Transition to Secondary School: A Literature Review

Report to the Ministry of Education

University of Waikato
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TRANSITION TO SECONDARY SCHOOL:
A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Prepared for the New Zealand Ministry of Education under contract between the Ministry and the University of Waikato
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ABSTRACT

This report is a study on student transition to secondary school from primary or intermediate schools in New Zealand. The study was carried out for the New Zealand Ministry of Education by researchers from the University of Waikato.

This study identified New Zealand and international literature on transition, and, on this basis, identifies issues relating to the impacts of transition upon student achievement and adjustment to secondary school. Data on transition were also obtained through interviews with key informants – people who occupied key roles in education, such as Ministry officials and school principals. The literature and key informant information are reported under eight major themes: academic attainment, social adjustment, linkages between schools, organisational issues, pupil perceptions, cultural factors, socio-economic factors, and gender differences. Key points of the eight major themes are summarised at the end of each chapter.

The report concludes that there are important gaps in information about transition in the New Zealand context and particular issues need further investigation.
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INTRODUCTION

This report is a study on transition to secondary school, carried out for the New Zealand Ministry of Education. The study has been done by a survey of New Zealand and international literature on transition and interviews with key informants. The information gained has been reported under a number of basic questions about transition, with a major emphasis upon the relationship between transition and academic achievement, adjustment to secondary school, and impacts on different groups of students.

On the basis of the analysis of the literature and key informants, some of the main findings and issues have been summarised. A considerable number of research and other studies were located. In the interests of readability and brevity, this literature has been reported in summary form, pointing to important findings and identifying that there are gaps in research.

The process of carrying out this study was, first, electronic and manual searching of University of Waikato library databases for relevant literature on transition, using keywords to guide searches; second, interviews with several key informants with experience regarding transition. Key informants included three senior Ministry of Education officials, four secondary school principals (two of them Māori principals), a principal of a Kura Kaupapa (Māori immersion primary school), two Year 9 deans, a NZCER senior researcher, and school consultant and former intermediate and middle school principal. Two meetings were held with Ministry of Education officials as the review progressed.

Report structure

The report is structured according to a number of major topics that relate to transition, and which emerged as the review progressed.

For consistency, and ease of reading, Chapters 1-8 are reported as follows:

- literature pertaining to the question: issues and summary.
- key informant findings and summary.
- summary and common threads.

The literature covered in this study is listed in three categories:

1. A list of core and significant literature (essential to an understanding of the field).
2. A list of websites.
3. A more extensive body of literature in addition to the core list.
CHAPTER ONE

ACADEMIC ATTAINMENT

The academic attainment of students is of primary importance when they make the transition from primary to secondary school. In particular, there is interest in how transition impacts upon attainment. Is there a natural progression? Are students motivated and ready for secondary school? What happens to their achievement when they get there? Generally, research shows that students look forward to secondary school, in spite of some reservations about particular aspects. They believe that work will be more challenging and interesting, that there will be opportunities to make new friends and learn new subjects. Some see opportunities for a ‘fresh start’, for implementing regular study and homework practices and ‘doing well at school’. They have accurate information about what secondary school will be like and are aware of the range of specific subjects they might study and choices they will be able to make (Kirkpatrick, 1992).

In the international literature on the effects of transition there appears to be substantial agreement that there is often a decline in achievement following transition (Barone, Aguirre-Deandris & Trickett, 1991; Bridging the gap, 1998; Carvel, 2000; Collins & Harrison, 1998; Galton, Gray & Ruddrick, 1999; Mizelle, 1995; National Center for Education Statistics, 1995; Office of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools, 2002). There are, however, several different causes to which this decline in achievement is attributed. Some researchers (e.g. Eccles & Wigfield, 1993; Wigfield & Eccles, 1991) have attributed it to the change in students’ concepts of themselves as learners as they get older. Their studies have shown that students’ attitudes to school and performance in subjects such as mathematics, science and art decreased with age. A decreased interest in academic activities and an increased interest in non-academic activities, including sport, was associated with the middle years (Eccles & Wigfield, 1993; Wigfield & Eccles, 1991).

The decline in academic achievement has often been associated with the onset of adolescence (e.g. Mizelle, 1999; Potter, 2001). This has particular implications for some ethnic and socio-economic groups who, because of slower progress in the early stages of school which led to retention in the early grades, and perhaps also because of earlier onset of puberty within their ethnic group, reach puberty at an earlier stage of schooling than do other students (McDonald, 1988; Simmons, Black & Zhou, 1991). It has to be realised, however, that transition to secondary school occurs at different ages in different countries, yet the same pattern of a drop in attainment occurred in the first year of secondary school (Anderman, Maehr & Midgley, 1999; Mizelle, 1999). Some studies reported on transition at 10 or 11 years old (Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Bridging the gap, 1998; Galton & Wilcocks, 1983; Office of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools, 2002; Taylor, 1994), others with a transition at 13 or 14 years old (Fouracre, 1993; Murdock, Anderman & Hodge, 2000), and they have similar findings, a drop in academic achievement. Students who make two transitions, to middle school and then to secondary school, appear to experience the achievement drop twice (Alspaugh, 1998; Felner, Primavera & Cauce, 1981). There appears to be evidence that any transition may cause a drop in achievement, regardless of the age at which it takes place (Suffolk Education Department, 1997). This is of importance to New Zealand where the majority of students change schools at two levels of transition (Year 6 to 7 and Year 8 to 9).
Research has noted lower expectations of the receiving school as opposed to the higher expectations of the contributing school over a long period (Galton & Wilcocks, 1983; Eccles & Wigfield, 1993; May, 2002; Office of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools, 2002) and this is often seen as a reason for decline in student achievement. Kirkpatrick (1992) noted that many of the students he studied in Australia found to their surprise that their academic work in their first secondary school year was no harder, or was easier, than in their final primary year. Even so, some students had difficulty adjusting to the academic environment of the secondary school. Kirkpatrick (1992) related the fall in achievement to students becoming increasingly negative about their first year as it progressed, a matter taken up again later in this report.

Academic challenge is an ongoing and contentious issue. At a time when higher levels of cognitive ability are emerging in adolescents, some researchers claim that middle level teachers often use low level strategies. American 8th and 9th graders thought they would have been better prepared for high school if they had been given more challenging work and taught more strategies that would enable them to learn on their own (Green, 1997; Kirkpatrick, 1992; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997; Mullins & Irvin, 2000). Teaching methodology changes throughout year levels in response to students’ maturity and preferred learning styles at school, so that students develop independent study habits as they progress through their schooling. Independent study skills provide students with a basis for successful studies in their senior secondary years and beyond (Lawton, 1999). The provision of a challenging curriculum, in terms of content as well as the processes involved has been reported to relieve the serious stresses resulting from student boredom and frustration in the first year of secondary school (Green, 1997).

British, American and Australian studies have reported student disillusionment at the lack of academic challenge in their early secondary school experiences (Green, 1997; Kirkpatrick, 1992; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997; Mullins & Irvin, 2000; Office of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools, 2002). One study found that children handed in inferior work in order to meet deadlines, finding that the volume of work increased rather than the difficulty level, and as a result children felt a lack of control over their own learning (Kirkpatrick, 1992).

Some studies have investigated the reasons for fluctuations in achievement. In a recent British study, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) found that students did not make enough progress and that the quality of teaching declined between Year 6 and Year 9 (secondary school years in England). They proposed to solve the problem partly through improved delivery of standardised documentation between schools, which would in turn diminish the amount of testing needed to be done in the secondary school, partly by building on what had been achieved the previous year in English and mathematics, and partly by doing more to prepare children for changes in teaching approaches in the secondary schools (Office of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools, 2002).

