

Executive Summary

The transition from primary to secondary schooling can be one of considerable change for students. Many students not only have to acclimatise to a new, and often much larger, physical environment, they also need to adapt to new ways of working, different teachers and teaching methods, a greater range of subjects, new routines and expectations, as well as interacting with a much larger pool of students. A student's ability to cope with these changes is likely to influence how they feel about school and how they progress and develop.

Literature findings

Key findings from a literature review on the transition from primary to secondary schooling¹ indicated that:

- there is often a drop in students' academic achievement following the move to secondary school. It is unclear from the literature, however, whether any drop in achievement is short-term or whether it endures for some or all students over the longer-term;
- students' attitudes towards school and their subjects often decrease over this period and can be accompanied by an increase in their interest in non-academic activities;
- the transition is most likely to have negative effects for students who are already experiencing difficulties at primary or intermediate school;
- it is important for schools to provide students with sufficient information about the transition and what to expect at secondary school and to have support networks in place. New Zealand schools, generally, have transition strategies in place, which may include prior visits, orientation days and peer support programmes;
- family support, school responsiveness and student involvement in school extra-curricular activities are important, especially for low performing students;
- there is a great deal of complexity around the transition to secondary schooling, in terms of school systems and structures, the nature and extent of communication between sectors, teaching and learning, assessment, student characteristics, and student development, especially adolescence;
- there is a shortage of transition research data, especially in the New Zealand context.

Rationale for the study

In response to the need for more information on what the transition from primary to secondary schooling is like for New Zealand students, the Research Division of the Ministry of Education designed an in-depth, exploratory study, which followed a group of students as they made the transition from Year 8 to Year 9 and then into Year 10.

Information was collected at four time points over 18 months. Eight primary and intermediate schools and two secondary schools from Auckland and Wellington were involved and 112 Year 8 students participated in the initial phase of the study.

In this report we look closely at students' achievement in mathematics, reading and writing as they make the transition from primary to secondary school. We used asTTle (Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning) to monitor changes in their achievement in each of these areas over the four phases. The report also discusses students' attitudes towards school, learning and their subjects and incorporates the views of their parents and teachers in an attempt to unpack the complexities of student achievement over the transition from primary to secondary schooling.

In our analyses, we have broadly grouped students as low, middle or high achievers based on whether their achievement scores in mathematics, reading and writing in the final phase of the project (Phase 4) were in the lower quartile, middle half or top quartile. This approach enabled us to track students' performance over the previous phases of the study to see if there had been any significant shifts in their achievement (covered in detail in Chapter 5).

¹ McGee et al (2003).

Summary of participating students' achievement over the transition and beyond

- Over the transition from primary to secondary schooling (i.e. from students' last term in Year 8 to their first term in Year 9) average student achievement declined in mathematics but plateaued in reading and writing.
- By the end of their first year at secondary school there was a marked improvement in average student achievement in all three subjects.
- The majority of students, at the end of Year 9, were achieving above or at a similar level to that achieved a year earlier in Year 8. Students' scores improved most noticeably in mathematics over this period.
- Early in Year 10, average student performance in mathematics and writing showed a similar pattern to those exhibited a year earlier, despite there being no physical move between schools. That is, there was a drop in students' mathematics scores – although this was not as great as when students moved into Year 9 (involving a change of schools for all students in this study) – and a levelling off in students' writing scores.
- While our aTTle results show good achievement gains for most students by the end of Year 9, there is need for concern about some students' learning and achievement, particularly those students in the lowest achievement quartile in mathematics. Between the end of Year 9 and early in Year 10 students in the bottom achievement quartile for mathematics had the lowest rate of progress.
- The gap between the high and low achieving students in mathematics widened at secondary school.
- Although students' achievement scores fluctuated over the four phases of the study, around half of the students who were in the bottom quartile in one or more of mathematics, reading or writing in Year 10 had also been achieving in the bottom quartile in Year 8.
- Two-thirds of the students achieving in the top quartile in mathematics and reading in Year 10, and half of the students in writing, had also been high achievers in Year 8.

- The high achievers in mathematics and reading were more consistent in their achievement patterns than other students. Around half of the high achieving students in mathematics or reading consistently achieved in the top quartile across all four phases of the study.
- The low achieving students in mathematics, reading and writing were more likely to have fewer books in their homes and less likely to say they enjoyed reading in their spare time.
- Watching television in their spare time appeared to be linked to a greater extent to students' reading and writing achievement than to their mathematics achievement. The low achievers in reading and writing were more likely to indicate watching television as a favourite spare time activity and, on average, watched more hours of television than the high achievers.
- Pasifika students were over represented in the bottom quartile for reading. They were slightly more likely to be in the bottom quartile for mathematics than students from other ethnic groups and were not present at all in the top quartile for this subject.

Summary of participating students' attitudes over the transition and beyond

- Students in our study generally had fairly positive attitudes towards mathematics, reading and writing at the outset of the study but their attitudes declined as they progressed through secondary school.
- Students were more positive about reading than they were about mathematics and writing.
- Teachers play a major role in how students feel about particular subjects and students often had quite different feelings about their various teachers.
- Although students were less positive about their teachers at secondary school than they were about their teachers in Year 8, they were still nevertheless more positive than negative about their secondary school teachers overall.
- While a significant number of the low achieving students in mathematics said that mathematics was one of the subjects they liked best in

Year 8 the proportion of those mentioning mathematics as a best liked subject decreased as they moved into Year 9, then into Year 10.

- In contrast, the high achieving students' liking of mathematics fluctuated from Phase 1 to Phase 4 of the study, dropping noticeably as they transitioned from Year 8 to Year 9, increasing by the end of Year 9, only to drop again as they moved into Year 10.
- Although a number of the high achieving students said that mathematics was one of their least favourite subjects, they were more likely than other students to consider they were good at this subject.

Views of students, teachers and parents in relation to students' experiences at school, their learning and their achievement

- Around a third of teachers at both primary and secondary school indicated having almost no contact during the year with the parents of participating students. Teachers were more likely to have had infrequent contact with the parents of low achieving students.
- Nevertheless, teachers considered the majority of parents to be generally 'supportive' or 'very supportive' of their child. They were more likely to rate the parents of the high achievers as 'very supportive' than the parents of the low achievers.
- Students also rated their relationship with their parents and family very positively over the course of the study.
- A number of parents in the study felt their children were achieving well or very well in particular subjects and doing well at school generally when in reality they were among the lowest achieving students.

- The parents of the high achievers were more likely than the parents of the low achievers to say they talked to their child often about what they did at school.
- By the end of Year 9, and early in Year 10, the high achieving students were generally more likely to find the work at secondary school more demanding or challenging than their peers. In contrast, the low achieving students were generally more likely than the high achievers to think that the work at secondary school was easier.
- In Years 9 and 10, the low achieving students in mathematics and reading were more likely than the high achievers to consider they were repeating work they had already done.
- The form teachers at secondary school often did not know the students in their form classes particularly well, especially if they only saw these students at form time. This was particularly the case for the form teachers of the low achieving students.
- The high achieving students were generally more likely to take part in extra-curricular activities at primary and secondary school, particularly the high achievers in reading. They were also more likely to take on special responsibilities at secondary school, such as library or canteen duties or representing their class on student council.

Further reports from the study

In addition to the present report, *Students' Achievement as they Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling*, there are two further reports focussing on other information from the Transition Study. Details about these reports are provided in Chapter 1.