

Overview of the Transition Study and Details about Participating Students

Background and Purpose of the Research

The international research literature⁵ suggests that the transition from primary to secondary schooling can be a stressful time for students and impact in important ways on students' achievement and well-being. It also shows that while many schools now have positive initiatives in place to ease the transition for students, there is still a lot to learn about the complexities of this transition point. This is especially so in the New Zealand context.

For this reason, the Research Division of the Ministry of Education undertook a semi-longitudinal, exploratory study that involved following a diverse group of students from their last term of primary schooling, when they were in Year 8, through Year 9, and on into their second year at secondary school. Eight primary and intermediate schools and two secondary schools in Auckland and Wellington agreed to participate in the study.

The overall aim of the research was to...

...identify the variables that seem to facilitate or hinder a smooth transition for students between the two school sectors in terms of their:

- *overall learning and achievement;*
- *social development or adjustment; and*
- *attitudes towards school, learning and achieving well.*

A Review of the Transition Research Literature

As part of the scoping for this study, an extensive review of the transition research literature was commissioned by the Ministry of Education and carried out by a team from the University of Waikato. The review, by Clive McGee, Richard Ward, Joan Gibbons, and Ann Harlow, was completed in 2003 and is entitled *Transition to Secondary School: A Literature Review*. It can be downloaded from the Education Counts website at:

www.educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/research/transitions_primary_secondary.html

In brief, the report contains a review of recent research literature concerning students' transition from primary to secondary schooling, with a focus on the New Zealand context. The report identifies both New Zealand and international literature and in particular discusses findings relating to the impact of transition upon student achievement and adjustment to secondary school.

⁵ See the 'box insert' on this page for details about the literature review that was commissioned prior to the commencement of our primary to secondary schooling (Year 8–9) transition study.

Brief Outline of the Study

The study incorporated four data collection phases over an 18 month period. The first of these was shortly before the then Year 8 students moved on to secondary school (Term 4, 2003), the second and third when these same students were in Year 9 (late Term 1 and early Term 4, 2004) and the last when the students were in Year 10 (April 2005).

The rationale for these four phases was that we wanted to establish how students felt about the idea of secondary school as they were approaching the transition point (Phase 1), and how they felt a few weeks after having made the transition (Phase 2), as compared to after almost a year at secondary school (Phase 3). The decision to follow the students as they made a second transition, this time into Year 10 (Phase 4), was to enable us to look at whether any 'transition effects' in evidence were the same or different from those a year earlier. We also wanted to see how the students were getting on at secondary school generally, now that they were into their second year there.

Students from across a broad spectrum took part in the study. But in accordance with the Government's focus on maximising educational opportunities for all students, our study was to have a particular emphasis on Māori and Pasifika students. For this reason, we aimed to include at least proportionally representative numbers (in terms of national population statistics) of each of these groups of students⁶, and so the make-up of their student roll became an important criterion in school selection.

Written consent for their child to participate in the study was obtained from parents/caregivers of all participating students.⁷ Once the schools that took part in the study had been decided, the chief criterion for final selection of students was that they were intending to go on from their primary or intermediate school to one of the two participating secondary schools.

The research literature identifies significant gaps in relation to *student* perspectives on education.

Because of this, the study was designed to obtain quite in-depth information directly from each student — for example, their views about school, subject areas, their own learning and achievement, other pursuits both within and outside school, and their views and experiences of transition, particularly the Year 8–Year 9 transition.

In addition to being interviewed at each phase of the study, the students were assessed in reading, writing and mathematics by means of asTTle (Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning), so that patterns of achievement before and at three points after transition could be analysed. The students' achievement was an important focus of the study, in light of the (mainly) international research literature which suggests that achievement seems to 'dip' following students' transition from primary to secondary schooling, but with little clear evidence of whether any dip is a short-term change or is sustained over a longer period.

Student feedback has been supplemented by information about the students from parents and teachers (mainly via questionnaires). The opportunity to compare and contrast students' viewpoints with those of 'significant others' is important. For example, one key finding from the transition research literature is that teachers and students often have different perceptions of where problems lie.