Some studies of achievement goals in the United States have looked at ways of learning. They found that an orientation towards task goals was related to positive patterns of learning, regardless of how able students perceived themselves to be, and that an orientation to performance goals may be particularly detrimental to students with lower actual or perceived ability. Performance goals focussed children on their ability level, and if their ability level is not high, they may be particularly likely to exhibit maladaptive patterns of motivation (Anderman, Maehr & Midgley, 1999; Maehr & Anderman, 1993;
Russell, 1994). Students who use more task and mastery-focused instructional practices tended to exhibit fewer negative shifts in motivation after transition (Midgley, Feldlaufer & Eccles, 1989).

Kruse (1996) outlined changes in teaching approaches for pre-adolescents in Australia that were a response to concerns about the inappropriateness of some traditional teaching and learning practices such as a perceived over-reliance on textbooks, lack of student collaboration and active learning, little reflection on the learning process, and the assumption that all students will benefit from doing the same thing in the same way at the same time. Coping with new forms of curriculum delivery is one of the challenges that students have to deal with as part of transition. For example, it was suggested that teachers needed to think about strategies they could use in the classroom that would emphasise mastery, understanding, and improvement (Midgley & Maehr, 1998). These included:

- allow students to redo work;
- de-emphasise mistake-free papers;
- use portfolios to assess student progress;
- use project-based approaches to the curriculum;
- integrate curriculum areas and use thematic approaches;
- recognise effort and improvement both formally and informally;
- provide complex, challenging work for students, and
- de-emphasise test scores and high grades.

One of the factors related to achievement is the way curriculum content is organised and taught. The prevailing method in secondary schools is via separate subjects. There are some examples of integrating separate subjects to provide greater study support. Campbell (2001a) reported a case study of how an American high school was successful at sustaining good student academic grades in the first year at high school, but in the second year the grades fell. To sustain the second year of high school, the school took 80 Grade 10 students and put them with four teachers working together to teach study skills and goal setting, and integrate subject matter. Academic achievement improved for 61% of the students in science, 62% in mathematics, 61% in English and 66% in history.

Not all studies have blamed lack of progress on the lower expectations of teachers, or on their teaching practices. In New Zealand, Wylie & Chalmers (1999) reported that some teachers felt that students “expected learning to be very accessible and didn’t want to have to concentrate for long”. Year 9 students “expected to go to different classes to do different things,” but “didn’t come expecting to learn”. It may be in a similar context that in England OFSTED came to its decision to recommend that primary students be prepared for different styles of learning at secondary level, rather than that secondary teachers be required to use different styles of teaching (Office of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools, 2002). This issue highlights the need for liaison between primary and secondary teachers.

Some studies made direct links between a decrease in pupil motivation and subject performance and a change in learning environment (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Roderick & Camburn, 1999; Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman and Midgley, 1991) raising the issue of transition. This was supported by research that showed declines in motivation were not merely a function of pubertal change (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Several studies went so far as to associate a decline in academic competence and
motivation with a change of school (Anderman, Maehr & Midgley, 1999; Harter, Whitesell & Kowalski, 1992; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Some factors were associated with the larger size of school and the difficulty pupils had in finding their own niche. Others included the move to a subject-specific timetable. But the most significant factor appears to be the move away from more intrinsic methods of assessment. The more impersonal, more evaluative, more formal and more competitive and comparative environment of secondary schools was seen to contribute to a decline in intrinsic motivation and commitment to learn (Harter et al, 1992).

There is some evidence that students in transition experience increased feelings of isolation (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; National Center for Education Statistics, 1995) during their first year after transition. However, in New Zealand (as overseas, e.g. Mizelle, 1995), it can be argued that transfers nowadays are better organised and more user-friendly, so few pupils experience anxiety for long. The personal-social effects of transfer may be less significant than they once were. Generally, anxieties concerning coping at a new school quickly fade and are replaced by more long-term concerns about schooling in general (Delamont & Galton, 1987; Ward, 2001). A greater problem may be curriculum continuity and teaching and learning. But these matters need further research to explore what factors are influential.

The AbeL evaluation (Auckland Uniservices Ltd, 2000) found that in both primary and secondary classrooms, the start of school was critical to effective management. They agreed with Evertson & Harris (1992) who documented the importance of classroom roles and procedures, and clear communication about expectations. In classrooms where clear communication about expectations is present, there was improved student task engagement, more appropriate behaviour, smoother transition between activities and higher academic performance.

Peer acceptance and meeting high expectations have been seen as predictors of success at school (Felner, Primavira and Cauce, 1981), and when large groups of students move between schools together, their stratification tends to remain undisturbed. Pupils who are doing well continue to do well. However, children who have low grades in middle school tend to do better if they attend a high school with fewer of their middle school classmates (Schiller, 1999).

At this point some comments are made on information from key informants who were interviewed about the topics covered in this report. Key informant information is inserted at relevant places in the remainder of the report. A common factor to most of the key informants’ comments was the notion that secondary school teachers expected a certain level of knowledge that their Year 9 intake would possess. Those who taught Year 9 at secondary schools tended to have firm ideas about what was required of Year 9 students. As a result those pupils who fitted this Year 9 setting had the most positive concept of self as learners. But there is the ongoing issue of groups of students who do not “fit the mould”, for example, some Māori and Pacific students. Key informants added little further information to this topic. Discussion tended to range towards the particular assessment measures used by a school rather than standardised measures. P.A.T. was mentioned most often as a measure. Some secondary schools have their own tests which they administer to Year 8 students. The results are used – with other information – to place students into Year 9 classes.
A related issue of social promotion is one that has long been debated in New Zealand. In Chicago it was planned to end the social promotion of students who were not ready for the next grade. Summer transition schools with small classes, a longer school day, special services (e.g. psychological, social worker, counselling, medical), and a focus on math and reading skills, provided a programme to be passed before admission to high school (White, 1999). However, holding children back in the early grades of school does not seem to improve their achievement, it only makes them older when they reach transition to secondary school (McDonald, 1988). In New Zealand, McDonald was concerned about the effect this had on Māori children. There was evidence in the literature that in America black children were held back more often than white children, so that some of the perception of an earlier onset of adolescent behaviour was because the children were in fact older (Simmons, Black & Zhou, 1991).

One long-term issue of transition is curriculum continuity and coherence across primary and secondary school, a matter raised several times in this report. The research indicates that there are gaps in subject content, inconsistencies in expectations of students and unnecessary differences in teaching and learning practices (Croll, 1983; Kruse, 1995). In the UK it was assumed that implementation of a new National Curriculum would offer a solution to some transition problems by providing curriculum continuity across the primary/secondary divide, but this proved not to be the case (Huggins & Knight, 1997). An evaluation of the effectiveness of transition arrangements was carried out by OFSTED in 2002 to address some of these issues (Office of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools, 2002).

Cathy Wylie’s longitudinal study of Competent Children in New Zealand has at present reached only 10 year olds, but indicates a high level of satisfaction with primary schools (Wylie, Thompson & Lythe, 2001). 70% of the children were reported by their mothers to be enthusiastic about school and 71% were satisfied with their child’s performance. Only 4% were unhappy with their school and 7% dissatisfied with their child’s performance. Parents’ satisfaction was unrelated to school decile, but was related to the child’s enjoyment of reading, writing and maths. Most children thought that working hard, gaining knowledge and understanding and learning something interesting, were good indicators of progress at school. They were ambivalent about the relevance of comparison with other children as a sign of their individual performance (Wylie et al, 2001). This is in line with overseas research referred to elsewhere in this report.

