticism of that methodology is offered here, but it is interesting that for some children in the 'low achiever' band, progress assessments by their parents did not match their teacher's assessments. Do some parents have a different view of what constitutes successful transition?

The specific documentation of these processes and practices will extend the wider knowledge of transition, provide opportunities for school policy and procedure development, inform future teacher and school practice, and inform work within the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, this information can immediately inform further action learning opportunities within schools.

Opportunities

It is suggested here that there exists in New Zealand the potential to improve our transition practices in the areas of families' transition experience, including access to good information and assistance with school choice and enrolment processes, pedagogical and curriculum continuity, inter-school relationships, common school understandings about transition practice and process, and the role of the Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour in being a critical link. Moreover, transition outcomes could be enhanced through support of centralised transition co-ordination in school communities and districts. The comprehensive extension of transition resources overseas is based upon evidence that transition services enhance student progress and achievement in secondary school.

Knowing what helps children with learning support needs in transition, and what works for their teachers and family members, will help all students and provide an opportunity to strengthen capability around retention, engagement, and presence in secondary schools.

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