Principals of all participating schools, a number of Year 8 and Year 9 teachers, Year 9 and Year 10 deans, and secondary school counsellors were also interviewed for their views on aspects of the Year 8 to Year 9 transition.⁸

More detail about the study, including methodology and data collection, are given in our other report *Students' Achievement as they Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling* (2008), and also on our *Education Counts* website, the address for which is given on the next page.

⁶ In the event, our achieved sample comprised a higher than expected proportion of Pasifika students and a slightly lower than expected proportion of Māori students. According to the Ministry of Education report, *Education Statistics of New Zealand for 2006*, Pasifika students made up 9.1 percent of the school student population, and Māori students 21.6 percent. The relative proportions of these groups of students in the present study were around 27 percent and 17 percent respectively. (However, for an additional perspective on the proportion of students in the study who identified as Māori, see footnote 10.)

⁷ Students (and others) were able to withdraw from the study at any stage if they chose. We also explained the purpose of the study to the students, as well as their parents, schools, and teachers, including outlining what the information they gave us would be used for — that is, to inform policy and practice — and by whom. Some interim feedback to students was provided some weeks after completing the fieldwork for Phase 4.

⁸ During the interviews with principals, teachers and school counsellors, we did not focus on particular students, but asked more broad-ranging questions about the Year 8 to Year 9 transition. For example, we asked respondents for their views on the issues, if any, they felt were associated with this particular transition point. (These views are reported in our third report on the study — see p.6.)

Content of Interviews and Questionnaires

The questions we asked each group of participants — students, parents, teachers, principals, and others — at each stage of the study were developed largely on the basis of reading the relevant research literature.

We also gratefully acknowledge direct and indirect use of a range of items from the *Competent Learners at 14* study, conducted by Cathy Wylie and team from the New Zealand Council for Educational Research under contract to the Ministry. As students in that phase of the longitudinal *Competent Learners*, *Competent Children* study had recently undergone the transition from primary to secondary schooling, many of the questions they were asked were directly relevant to the present study. For more information about this study go to:

<http://educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/publications/homepages/competentchildren/index.html>

As will be seen when reading Emily's story, most of the questions we asked students are incorporated into the text, along with a brief rationale for why we asked the particular question or set of questions. Questions that we asked parents and teachers, relevant to this particular report, are also included. The complete set of questions used for the study can be seen on our website at:

www.educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/research/transitions_primary_secondary.html

Achievement Testing

asTTle (Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning) was used to assess students' achievement throughout the transition project. asTTle is an educational

software package, developed by the University of Auckland for the Ministry of Education, that enables teachers to create and analyse literacy and numeracy tests for their students.

We chose asTTle because it allowed us to measure changes in the students' achievement over the four phases of the project, and represented a consistent assessment tool for all participating students no matter which schools they attended before and after transition.

The tool has been developed in such a way that students' scores can be compared on a common scale irrespective of the particular items students actually answer and regardless of when the tests are undertaken.

asTTle also enabled us to design tests that were tailored to the specific needs of the students in the study and which were fairly easy to administer and score. In addition, by using asTTle we were able to compare the results from our students with national asTTle data.⁹

Students in the Study

The following is a brief description of some background characteristics of participating students.

Ethnicity

At the beginning of the study, 112 students took part. Of these students, around¹⁰ 17 percent identified as Māori, 27 percent as Pasifika, (primarily Samoan, Tongan, Cooks Islands Māori, and Tokelauan, as well as 'other Pasifika'), 38 percent as Pakeha/European, and 18 percent as an 'other' ethnic grouping (with these students variously identifying as Indian, Chinese, Sri Lankan, Thai, Laotian, Zambian, Iranian, and South African).

⁹ Discussion of the asTTle data, together with other achievement-related data, is contained in our report *Students' Achievement as they Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling* (2008), as are further details about asTTle itself.