The experiences that related most to competency levels were to do with fair treatment, having interesting work, and keeping out of trouble. “Most of the children saw school as a place for work, friendship, and enjoyment, and they saw achievement reflecting their effort.” (Wylie et al, 2001). 93% of parents had some involvement with the child’s school; 55% had decided which secondary school they would like their child to attend.

Wylie et al (2001) reflected that children who started school with enthusiasm or were initially unhappy, scored better than children who took a long time to settle in or were lukewarm about school. The researchers found that unhappiness gave clear signals to adults for support, which was given, whereas a lukewarm reaction or taking a long time to settle in did not give such clear signals, and help had not been given. This research did not record whether something similar occurred at transition to secondary school.
An International Association for the Evaluation of Achievement (IEA) study of literacy achievement showed that fourteen year old New Zealand students ranked fourth in the world on overall achievement in reading and nine year old New Zealand students ranked sixth in the world (Wilkinson, 1998). This suggests that if there is a fall off following transition, it does not last long, and is not of great longitudinal impact. Wilkinson suggests that the comparative drop in New Zealand students’ performance since 1970-71, when they showed the highest mean achievement amongst participating countries, is due to shifts in ethnic composition and economic well-being over the last twenty years. Migration of Pacific, Asian and peoples of other origins to whom English is a second language, and a programme of economic and social restructuring in New Zealand has resulted in a negative impact on the well-being of many New Zealand families (Wilkinson, 1998). The IEA survey of 1990-91 showed that variation in achievement within New Zealand had grown considerably. At the fourteen year old level New Zealand had both more good readers than any other country and a large number of poor readers (Wagemaker, 1993). It appears that “New Zealand’s high standards in literacy depend not only on having good teachers and teaching practices but also on having social and economic conditions that permit school and home environments to foster a literate culture” (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 162).

There are other possible reasons for a decline in motivation associated with transition to a new school setting. First, changes in motivation may be related to pupil’s changes in beliefs concerning effort and ability. As pupils approach adolescence they viewed ability as a stable trait with fewer links to effort (Nicholls & Gardner, 1999). As pupils moved into school contexts where ability was more overtly valued, there was diminishing value on giving effort because if effort was followed with failure the pupil risked being labelled as incompetent. One international survey of parent opinion concerning success at school prioritised effort over ability. Parents also saw a clear link between effort and the need for good qualifications (Elliot, Hufton, Illushin & Willis, 2001).

Second, a decline in motivation to learn may be associated with a mis-match between the psychological needs of early adolescents and the type of school environment. If early adolescence was characterised by a period of socio-cognitive development that was based upon a sense of autonomy, independence, self-determination and social interaction (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Simmons & Blyth, 1987), fitting into a secondary school environment that was characterised by rigid rules produced a mis-match. There may also be a mis-match between school environments that emphasised ability goals and those which fostered task goals (Maehr & Midgley, 1991). A problem with these claims is that primary to secondary transition occurs at different ages in different countries.

Third, there was evidence that linked social and academic readiness for secondary school with self-esteem, identity at school and self-ratings of progress. For example, academic readiness for secondary school was likely to be higher for girls who attended a non-disadvantaged school, from English-speaking homes, with positive self-esteem, and who did not exhibit antisocial behaviours (Darmody, Carpenter & Makki, 1989). These variables are seen as more significant than the characteristics of schools with high ESL numbers and low SES classification.

Fourth, where concepts of self were related to academic achievement, some transition-related activities, such as improving communication of test results, holding summer schools for pupils at risk, or setting up joint primary-secondary projects before transition,
are important but did not in themselves overcome the problems of transition. Attention needed to be given to: discontinuities in teaching approaches; the gap between pupils’ expectations of secondary school and the reality; helping teachers develop strategies for helping students manage their own learning; giving pupils the opportunity to ask things they do not understand, particularly relating to classroom learning and the expectations of new teachers; and flexible learning/teaching, which takes account of differences in pupils’ preferred learning styles (Galton et al, 1999).

**Attitude to learning**

There are some examples in the literature of schools have attempted to implement programmes that make a difference. An improvement in achievement and attitude to learning was noted as a result of Hagley Community College’s Junior College programme, which required students to meet certain standards before they could go on to Year 11 (Rentoul, 2000). Beginning the programme at the start of the academic year with a contract about learning between parents, students and the college led to a 96% chance of achieving performance targets. Those who enrolled in the programme part way through the year had an 88% chance of not meeting the targets. The programme involved diagnostic assessment at entry and placement at enrolment in the programme. Its aim was to get more students through national qualifications and to retain students through Year 13. Principal Brian Ingram claimed that what they had done was move the eight essential learning skills of the New Zealand curriculum framework ‘to the front end of learning’.

Another initiative involved taking a team teaching approach over Years 9 and 10 at Cargill High School and Tweedsmuir Junior High in Invercargill. Potter (2001) claimed that it considerably improved attitude and learning in Year 10.

The Education Review Office (ERO) (2000) considered the impact of transition on students’ educational development. They cited Galton, Grey (sic) and Ruddock (1999) relating to loss of ground in academic achievement because of difficulties in adjusting to a new environment, including losing old friends and making new ones, coping with a variety of teachers and their different expectations about work, the impact of long summer break on previous knowledge and skills, and repetition of work when students expected learning to be new and challenging. This research recommended that schools do more to share information about student achievement, e.g. joint primary-secondary projects and studies induction programmes, that studies be undertaken on the progress of students at risk, that teaching take into account different learning styles, and that schools share more information about successful schemes for helping ease transfer and transition. ERO recommended that NZ schools should provide Year 7 and 8 students with opportunities for specialist study within an integrated curriculum.

Overseas literature suggested that the early years of high school were often a time of academic difficulty and disengagement. The degree to which students experienced difficulty following transition was strongly correlated with their likelihood of school dropout. In Chicago, 40% of all 9th graders failed one or more major subject in the first semester. Failures varied as a function of race, ethnicity, gender, age and prior achievement, and between schools (Roderick & Camburn, 1999). In England, as reported elsewhere in this report, 40% of pupils scored less on basic skills tests than they had the term before transition (Galton & Willcocks, 1983).
Primary school teachers often tend to be more task-oriented in their teaching: the goal is to master a certain task such as learning addition or subtraction. In high schools, however, the goal of teaching often becomes attaining a certain grade. Learning is still key, but measuring performance is also a major part of the equation (American Psychological Association, 1996).

In England, Galton, Gray & Ruddock (1999) found that 7 percent of 11-year olds “unlearn” reading, maths and language skills in their first secondary year and their marks drop by up to a third in the standardised tests, compared with their final primary year. Up to 40 percent of all 11-year olds do not make satisfactory (predicted) progress in their first secondary school year. One explanation is that too much attention is paid to social aspects of transition, and too little on academic aspects. The novelty of moving to a larger school soon wears off for Year 8 students. Interestingly, exciting induction day activities in say, science, gave students high expectations which were later unrealised. Most of the information exchanged between the two school levels was about pastoral care and administrative matters, and there was less about academic achievement. Despite the introduction of a national curriculum, there was a problem with curriculum continuity for students. However, some strategies worked, for example, in British classrooms, the use of reading assistants maintained student progress in the first secondary school year.

