

Explaining the Reporting Process for the Transition Study and Suggestions for Using the Report

This chapter describes the scope and structure of the report, and explains how the particular ‘style’ of this research report came about, and why the student focused on in Part III was selected.

To help readers get the best out of the information provided and so that they will not, it is hoped, be too daunted by the size of the volume, some suggestions for using the report have also been provided.

The Nature, Purpose and Scope of the Report

This report is part of a series. Each of the three ‘stand-alone’¹ reports in the series focuses on different aspects of the data collected for a semi-longitudinal Ministry of Education study that followed a group of students as they made the transition from primary to secondary schooling.²

In order to help inform decision-making and professional practice regarding the Year 8 to Year 9 transition in particular, the report series has set out to portray students’ experiences as they are about to complete their primary schooling (Year 8), as they adjust to their first year at secondary school (Year 9), and then as they prepare for and settle into Year 10. It is also to illustrate how students develop or change during this period of their schooling, especially with regard to their learning and engagement at school.

While the present report has as its basis a study of ‘Emily’, it makes regular reference to data for the 100 or so other students who took part in the study. In addition, as a more in-depth complement to ‘Emily’s story’, extracts about a student we are calling ‘Luke’³ are inserted from time to time.

The report contains information about the factors that can facilitate or hinder student learning and achievement. Amongst other things, it discusses the nature and extent of student friendship networks; student attitudes towards subjects being studied; behaviour in class; and engagement with the wider life of the school. As well, there is discussion of: student views of, and relationships with, teachers; home interests and activities; nature and extent

of family support and involvement; important life events; future goals; and salient other individual student characteristics.

As well as presenting data on students’ experiences from their own perspective, information provided by parents and teachers is included where appropriate, to indicate how, where and why the views and perspectives of students, parents, and teachers may differ.

Development of the Report

We were keen from the outset of the study to ensure a strong emphasis on ‘student voices’, both in the data we collected and in the reporting process. In our early planning for the study it was envisaged that our final report would, as is customary, primarily focus on presenting *group* data. However, as the study incorporates four data collection phases, each producing a complex layer of information about participating students, it became increasingly apparent that presenting this wealth of information in an accessible way and as concisely as possible, without losing the richness of what the students and their parents and teachers were telling us, was going to present a considerable challenge.

As a step towards dealing with this challenge, we did a test run of how well all the information we had gathered on or about students ‘hung together’, by collating everything we had on just one of the participating students. We began by sorting the data according to the questions asked at various stages of the study so that we could see, for example, how responses to the same question may have changed over time.

We then sorted different sets of data into sections, beginning with background details about the student, moving on to (amongst other things) the student’s views and experiences of school and learning, and ending with a compilation of the data relating to

¹ Although each report is self-contained, some cross-referencing occurs, to show where further information on a particular topic may be obtained in one of the other reports, details of which can be found on page 6.

² More information about the study is provided in Part II of this report (p.9 following).

³ The names ‘Luke’ and ‘Emily’ are pseudonyms.

achievement. Where relevant, information from parents and teachers was added in, so that we could then readily see what the student's parents or teachers had said to an equivalent, or parallel, question.

As this process developed it occurred to us that what was emerging was both an interesting, real-life account of a student's experiences and views about the primary to secondary transition and about school generally, and a very good basis from which to think about and analyse what it was like, within the context of the study, for *all* of the other participating students.

We therefore conceived the idea that rather than a focus on reporting *group* data we would instead produce a document that retained an in-depth focus on 'one student', while at the same time bringing in portions of group data to show how overall response trends were the same or different from those of the focus student.

This concept fits with the thinking and practice of other researchers. For example, Robert K. Yin, in his publication on research methods⁴, discusses a situation where '*the purpose of a case study may be to portray an "ideal type"*' [p.143]. While we do not wish or intend to present our focus student as an 'ideal case', there is a parallel between what Yin refers to and the present situation: that is, our desire and intent to present a study of a student whose *story*, rather than *individual identity*, sparks thinking and debate about what it is like for students in general, shortly before, during, and at two points after the primary to secondary schooling transition.

We believe that the approach we have taken in the present report is able to highlight many of the important themes from the study in a quite accessible way, without compromising breadth or depth or distorting key messages from the overall data.

Selecting the Case Study Student

The student we call 'Emily' was chosen to be our case study student because she had an easy ability — most of the time — to put into words what she wanted to say, enjoyed taking part in the study, and seemed to be a very good representative of the broad, 'middle group' of students in our study.

That is, she was a student who mixed with a wide range of other students, including those who, while they often had views and experiences in common with Emily, did not always find it very easy to put their thoughts into words, especially in an interview situation, making 'Emily' a good 'spokesperson' on their behalf.

Also, while Emily's experiences and views of the transition and of school generally were mostly very positive, as they were for many other participants, she had ups and downs which serve as important insights into some of the difficulties experienced by other students, and provide indicators of where schools, policymakers, and others may need to focus the 'where to from here' thinking and practice, in terms of the primary to secondary transition and in relation to such matters as ongoing student engagement.

Student Anonymity

'Emily' is not our focus student's real name, nor is it the name of any other student in the study. As well as the name change, we have altered certain identifying details about 'Emily' in the interests of preserving anonymity, as promised from the outset of the study. For the same reason, a number of verbatim quotes attributed to Emily came from other student participants who had made the same point, expressed the same ideas, or talked about a very similar experience, albeit in slightly different words. Therefore, the story as presented is to some extent that of a 'composite student'.