¹⁰ The figures given are not precise for two reasons: firstly, over the course of the study student numbers varied (however the effect of this on overall proportions for the various ethnic groupings at each phase of the study was only slight). Secondly, students provided ethnicity data in two different ways. The first of these was by means of their responses to a background question in their asTTle tests about ethnicity — with the broad response options of 'NZ European/Pakeha', 'NZ Māori', 'Pacific Nation', 'Other'. The second way was during their first interview for the study, where they were asked 'Which of these people groups do you belong to?', with the following options given: 'New Zealand Māori', 'Pakeha/New Zealander', 'Samoan', 'Tongan', 'Cook Islands Māori', 'Chinese', 'Indian', and 'Other' (specify). It is interesting to note that when they were given a greater choice of response categories, and scope to select more than one, as in the interview situation, more students identified as Māori (as well as Pakeha, or Samoan, or Cooks Islands Māori, for example). This resulted in a figure of 28 percent of our students identifying as Māori in their interviews, as opposed to the 17 percent on the basis of the asTTle data (refer footnote 6 for more on this). In order to be consistent between the present report and the 'achievement report' arising from the study, we have opted to report ethnicity figures collected during asTTle test sessions, but supplementing them with some of the detail from the interview data, about specific Pasifika identities, for example.

The Students' Schools

The students were enrolled in eight primary and intermediate schools, three in Wellington, and five in Auckland. These schools ranged from decile 1¹¹ (N=1) to decile 9 (N=2). Two schools in each case were decile 2, 3 or 4, and the remaining school was decile 7. The two participating secondary schools, to which all students in the study moved at the completion of their primary education, were decile 2 and decile 3 respectively. Both secondary schools were co-educational.

Age

Students were either 12 or 13 years of age when the study began.

Gender

Despite some change in numbers of participating students over the course of the study, generally our sample was made up of around 55 percent boys and 45 percent girls.

Country of Birth

Eighty-three percent of students were born in New Zealand; remaining students were most often born in Fiji, India, or Samoa. Four of these latter students had lived in New Zealand for less than a year, but most had been in New Zealand for between two and five years. And two had lived in New Zealand most of their lives: 10 and 11 years respectively.

However, while most students were New Zealand-born, about one-third reported that both of their parents had been born overseas, most often stating parents' birth countries as a Pacific Island nation — Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Cook Islands, Tokelau — or within Asia — India, Sri Lanka, Laos, Thailand, Malaysia. Other countries mentioned were Australia, Scotland, England, Canada, The Netherlands, South Africa, Zambia and Latvia.

Language Spoken at Home

Eighty-seven percent of students spoke English at home either exclusively or almost so. Where other languages were spoken, these were usually stated to be Māori, Samoan, Tongan, Tokelauan, or an Asian

language (Hindi, Mandarin, Sri Lankan, Laotian). One further student advised speaking Bemba (an African language).

Experience of Previous Transitions Involving a Change of School

Prior to their move to secondary school, 36 percent of students had attended the same school throughout their primary sector schooling. While most of the remaining students had attended two or three primary/intermediate schools, a small number had attended more than that, including one student who stated having attended seven schools.

Family Configurations

Sixty-nine percent of the 112 students who took part in Phase 1 of the study lived with both their mother and father. Where only one birth parent lived in the same household as the student for the majority of the time, almost always this was the mother. And in the case of 10 students, a step-father was also present.

Of the 31 percent of students who lived in a one-parent household, just over half said they quite regularly spent time at their other birth parent's — usually father's — house (generally at weekends or during holidays), while the remaining students said they seldom or never did.

Other members of students' families who lived in the same household included one or both grandparents (10% of students), older (36%) and/or younger (31%) brothers, and older (31%) and/or younger (38%) sisters. And a small number of students mentioned 'other' family members, such as a step-brother or sister, or an aunt, uncle or cousin. Most students had between one and four siblings.

Number in Household

Including themselves in the total, the largest proportion of students lived in households of either four (30%) or five (27%) people. A further 27 percent lived in six–eight member households, 11 percent in three-person households, and four percent in households of between nine and twelve people.

¹¹ A school's decile indicates the extent to which the school draws its students from particular socio-economic communities. Deciles are used to provide funding to state and state integrated schools to enable them to overcome the barriers to learning faced by students from low socio-economic communities. The lower the school's decile, the more funding it receives.