Gorwood (1991) suggested that the problem of continuity between schools would not be solved by a national curriculum because the real problem is lack of communication between teachers. He mentions that in recent years there has been a shift in emphasis in liaison between secondary and feeder schools from pupil anxiety (which appears to be not as significant now as suggested by research in the 1960s and 1970s) to issues of a curricular nature. In the primary school, assessment has usually been of a diagnostic nature and aimed at promoting individual learning. In secondary school it has been rooted in competitive external examinations (although not immediately after transition, either overseas or in New Zealand). Gorwood sees the future in Britain for assessment as not only diagnostic and formative but summative and evaluative. “Competitiveness is at the heart of the government’s educational reforms.” It is being said that the national curriculum will “provide a framework for achieving continuity”. Mac Iver (1990) in the USA makes similar comments regarding communication between teachers recommending interdisciplinary teacher teams.

**Particular subjects**

There is some information regarding particular school subjects. A UK Qualifications and Curriculum Authority report stated that pupils were held back by a ‘dumbing down’ of the science curriculum in the first year of secondary school (Thornton, 1999b). Attention needs to be given to building on prior achievements in maths and science. The most able students are the most disadvantaged here. There are examples of collaboration, such as a cluster of Australian Catholic schools which, intending to improve transition in maths, had teachers at both levels exploring content, process and their understanding of maths together (Williams, 1995).

Information technology is another area with primary – secondary differences. Children in USA access the internet five times more at home than they do at school. Primary schools make more enlightened use of computers than do secondary. Usually there is a computer in each primary school classroom and pupils can make use of it when they need to (Kenny,
2001). Children in the United Kingdom are often years ahead of secondary school ICT lessons (Galton & Wilcocks, 1983).

For achievement during transition, schools need:

- To use more task-focused (and less performance-focused) instructional practices (American Psychological Association, 1996; Anderman, Maehr, Martin & Midgley, 1999; Maehr & Anderman, 1993; Midgley & Maehr, 2000; Russell, 1994).

- To foster a sense of belonging (Ferguson & Fraser, 1998; Kruse, 1996).

- To focus on language development in all subject areas across the curriculum within a climate of support and encouragement (Dunne, 1989; Hopfenberg, 1991; Irvin, 1998; Sebba, 2000; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001).

- To provide relevant information, on the transition process or on changes in teaching and learning practices, to students in time to make a difference to student expectations (Kruse, 1996; Galton, Gray & Ruddick, 1999).

Summary

- Following transition to secondary school, students tend to suffer decreases in academic achievement.

- The age of transition differs between countries; it appears to be the change that makes the difference, not the age at which pupils make the transition. Any transition may lead to a fall in achievement.

- Academic attainment in the first year at secondary school seems to be related to students’ decreased interest in academic activities and an increase in non-academic activities in the middle years.

- Disillusionment at the lack of academic challenge has often been reported.

- Few steps appear to have been taken by schools to address the drop in academic achievement.

- Social and economic conditions need to permit school and home environments to foster a literate culture.
CHAPTER TWO

SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

The second aspect of transition covered in this report is social adjustment. For most, if not all students, transition from primary to secondary schools where an actual shift from one school to another occurs, is a major milestone. It can produce mixed reactions of anticipatory anxiety and satisfaction. In this section we outline literature about how students react socially and what schools have done to make transition a positive experience.

Most New Zealand secondary schools appear to handle the social aspects of transition quite well. Dissemination of information about the school, prior visits to the school by students and parents, orientation on arrival, and peer support programmes are common. Liaison between teachers of contributing and receiving schools seems less common (NZ Ministry of Education, 1998). It seems likely that, as is the case overseas, the greatest challenge is how to achieve continuity of social relations and learning between schools.

The predominant move between schools is from Year 8 to Year 9, but there are also Year 7-15 schools. Recently, several middle schools have been set up, and students remain at the same school for Year 9 (and sometimes 10 and 11). Supporters of the middle school movement have argued that middle schools make social adjustment easier, and that they may “broaden the horizons and raise the achievement of their students significantly” (Stewart, 2001), but there has been little research to substantiate the claim. Wylie and Chalmers (1999) study of Palmerston North schools reported that most parents favoured Year 0-8 and Year 9-13 schools.

There is ongoing concern about the progress of students who have low achievement and commitment, and the effect of transition on their achievement. Analysis of data from a national longitudinal study in the United States revealed the nature of performance-based tests and the conditions under which students improve their performance levels and outlook (Catterall, 1998). The importance of family support, school responsiveness (listening and showing an interest in students), and student involvement in school and community activities stood out as predictors of recovery from low performance or low commitment to school.

Transition

It is hardly surprising that transition to a new school invariably includes a period of adjustment. The features of transition from primary to secondary school include moving from: the known to the unknown; a smaller primary/intermediate/middle school to a larger secondary school and having one teacher for several subjects with some room changes to other subjects, to a different teacher for each subject, usually in a different room (Bates, 1998; Measor & Woods, 1984). The adjustment period may last until a pupil is able to show they can cope by making appropriate responses to the demands of a new environment. Researchers have described coping in different ways but most imply some form of reorientation between a child’s perception of a situation and the abilities they bring to the situation (Cotterell, 1982; Ward, 2001).
Appraisal of coping resources is central to adjustment, and is essentially a cognitive process, with thought and judgment enabling a person to appraise a situation in terms of its potential harm, and set in motion coping responses. Having adequate information is a crucial factor in a student’s ability to cope, and “its absence produces a sense of bewilderment and entrapment in a new setting” (Cotterell, 1986). Transition often occurs at the same time as children have to make other adjustments, the most significant of which is the onset of puberty (Simmons, Burgeson, Careton-Ford & Blyth, 1987). The more transition events that have to be negotiated at one time, the greater the likelihood of negative consequences (Simmons et al, 1987). The stress associated with transition is widely recognised among researchers, although they have disagreed about how long and how severe is that stress (Ward, 2001). It also should be noted once again that stress seems to accompany any transition from school to school, no matter at what age it takes place.

Several countries have developed programmes to address the needs of at-risk students (Holmes, 2000; McElroy, 2000). To help at-risk students experiencing school failure, some schools in the United States have incorporated programmes that provide students with extra academic and personal support. These programmes often include tutoring, individual counselling, advocacy, and efforts to increase parental involvement (Chapman & Sawyer, 2001).

In New Zealand too, programmes have been instituted to assist at-risk students. Improving achievement: Case studies of secondary school systems to support students at risk (NZ Ministry of Education, 1998) reports several such programmes. One culturally diverse school, for example, created opportunities for families and schools to visit during the day and held an open evening. Two other schools used vertical grouping, mixed ability classes, and whanau grouping to assist with adjustment to secondary school.

Shofner (2001) reported on a music programme which involved middle and high school bands in joint appearances. This gave students a chance to meet on musical and social levels, and eased the transition, encouraging students to continue with their instruments after transition. Many New Zealand cities have music programmes which join all ages in musical activities.