However, as we felt it essential to present a 'real story', firmly based on the information we collected through our research, in all other ways 'Emily's story' is authentic, accurately reflecting, for instance, how her stated views about different subjects changed over time, and how she viewed her relationships with teachers and others at school.

We are confident that the story as given will not enable the reader to link it to a definite individual. We have 'disguised' the story for two reasons. As stated above, the first of these reasons was to honour our undertaking that individual participants would remain anonymous. The second reason relates to Yin's discussion about the use of case studies to portray an 'ideal type' (see earlier in

⁴ Yin, Robert K. (1994): *Case Study Research: Design and Methods (Second Edition)*, Applied Social Research Methods Series, Volume 5, SAGE Publications, Inc, Thousand Oaks, California.

this section): he maintains that this is a situation where it is necessary to preserve anonymity of the individual in order to ensure that that person's story facilitates insights regarding the thinking, feelings, and experiences of a wider group over a specified period, rather than simply conveying details about the particular individual.

Linking to the Other Reports in the Transition Study Series

As indicated earlier, the present report is one in a series of three. An outline of the content of the other two reports is given below.

The Other Reports

'Students' Achievement as they Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling'

An important emphasis of the study came from the research literature that suggests that the primary to secondary schooling transition can have a significant impact on student achievement. To check whether this finding would apply to our sample, students completed asTTle (Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning) tests in reading, writing and mathematics at the four phases of the transition study. The 'achievement report' focuses on these asTTle data, together with related achievement-based information from the student interviews and from questionnaires about participating students completed by teachers and parents.

The report (now available) firstly presents overall asTTle results, along with a discussion of trends or patterns in achievement for all participating students. There is also a brief comparison of our students' asTTle results with asTTle data from a national sample of students within the same year levels.

Achievement trends for individual students, and for various groupings of students (eg, students achieving in the highest and lowest quartiles), in the study are then discussed. Where there is evidence of marked positive or negative changes in patterns of achievement in one or more of the areas of reading, writing and mathematics following the transition, this is discussed in light of particular student

characteristics or other factors which could help account for the change, including differing student experiences of and reactions to the Year 8 to Year 9 transition.

Another important discussion topic in this report is the way in which students' attitudes to subjects and learning in general change over the course of the study.

Brief profiles of a small number of individual students are used to illustrate key points or themes in the achievement, and attitudes to subjects, data.

'Easing the Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling: A Resource Document'

The final report in the series (which will be available later in 2008) comprises a resource document for schools and others. It contains 'practical suggestions' arising from the study findings (often building on ideas and information touched on in the other two reports about the study), taking into account contributions from participating principals and teachers, most of whom had suggestions to make about improving the Year 8 to Year 9 transition for students, and from parents and students. It also refers to findings from the literature review on transitions that was commissioned for our study, plus other relevant information. Some of the topics covered have a more specific focus on the Year 8–9 transition, while others have perhaps wider educational implications than the transition per se.

The report has a particular emphasis on students most likely to experience difficulties in their transition to secondary schooling, including insights from teachers, parents and others on the characteristics of students they think are most and least likely to make a successful transition.

The report contains a number of short case studies of students to show how the experiences of individual students in the 'same situation' can contrast widely: for example, when a student has particularly enjoyed the step to secondary school and when a student has not.

Using this Report

As intimated earlier, the purpose of ‘Emily’s story’ is to provide a sort of reference point or benchmark against which to compare and contrast the data relating to all of the other students who participated in the study. Her story also provides insights about important considerations when looking at ways of maximising all students’ potential at school and in life as a whole. As well, it demonstrates how important it is to know as much as possible about any given student in order to understand how they may be affected by and cope with important milestones in their education, such as the transition from primary to secondary schooling.

Pull-out statements

Many of the key ideas or findings about Emily are highlighted throughout Part III of the report by the inclusion of ‘pull-out statements’, as shown. These serve both as a summary about Emily and as a readily accessible framework or base from which to consider students’ experiences more generally: for example, when thinking about another student, or a group of students, the reader might like to consider how similar to, or different from, Emily’s these students’ experiences, views or behaviours are, and what the implications of this might be.

‘All Students’ boxes

As you proceed through the report, you will notice boxes headed ‘*All Students*’. These boxes have been designed so that they are easily identifiable from the main text, and cause minimal interruptions to the flow of Emily’s story. The information on all students has been included to enable the reader to see more clearly on what bases the key themes and ideas presented in Part IV (the ‘Discussion’ section) were derived.

Each ‘*All Students*’ box contains portions of the data on the overall group of students who took part in the study. While the various boxes are placed as close as possible to the discussion in the main text about equivalent data for Emily, they are quite self-contained: that is, as reader, you can choose to read these boxes in conjunction with the information about Emily, read some or all of them as stand-alone text, or not read them at all!

Similarly, the small number of boxes about ‘Luke’ can be read for comparison purposes or regarded as an optional extra.

Key points are highlighted throughout the report in ‘pull-out’ statements like this.

Report Structure

As described in the ‘Report Outline’, the remainder of this report is structured as follows.

Part II includes a short account of the primary to secondary schooling transition study. Also included is a summary of Emily’s story, to allow the reader quick, initial access to important themes emerging from the study.

The in-depth version of ‘Emily’s Story’ is then presented in Part III of the report. As well, extracts from Luke’s story, and the group data referred to above, are given in separate boxes.

The first chapter in Part III provides some background information about Emily and her family. The following ten chapters focus on different aspects of Emily’s story, and each concludes with a short summary of the main points contained within it.

Part IV discusses key findings and themes that have emerged from the study, both in relation to Emily and to the group of students overall. Much of the discussion is organised under research questions that were established for the study.