Occupations/Qualifications of Parents

A wide range of occupations and education qualifications were evident amongst participating students' parents/caregivers, from unskilled manual occupations to professional occupations (eg, teacher, nurse, accountant), and from no formal school qualifications to an undergraduate university degree or higher. However, the majority of parents were reported to be in occupations such as trades, general office positions, factory work, shop work, and caregiving of children or the elderly, rather than more professional occupations.

Attrition Rates

By the end of the study, 92 students remained. Of the original 112, eight were lost after Phase 1, a further four after Phase 2, and eight after Phase 3.

We have no reason to think that any of these 'lost' students were 'transient students' and therefore different in kind from the students who remained in the study. The reasons they could no longer be part of the study included (for Phase 2) students who had not, after all, enrolled in one of the two secondary schools in the study, even though in Phase 1 it had been their, and their parents', stated intention to do so. The other major reason was that the students' families shifted to a different part of the country for new work opportunities. And there were also a small number of students (Phase 4) who moved to a different secondary school (usually because they had always wanted to attend the other school but had been unsuccessful in gaining a place for the beginning of Year 9).

Summary of 'Emily's Story'

This section contains a brief profile of Emily, our featured student. It discusses Emily's progress over the course of the study, from the end of her final year of primary schooling to three 'post-transition' points, the first and second of these near the beginning and end of her first year at secondary school and the third at the close of Term 1, 2005 when she was in Year 10. The profile concludes by offering some summary comments on what can be drawn from the information obtained from and about this student.

Emily identified as New Zealand Māori/Pakeha and was 13 years of age when the study began in November 2003. She was from a stable, caring family background, where clear boundaries were set for behaviour. Her primary schooling was completed at a decile 3, Year 1–8 state primary school. She then moved on to a decile 2/3¹², Year 9–15 co-educational state secondary school, where she intended to remain until she had completed her secondary schooling. She said of herself that she was a social girl with a good circle of friends at each phase of the study, and that she was keen on both sports and performing arts. While she was mostly lukewarm about reading for her own enjoyment and interest (although there was indication of a more positive view by Year 10), she did enjoy writing 'true' and also creative stories in her own time. She usually enjoyed school a great deal, particularly for the social interactions, stating that she did not like to stay away, even when unwell. Emily described herself as being generally confident, as feeling 'good' or 'happy' most days and as being in good physical health (confirmed by parents and teachers). Her social activities, and her interest in sports and the performing arts probably accounted for her relatively low levels of TV viewing and use of the computer for non-educational reasons.

Emily was reported by her teachers before and after transition to be a cooperative, motivated, generally well-behaved student who liked to learn and be challenged in her learning. Emily described herself in very similar terms and added that she felt she had a positive attitude and the self-discipline to complete homework and other learning tasks outside of class. Her primary 'failing', in her own eyes, was that she found it very difficult, if not impossible, to stop talking, even when in class! Emily wanted to obtain as much education as she could, and had aspirations beyond school, strongly linked to her interest in creative pursuits (although by Year 10 she was also considering the idea of becoming a psychologist), and a desire to travel.

¹² School decile has not been more precisely defined here (ie, as either decile 2 or 3) in the interests of school and student anonymity.

While still in Year 8, Emily expressed fears about going on to secondary school — mainly because she didn't know what to expect but also because she was afraid she would encounter antagonistic students. In the main her fears were not realised. She said she settled into her new school in a number of weeks in terms of — for example — getting used to routines, finding her way around the school, having several rather than the one or two teachers she had been used to at primary school, learning new subject material, and meeting new people. She also found older students, especially peer supporters, in the main friendly and supportive. But she did admit at the end of her first year at secondary school that although she enjoyed school it had nevertheless been “a *topsy-turvy year*” in which she had needed time to feel her way. This was why, in contrast to when she was in Year 8, she did not want to accept special responsibilities at school in Year 9 and decided to opt out of some of the extra-curricular activities she had initially signed up for.

She had also experienced some worries about an older student who had been verbally aggressive towards her and made physical threats, with the result that she felt the need to seek teacher assistance.