**Transition in rural communities**

New Zealand has many schools in rural communities, and some international literature is worth considering in terms of rural students. Some New Zealand students move from rural primary to urban boarding schools. Baills and Rossi (2001) considered the transition of children from rurally isolated enviroments to highly competitive secondary boarding schools in Australia and found that many rural children were confident and willing to ‘have a go’ at anything and usually had high self esteem. They made the transition with little anxiety. Such a ‘have a go’ attitude appeared to be contagious among country children, and created an environment similar to that of home, thus aiding transition. A Canadian study (Walsh, 1995) also found that rural school culture and values reflected community culture and values, which reduced students’ feeling of isolation and alienation when they moved from primary school.
Activities that provide social support (pupil centred)

At a time when friendships and social interaction are particularly important for young adolescents, transition into secondary school often serves to disrupt friendship networks and thereby interferes with students’ success in secondary school (Barone, Aguire-Deandis & Trickett, 1991). Thus it is vital for a transition programme to provide social support activities that give students the opportunity to get to know and develop positive relationships with older students and other incoming students (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; Mac Iver, 1990).

Early adolescence is a time of heightened vulnerability for many students (Cotterell, 1986; Measor & Woods, 1984; Morrison Gutman & Midgley, 2000). There are not only the biological and physiological changes associated with puberty to be negotiated, but also the social and learning environment changes that characterise the transition from primary to secondary level schools. A mismatch between the developmental needs of early adolescents and the new school environment may result in a decline in school performance and adjustment during this transition (Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991).

Pastoral support (May, 2002), mentorship programmes (Ascher, 1997; Stenlake, 2000) and buddying with older pupils (Highland Council, 2000) have proved successful means of reducing stress and improving performance. Programmes targeting a combination of students, parents and school staff have a measurable impact. Smith (1997) reported that stand-alone middle schools made the strongest commitment to helping students transition to secondary school. Schools with larger 8th grade cohorts were more likely to offer full transition programmes. Transition programmes have the potential to facilitate student performance in secondary school, particularly when adults have a commitment to student success.

The developmental needs of early adolescents

The developmental needs of early adolescents include self-esteem, motivation, self-regulation, family support and a sense of belonging. From a self-esteem perspective, Midgley and Maehr (1998) found that students in middle school who lacked confidence in their ability to do their work avoided seeking help the most. This was particularly so in classes where students perceived an emphasis on competition and relative ability.

Results of a programme set up in the United States to address the problems of at-risk middle school students with poor social and academic skills indicated that individualisation and concentrated effort in learning strategies, in conjunction with parent and faculty involvement, aided in raising self-esteem and in keeping the at-risk student in school. Students displayed greater academic motivation due to an increase in self-esteem and expressed positive feelings about themselves resulting in academic success (Kallmann, 1991). These issues also seem important for New Zealand students.

Motivational aspects of transition include attribution theory, self-regulation, family support and sense of belonging

Attribution theory holds that students’ perceptions of their educational experiences are generally more influential for their motivation than their actual, objective reality of those experiences (Anderman & Midgley, 1997). Students who believed that their poor
performance was due to factors out of their control (e.g., their own lack of ability or the perceived animosity of teachers) were unlikely to see any reason to hope for an improvement. In contrast, if students attributed their poor performance to a lack of important skills or to poor study habits (i.e., to something they can control), they were more likely to persist in the future. The implications for teachers included the need to attempt to understand what students believe about the reasons for their academic performance, to listen to students’ past successes and failures and be prepared to challenge maladaptive patterns of belief; and to communicate to students that everybody has the ability to succeed, that effort and appropriate strategies are necessary components of improvement, and that errors are an essential part of progress and something to be learned from (Anderman & Midgley, 1997).

Self-regulation

At American middle schools, students have been reported to experience fewer opportunities for autonomy or self-determination than at elementary (primary) school (Anderman & Midgley, 1997). Features that enhance self-determination include the provision of choice over such things as: what types of task to engage in; how much time to allot to each task; whether to work with a partner or independently; and how to present information for evaluation. Teachers can help their students develop their sense of self-regulation by providing limited choices between acceptable options, assisting with breaking large tasks into manageable pieces, and providing guidelines for students to use in monitoring their own progress.

Sense of belonging

Research has shown that positive relations and a sense of school belonging are strongly related to students’ positive attitudes about school, self esteem, self-deprecation, and feelings of anger (Midgley & Maehr, 1998; Midgley & Maehr, 2000). An involvement in sports, arts and other activities in school, and time spent in extra curricula activities was positively correlated with academic success at grades 8 and 10. School responsiveness was also found to be a factor in student achievement: whether teachers cared about the students, whether they listened to what the students had to say, and whether the school discipline system was considered fair (Catterall, 1998) though these findings conflict with others cited later.

Relationships with teachers

Students’ social adjustment to transition is closely connected to their relationships with their teachers. In Australia, Cocklin (1999) found that the nature of the teacher and the type of teaching were the main issues noted by students about transition to secondary school. Students came with particular expectations of teachers and the processes of teaching and learning. This involved a relationship of working together and interacting as learners and teachers, and students reported a regression in their relationships with teachers at the secondary level.

Student diversity is another issue in forming effective student-teacher relations. Gorwood (1994) found that it was difficult for secondary teachers to find a starting point for pupils with different kinds of educational background. Gorwood suggested that a solution to
problems of continuity of curriculum and learning and teaching methods may have been found by some independent UK schools that have included pre-primary, primary and secondary units together which has facilitated an overarching school ethos and liaison between units. In New Zealand there are schools that cover the full range of students, e.g. area schools and some private schools. Research is lacking, but the perceived academic success of the latter but not of the former is probably related to the socio-economic mix of the pupils. The influence of the structure of the school is more difficult to assess. Information from key informants suggested that while liaison with contributing schools concerning curriculum continuity and pastoral care varies considerably, all secondary schools offered structures that promoted care and support for students through ready access to a home-room teacher or dean. One informant drew attention to the different kind of care offered by secondary schools, suggesting that the care moved from a nurturing one towards a more mature form that fostered independence and personal success.

It has been argued by Anderman, Maehr and Midgley (1999) and Anderman and Midgley (1997) that teachers need to communicate to students that what is valued in the classroom is understanding, effort, mastery and a willingness to take on challenging work when American teachers believed that they were making a difference in the lives of their students, it was found that students’ motivation and performance improved (middle and high school teachers felt that they had less of an impact on their students’ success than did elementary teachers).

Discussion with key informants showed that there is a widespread view that all secondary schools’ liaison with contributing schools was valued, and that all had linkages, policies and practices of various kinds in place. Commentary from low SES schools and schools with a high Māori roll suggested that confidence to cope and achieve in Year 9 was related to personal self-esteem at the end of Year 8.

Summary

- Generally, New Zealand schools have transition programmes that handle the social aspects of transition well. Prior visits, orientation programmes and peer support programmes are common.
- Family support, school responsiveness and student involvement in school and community are important in recovery from low performance or low commitment to school.
- Transition is stressful – having adequate information and social support activities that help students to form friendship networks are crucial factors in coping.
- Increased self-esteem can aid academic motivation.
- Provision of choice can enhance student self-regulation.
- Involvement in sports, arts and other activities correlate with academic success.
CHAPTER THREE

LINKAGES BETWEEN SCHOOLS

Another important matter in transition is linkages between primary and secondary schools that are planned to make transition easier for students. In this section we report literature that focuses upon transition schemes, students’ reactions to them, and information about students that transfers from primary to secondary teachers.

In a more competitive environment, secondary schools are, arguably, more conscious of their reputations. Many secondary schools have programmes in place that present their school to primary pupils and their parents in the best possible light. Far fewer have sustained linking arrangements focused on the learning progression of individual children (Abrams, 2000; Doyle & Herrington, 1998; Mac Iver 1990). Hertzog & Morgan (n.d.) conclude from their research in the United States that the more extensive the transition programme, the lower the drop out rate will be. Internationally, the literature reports problems with documentation of student achievement between schools. Attempts to increase individual school choice in recent years have made linkages more difficult.