After a term in Year 10, however, Emily was now saying that she was feeling much more confident about everything and as a result had not hesitated to join up for a considerable range of extra-curricular activities offered by the school. A different problem was that her involvement in the extra-curricular activities meant that she felt she was getting behind in class-work in some of her subjects (eg, because of missing classes during periods of intensive rehearsals). While this had been worrying her, Emily did add that she was beginning to successfully get to grips with the problem and catch up with her studies.

Emily talked about the subjects she liked best or liked least at different phases of the study: her views changed over time according to such variables as her relationship with different teachers, specific topics being studied within subject areas, and the way a subject was being taught — for instance, she disliked too much writing in class or when classmates took turns to read portions of the prescribed novel out loud in class.

When asked to nominate subjects she felt she was ‘best at or good at’ Emily was happy to specify writing, science, drama, and singing at the end of Year 8. But at the beginning and end of her first year at secondary school, although she still mentioned performing arts as a strength, she was reluctant to specify other subjects, saying she didn't like to talk about herself in terms of being ‘good’ at something. However, once in Year 10, Emily was obviously feeling much more confident, now stating that she was good or best at performing arts “*because I've got the confidence*”, ‘business studies’ because “*I like to get a point across [and] believe I would be very persuasive*” and social studies “*because I like to learn about different cultures and history*”.

With regard to teachers — both at primary and secondary school — Emily had the following to say, that is: she particularly valued it when teachers showed a sense of humour, made learning fun, ‘related well to young people’, including understanding ‘teenagers’ language’, and made it clear that they liked and enjoyed working with their students. In contrast, she most disliked it when she felt teachers didn't listen to a student's point of view, constantly told students off, and were not able to make subjects seem interesting, important, relevant or fun.

When asked to describe, at each phase of the study, what learning was like for her in class, on the whole Emily was very positive, both before and after moving to secondary school. The main difference was that while she found learning in her classes at secondary school mostly interesting, learning was generally not quite as much ‘fun’ as it had been at primary school. She also considered the class environment to be not quite as flexible, in terms of being able to collaborate and discuss work in groups with other students and move about as they worked.

Emily's Year 8 teacher said about Emily that she was a very social girl, with a wide circle of friends. She further described Emily as being of above average ability, rated her achievement level as 'very good/excellent', considered her to be making good academic progress, both compared to her classmates and against her own previous achievement, and noted that she engaged well in extra-curricular activities. This teacher expected Emily 'to do well in life'.

Teachers post transition (early Year 9 and subsequently) talked about Emily in very similar ways, albeit perhaps at a slightly less positive level — for example, while the Year 8 teacher rated Emily's achievement as 'very good/excellent' (the highest rating on a five-point scale), her Year 9 teacher gave a rating of 'average, but very good in some aspects' (the second highest rating on the scale). These ratings may reflect the varying opportunities and time that different teachers had to get to know 'the whole' student.

Feedback about Emily provided by her parents showed a high level of agreement with what her teachers had to say about her: for example, both parents and teachers judged Emily to be of 'above average ability', and felt that she was making very good progress at school. Emily and her parents also concurred on many aspects focused on in the study, such as her behaviour in class, how she related to her teachers, and the extent to which she enjoyed school and why.

Various data from the study indicated a high level of parental interest in and support of Emily's education and academic progress and in her life generally. The interest and support was mainly in the form of listening, talking, discussing, and helping Emily to arrive at her own decisions, talking with her teachers, and coming along to events in which Emily was participating. It did not involve helping Emily with homework, apart from checking she had done it, and taking an interest in a completed project or assignment. This was because, repeating what Emily herself said, her parents realised that Emily seldom required assistance with her homework.

What can be Drawn from the Information about this Student?

In many ways, Emily made a smooth transition from primary to secondary schooling. By this we mean that despite being separated from most of her primary school friends in her various classes, she quite quickly established new friendships. She also found a lot of what she was learning at school to be interesting and appropriately challenging, she took up opportunities to engage in the wider life of the school, and was able to earn positive feedback from her teachers both in terms of her behaviour and her progress at school.

Also, her aSTtle reading scores (along with more positive attitudes to reading) showed a good level of progress by Phase 3, compared with her Phase 1 and Phase 2 scores, with further improvement in Phase 4.