The New Zealand experience

McGee (1987) examined New Zealand schools that managed transition effectively through local co-operation and found that primary-secondary contacts were disappointingly few. However, there were examples of schools that had developed linkages that were effective, and were aimed at reducing barriers to learning. In schools where there was contact, it was mainly to do with:

- the transfer of information about students;
- familiarising primary students and their parents/guardians with their local secondary school;
- sharing facilities and equipment; and
- teacher contacts about curriculum and teaching.

A powerful influence upon students’ perceptions of transition is what they have heard from others about a particular school. Siblings are one source of information. The first sibling in a family at a particular secondary often influenced younger siblings by passing on anecdotal evidence of the school. This had potential to either increase or reduce anxiety. A supportive move in a number of secondary schools was to place successive siblings in the same ‘houses’ for mutual support (McGee, 1987). Even though this research was carried out a number of years ago, issues such as sibling influences remain.

Orientation programmes for transition

Moving between schools has implications for both programmes and records. There is evidence that internationally schools have become, in recent years, increasingly successful in managing the move of students from primary to secondary school, e.g., in the UK induction programmes have become more user-friendly, and standardised (Abrams, 1993).
Transition programmes are common. According to Mac Iver (1990) a secondary school transition programme should include a variety of activities that provide students and parents with information about the new school, provide students with social support during the transition, and bring middle school (primary and intermediate in New Zealand) and secondary school personnel together to learn about one-another’s curriculum and requirements. It appears that this is what New Zealand programmes also attempt to achieve (N.Z. Ministry of Education, 1998).

Some specific concerns about transition programmes were discussed and acted upon by a group of schools in South Australia (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1993). A Junior Secondary Review came up with two broad goals for educating young adolescents: success for these students in a core of knowledge and competencies/skills which is valued by all parties, and positive and sustained personal and social development as young adolescents. Their eight areas for action at local and system levels were learning communities, curriculum, teaching/learning practices, monitoring and intervention for students at risk, teacher training and support, community involvement, personnel practices and resource allocation.

Underlying successful secondary school transition programmes are activities that bring primary and intermediate or middle school and secondary school administrators, counsellors, and teachers together to learn about programmes, courses, curriculum and requirements of their respective schools (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; McGee, 1987). Nicholls and Gardner (1999) have argued the case for an audit of existing transition arrangements. This should comprise all the key issues involved in transition and management induction procedures, record keeping, school visits, etc., may require their own discrete audits, or it may be one process. Some of their suggestions appear unrealistic because they include teachers from one level of schooling having control over what happens at another level.

In research on transition to high school in New Zealand, McGee (1987) recommended four strategies for the management of transition to secondary school that are still relevant:

- a package of ideas for principals on how linkages could be established between themselves and the principals of transition schools;
- time to be made available to primary and secondary teachers to meet for curriculum co-ordination;
- organisational changes to advisory services and other agencies divided along primary-secondary lines; and
- research projects to look at linkage schemes and perceptions of students and school communities about transition to secondary school.

Orientation activities that provide information to students and parents (administrative)

In different countries steps have been taken to design orientation programmes to familiarise primary students with the secondary school of their choice. Orientation activities can range from a single session on the first day of school to an ongoing programme lasting up to a full semester that involves students, teachers at both primary and secondary schools, and parents. Positive outcomes from orientation programmes have been reported. When parents were involved in their children’s transition to secondary
school, students have higher achievement (Linver & Silverberg, 1997; Paulson, 1994), are better adjusted (Hartos & Power, 1997), and are less likely to drop out of school. In the UK, when making decisions about transition to secondary school, it was found that at both primary and secondary stages, very high percentages of parents considered it essential that their children should be “happy”. Deciding what makes a particular child happy is negotiated in different ways in different households. In some families it was found that ‘happiness’ meant the child was not upset/was content, whilst in others it was linked more to the child being able to fulfil parental expectations and ambitions (West, Noden, Edge, David & Davis, 1998).

Research done in the United Kingdom by Galton, Gray and Ruddick (1999) describes five bridges schools can build across the gulf between primary and secondary school. Initiatives in the United Kingdom include: induction days at the school to which students will transfer; special visits related to sport or drama, for example; summer literacy and/or numeracy programmes for students about to enter secondary school.

Ascher (1997) described how a middle school student might shadow a secondary school student to learn what the high school day in the USA is like. In another programme, secondary school counsellors visited primary schools for individual conferences with parent and students. A large commitment of time was required but the sessions were perceived to be very worthwhile. Individual appointment cards were sent to each student for this meeting with the counsellor who would counsel them for the next four years. By the end of the session each student knew the courses he or she would be enrolling in during 9th grade and had a general plan for the four years of secondary school (McElroy, 2000).

**Liaison and inter-school contracts**

Liaison between primary and secondary schools is often viewed with suspicion by teachers. Some primary principals in the U.K. were found to be not interested in facilitating curriculum and pedagogic links with secondary schools (Inch & Hewetson, 2001). Yet such programmes are thought to be essential (Nicholls & Gardner, 1999). This was certainly the case with the key informants in the New Zealand setting. Although varying use was made of summative academic data, all valued liaison between schools.

It is widely reported that student attainment is negatively affected by transition (Galton, Gray & Ruddock, 1999). Problems included secondary teachers repeating topics already studies at primary school, ignoring or distrusting information from feeder (primary) schools, teaching to the lowest common denominator, discontinuity in and ignorance of each others’ schemes of work and teaching strategies, and failure to build on the work of primary school (Suffolk Education Department, 1997; Thornton, 1999a; Ward, 2001). Large numbers of feeder schools and lack of time for staff to discuss current issues compounded these problems. Declines in grades and attendance have been noted by researchers (e.g. Mizelle & Mullins, 1997).

Alexander and George (1981) claimed that one of the reasons for establishing middle schools in the United States was to bridge the gap between elementary school and high school. They believe the aim should still be to minimise distinctions between the different levels, with greater sharing of resources and programmes. However, there is little evidence that liaison between intermediate or middle schools and their contributing schools or the schools they contribute to is any better than that between primary and secondary schools.
However, there is widespread belief that linkage schemes help, and schemes whereby children have prior visits to secondary schools, become familiar with facilities and begin a unit of work to be finished when they enter secondary school, have been tried by several schools in the belief that they make a difference (Billingham, 1989).

Bush and Hodgkinson (1995) discussed how the implementation of the National Curriculum in the UK after 1988 fostered the development of more effective interschool networks. The ‘family’ of schools was a secondary school and its main feeder primary schools, the whole enclave being defined as the catchment area for the secondary school. The range and extent of collaboration which was coordinated by head teachers at half-terminy meetings included: professional concerns, collaborative vertical subject area team meetings, sharing of advice and experience over the joint use of services and facilities, and wider policy issues, for example calendar co-ordination and parental liaison.

Several studies in America have addressed students’ transition point experiences related to their possible future career choices. Dahir (2001) suggested that career planning established a focus for achievement and helped middle school students identify the strategies that will help them achieve their goals. Career awareness assisted by elementary school programmes could lead to wiser choice of courses in secondary school.

**Student’s prior achievement and attitudes to learning**

One of the issues facing secondary teachers is how much they want to know or should know about their students coming from primary school. Is it best to know very little so as to give students a “fresh start”, or is it best to be well briefed on each student? Teachers at oversea secondary schools often favoured a “fresh start” approach, and, faced with children from a variety of schools, tended to start everyone off at the same place regardless of previous achievement (Huggins & Knight, 1997; Galton et al, 1999; Waslander & Thrupp, 1995). This seemed to be particularly the case with mathematics. The OFSTED report, Changing Schools, found this approach wasteful, and recommended steps such as a common approach to the transfer of standardised assessment data, common lesson structure for English and mathematics across the transition, and the rationalisation of and reduction in the amount of testing done at the beginning of secondary school (Office of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools, 2002).

While anecdotal evidence suggests that the “fresh start” approach of disregarding previous experience or achievement is often practiced in New Zealand, particularly in areas such as maths and science, there is no actual evidence about the extent of this strategy. There is also the connected matter of how much curriculum continuity there should be between Years 8 and 9. Introducing a national curriculum across primary and secondary years does not ensure curriculum continuity, as has been found in the U.K. (Haigh, 1996). In New Zealand, anecdotal evidence suggests that among many teachers, there is a perception that there is a primary school curriculum and a secondary school curriculum, in spite of a Year 1-10 national curriculum being in place which is designed for continuity. In part, this was endorsed by some key informants who regarded preparation for external examinations as beginning at the start of Year 9.

In Australia, Moore (1989) found that secondary teachers thought it both unrealistic and contrary to educational guidelines to expect all children to be working at the same level at the end of primary school. Development of secondary mathematics teachers’ pre-service
and in-service training, mastery teaching, knowledge of primary school methods, provision of continuity of mathematics learning at transition for each student, development of suitable resources for mixed ability classrooms, and assessment procedures which were individualised and informative, were some of Moore’s suggestions. Students responded positively when teachers indicated that they valued the learning their students brought from primary school. They arrived at secondary school expecting that the curriculum would be more difficult and challenging. The study concluded that the positive impact of high expectations was a major factor in enhancing achievement.

The needs of different school systems are not always compatible when it comes to consistency in assessment records. Klein (1996) found that key Stage 2 assessments done at primary level in the U.K. were initially viewed with scepticism by secondary teachers. This was due to the testing being done at the end of the summer term and some secondary schools requiring transfer information earlier for curriculum planning and class grouping (May, 2002). Several key informants in the New Zealand setting commented on the difficulty in synthesising academic results from a range of contributing schools. Another commented on the variation in how “candid” contributing schools were concerning data about slow progress pupils.

Automatic promotion (sometimes called social promotion) through school years remains a contentious matter. Regardless, it results in students with a wide range of ability entering secondary school in Year 9 (New Zealand). When secondary schools taught students at one standard level, little progress was made by students who had not yet reached that level, and none was made by children who had passed that level. It has been argued that primary teachers, with more training in how to deal with mixed abilities in students, seem better able to cope with learning differences (Moore, 1989). However, no research was located that shows how secondary and primary teachers plan and teach for mixed ability classes.

There is some evidence from the U.K. that differences in levels of attainment were likely to have less to do with students’ ability than with the nature and quality of their primary schooling. For the Year 7 (first year secondary in the U.K.) teachers the notion of a “fresh start” was therefore an attractive way forward that enabled them to keep their own teaching fluent – to the detriment perhaps, of any semblance of continuity for many of their students (Nicholls & Gardner, 1999; Huggins & Knight, 1997; Galton, Gray & Rudduck, 1999). This matter of student ability, student achievement, and teaching quality is extremely difficult to tease out in terms of the respective and quantified influences of each.

Documentation

The passing of documented information from primary to secondary teachers is another problematic matter. The use of transferred information has not been well researched, and the evidence that exists is inconsistent. Studies in the U.K. showed that documentation is often received by secondary schools from the pupils’ prior school but not utilised, either because it did not get to the classroom teacher, or because it was ignored (Galton & Wilcocks, 1983; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997; Suffolk, Education Department, 1997). Another study claimed that information for secondary schools rarely comprised the full range of information that was available (Nicholls & Gardner, 1999).

The transfer of pupils’ academic records between schools in the UK was made easier with the introduction of common transfer forms (Smith, 1999), something that New Zealand has
moved away from. Opinion on the forms, which carried pupil assessment details, has varied. Barber (1999) thought that they ensured that secondary schools would receive useful, easy to understand information about children’s ability, and enable the tracking of pupils’ performance as they moved between schools, but by 2002, OFSTED had criticised the variation in the range and quality of information they carried and recommended that a form carrying a standardised minimum set of information be sent electronically (Office of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools, 2002).

In the New Zealand setting, the key informants reported that there was some confusion between prior achievement and entry assessments. A variety of methods was used. All informants acknowledged that details of each student were passed on to secondary schools. There was a variety in the type of data sought, a variation in how they were used and differences in who saw the information.

At one end of the continuum secondary school deans sought wide-ranging information and used it for class placement in Year 9. Some used it in conjunction with school assessments. Others, claiming a “fresh start” approach, made little use of the contributing schools’ information apart from identifying “at-risk” students.

Two informants made reference to the need for some form of “benchmarks” that would be required from Year 8 pupils. Another made extensive use of an orientation activity package produced in Dunedin (Go for Gold). There was certainly variation in the extent to which secondary schools capitalised on prior achievement.

Common to all respondents was the use of a variety of ways of measuring progress (one respondent regretted not having a national testing programme). Additionally, teachers made assumptions about the causes and the actuality of “summer fade”.

All secondary school teachers spoken to valued the liaison with their contributing schools and had linkages in place. Common to all were visits by deans to contributing schools, collection of progress reports on pupils, parent evenings, some form of “open days” that included parents and community involvement, and contributing school visits to secondary schools that involved senior secondary students in guided tours for the newcomers. They used the strategy of involving Year 13 students as mentors to Year 9 students on the first day of school, in a setting where the pupils were relatively unencumbered with coping with organisational matters because there were just Year 9 and 13 students in the school. They felt that in this way they provided an initial secure environment for year 9 students.

What varied was the range of liaison events in a given school, the span of time they covered, and differences in the data sought from contributing schools. The overall message from key informants was that investment of time and resources in liaison activities reduced transition-related anxiety, according to key informants.

Key informants also reported that most problems occur with students’ loss of motivation to learn and with lower-achieving students, especially boys (most suspensions are boys). All informants who were principals of secondary schools identified one contributing school as distinctly better than the others at preparing students for their school. Most principals viewed intermediate schools as offering the best preparation for secondary schooling, compared with full primary schools. There was little support among informants for the
development of middle schools beyond the current intermediate schools. As a result, delaying transition to secondary school was seen as undesirable.

**School choice**

Transition has become a more complex issue in recent years, particularly in terms of a more competitive educational climate and parental choice of schools (Klein, 1996). Popular secondary schools take pupils from many primary schools which means the break up of primary school peer groups when they go to secondary school. As a result many secondary schools conduct their own baseline tests as students arrive at the school, rather than relying on information from primary schools.

Wylie and Chalmers (1999), investigating schooling in Palmerston North, found that choice of secondary school was more likely to be based on information gathered from a school visit or information supplied by the school, and to take into account the choices of the student’s friends. When choosing a primary school, greater emphasis was placed on the advice of family and friends, and previous family attendance. A few parents of secondary school students were influenced by examination results and newspaper reports.