It is likely that important contributing factors to the finding that Emily made a relatively smooth transition to secondary schooling and that, overall, she had positive attitudes towards school were that: Emily had strong family support; was friendly and social; had an optimistic outlook; good levels of self-confidence; a range of interests in sports and performing arts, which helped her fit well into the wider life of the school; the ability to relate well to most teachers and other adults; a sound level of academic achievement; the ability to enjoy school and life generally; enjoyment of learning and the motivation to learn; good work habits (eg, conscientious about completing homework, and effective organisational skills when it came to balancing assignment timelines); and future goals.

But there were also indications that Emily did not find her first year of secondary school as straightforward as she had thought it would be soon after her arrival. For example, there was her reference near the end of Year 9 to it having been a ‘topsy turvy year’, and her realisation earlier in the year that, although she had been accustomed to a high level of extra-curricular involvement at primary school, she now needed to reduce extra-curricular activities until she felt she was properly adjusted to secondary school. She mentioned too that in the first few months at secondary school it was important to her to make regular visits back to her primary school, because she missed her former teachers and many of the younger students that she had worked with and mentored in various ways.

In addition, although Emily mentioned positive attitudes to school throughout the study — because of the social opportunities and extra-curricular activities, because she enjoyed learning and new challenges, and because she was motivated to do well for her future — her asTTle results provided evidence of a drop in achievement in mathematics post-transition (a common finding for students in the study) and also a decline in positive attitudes towards some subjects, especially towards writing and science, both of which Emily had particularly enjoyed in Year 8.

Emily’s asTTle mathematics scores were somewhat perplexing in that they did not resume the high level that she achieved in Phase 1, despite her feedback that she was enjoying maths more at secondary school than she had in Year 8, largely because she liked her maths teacher. In addition, although Emily’s asTTle scores for writing were above the group mean, they remained steady rather than increasing over the course of the study.

Decline in attitudes towards subjects was largely due to feelings about certain teachers, what she felt were boring teaching practices, disengagement from some topics within subjects, and, to an extent, preoccupations with other matters, such as extra-curricular activities, establishing new friendships and social interactions generally.

The achievement and attitude data — especially in light of feedback from Emily’s teachers in Years 9 and 10 that Emily was making very good progress in all her subjects at school, when it seemed that this was not entirely the case — emphasise how important it is to take into account a range of measures, factors, and perspectives on or about a student to build a more complete picture of where a student’s strengths lie and where, when and why the student may need greater assistance to progress their knowledge and skills and broaden their outlook.

Over the course of the study, a strong picture of Emily as a very social girl who made friends readily emerged; however, there was also evidence that the larger, more diverse student population at secondary school was a considerable challenge for Emily at times. For example, there was a suggestion that she could at times invite negative responses from some other young people: in fact, Emily had been upset during the year because of ‘threats’ from another student.

So while Emily was a capable, optimistic student with the appropriate confidence, skills and attitudes to cope well with the majority of change represented by the Year 8 to Year 9 transition, it seemed the transition was still a challenge for her in a number of ways, even taking into account a level of discomfort that it might be expected most people would experience at a time of change. But by the time she reached Year 10, it was evident that Emily felt well established at secondary school and had the confidence and motivation to do very well, particularly in the areas in which she was most interested.

Brief Account of 'Luke's Story'

Luke, segments of whose story are included in each of the chapters that focus on Emily, was 12 years of age when the study began. He identified as New Zealand Māori and lived with his mother and two younger siblings. He spent time with his father on a regular basis and got on well with his father's partner and her children.

Luke's primary schooling was completed at a decile 3, Year 1–8 state primary school. He then moved on to a similar decile, Year 9–15 co-educational state secondary school.

Like Emily, on the whole Luke experienced a positive transition from primary to secondary schooling. Despite this, he did experience some ups and downs, including in his personal life (in the second half of Year 9 he was very worried about a family member who was seriously ill, but the situation very fortunately had a positive outcome); similarly, his pattern of achievement over the course of the study indicated a few hiccoughs, especially in maths. However, again like Emily, early in his second year at secondary school, Luke was feeling good about school.

A more comprehensive account of Luke's story can be found on our *Education Counts* website at: www.educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/research/transitions_primary_secondary.html