Parents choosing secondary schools and intermediates showed the greatest overall interest in having information about a range of aspects of the school, such as dress code, subject options, sports and arts options. Fewer parents at this level felt that they had sufficient information about school atmosphere and quality of teachers. However, it would appear that secondary schools generally provide more information to parents than do primary schools, although there is a trend for schools overall to provide more information.

Wylie and Chalmers (1999) found that at the beginning of the school year 45% of primary parents, 48% of intermediate parents and 61% of Year 7 and 8 children knew which school they wanted to attend or wanted their child to attend. Intermediate principals identified “location and precedent/tradition” as the main factors in secondary school choice. Choices were made between nearby single sex and co-educational schools. One principal felt that parental perception of student behaviour was a major factor. More parents with higher family income consulted ERO reports and used the experiences of family and friends. Those on lower incomes were more likely to seek advice from their child’s teacher or principal.

It was found that the most popular reasons for secondary school choice were: opportunities to participate in sport, music, arts and/or clubs; a wide range of subjects; that they felt comfortable in the school; that the school had the range of subjects that they wanted; that the school had a good record of academic success; a uniform; good buildings and facilities; and a good mix of students from different backgrounds. Principals had a wide range of reasons why they thought families chose the schools, including academic success, caring/friendly atmosphere, disciplined/ordered environment, provision of flexible learning programmes, or a range of subjects available. The views of parents and principals regarding school choice were not greatly different.

Palmerston North parents showed a high degree of satisfaction with secondary school. Most parents got their children into their first choice of school, but most were satisfied whether or not this was so (Wylie & Chalmers, 1999).
Summary

- Transition programmes that emphasise orientation and support are common.

- Continuity of curriculum suffers on transition. Few secondary schools have sustained linking arrangements focused on the learning progression of individual children.

- Little use is made of standardised achievement measures. Many secondary teachers prefer to apply their own entry assessment tests.

- Teaching expectations often differ between primary/intermediate and secondary school. Previous experience or achievement is often disregarded by secondary schools.

- Continuity of peer group appears to associated with continuity of achievement. Low achievers at primary/intermediate schools may do better with a new peer group at secondary school.
CHAPTER FOUR

ORGANISATIONAL ISSUES

The previous chapter reported literature about linkages between schools. This chapter focuses upon a closely-related matter, organisational issues that relate to transition.

In international and New Zealand literature it is common to find attention drawn to obvious differences between primary and secondary schools and the argument made that these are a major cause of anxieties for students transferring between the institutions (Davison, 1996: Pollard, 1984). On the other hand, there is no conclusive evidence about whether any negative effects last a long time. Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm and Splittgerber (2000) commented that these difficulties were soon overcome. Furthermore, the literature may have a tendency to relate problems with transition. Therefore, more needs to be known about the students for whom transition was a positive experience.

It was common for studies to claim that primary schools usually offered a more nurturing experience, a continuation of what had been experienced since the pupils entered school (e.g. Anderson et al, 2000). This included what is often called a largely child-centred approach to teaching, in a home-room environment. It also involved the use of large blocks of time, within which subjects were sometimes integrated, often within themes or units of work. This contrasted with the more specialised approach of secondary schools where teachers teach separate subjects (Ward, 2000). Caution has to be exercised over claims of “child-centred” or “subject-centred” teaching which can oversimplify a complex reality.

In a three tier system as in the USA or in New Zealand, where many children attend intermediate schools, the middle years between primary and secondary are contentious. (New Zealand intermediates are primary schools.) There was evidence in US literature that schooling for the middle years was most effective when it reflected the particular learning and social needs of the pupils and that a clear bimodal system of education (primary/secondary) did not cater for the education needs of pre-adolescents (Eyers, 1992; Wiles & Bondi, 1993). Yet grade organisation (the number of years accommodated by middle schools) was not a major determinant of the type of teaching practices in a school (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991).

New Zealand literature

In recent years, a few Year 7 and 8 intermediate schools in New Zealand have become “middle” schools by offering places to Year 9 and/or Year 10 students. One issue is whether the students who transfer to a secondary school in Year 10 or 11 can cope with the organisations and academic programme. Ward (2001) found that students coming in to Year 11 at New Zealand secondary schools from one of these new middle schools were adequately prepared scholastically for Year 11 programmes. His study confirmed that the pupils’ scholastic attainments, in terms of passes in the external School Certificate examination, were achieved on the basis of the Year 9 and 10 integrated programme of the middle school, rather than the specialist (separate subject) programme of the secondary school.
Wylie and Chalmers’ (1999) study of schooling in Palmerston North, however, found a high degree of satisfaction with secondary schools and little interest in middle schools or senior schools. “Intermediate schools are a waste of time and money” one secondary school parent is reported as saying (Wylie & Chalmers, 1999). Instead, they found an interest in more full (Year 1-8) primary schools, and general satisfaction with the status quo. Principals and teachers reported a trend towards parents “seeking a more traditional/conservative secondary education for their child”, whilst at the same time having higher expectations than ever of the school.

Wylie and Chalmers’ (1999) Table 29, Preferences for secondary school learning arrangements and programme features shows that more students preferred to have some classes with different students rather than all classes with the same students even at Year 7 and 8. By Year 10, the number of students favouring having the same students in all their classes had reduced by half from the Year 7 and 8 figures. This suggests that students had not only adjusted to the different class arrangements at secondary school, but that they preferred these arrangements.

**Management of transition in New Zealand**

In New Zealand, schools have managed transition in a variety of ways (which was referred to in an earlier chapter, especially McGee, 1987), by a focus on orientation and support. The Education Review Office (1994) reported that:

- many orientation programmes began with introductory activities in the year before the transition occurred. Others focussed on the first weeks or even the first year in the new school;
- many secondary schools operated a Peer Support programme where a senior student met with a group of about five junior students on a regular basis. The senior students underwent initial training with a teacher who was responsible for the programme, then received ongoing training and teacher support as the programme progressed;
- achievement information forwarded by primary and intermediate schools supplemented secondary school diagnostic testing of new students for appropriate placement; and
- junior schools rarely sought feedback about the success of their students in their secondary schooling, but such information has been used successfully to modify and develop teaching programmes in order to raise achievement standards.

Hunua Primary School is one school that has surveyed teachers and ex-students attending the local high school to assess the level of successful transition (Foster, 1998). The results were an increased awareness of the environmental differences between the schools and an identification of the barriers to learning at the transitional stage.

A study of transition (referred to earlier) to year 11 in secondary school by a group of year 10 students from one of New Zealand’s first middle schools (Ward, 2001) added to the knowledge about transition in three ways:
given timetable and map support, the adjustment phase within the secondary school was shorter than the literature suggested;

those who chose to delay transition to secondary schools considered it worthwhile academically and socially; and

although transition was generally perceived to be readily accommodated, each pupil had personally stressful experiences associated with transition.

The data collected by Ward (2001) concerning the evolution of a middle school and the transfer of its first pupils to secondary schools suggested significant implications for the provision of middle schooling:

parents who had children attend both the Middle school and secondary school favoured the environment offered by the Middle School and would repeat the experience were the choice offered, and

many of the issues traditionally associated with transition to a larger institution were not apparent when pupils from the first year 10 class moved into their secondary schools.

However, only a minority of Year 8 students took the Year 9 middle school option, and their experiences would need to be compared with those of Year 9 students. Interviews with key informants revealed that non favoured the extended middle school as an option. Two principals of secondary schools suggested an earlier transition stage, at the beginning of Year 8. Most key informants acknowledged the challenges to students associated with transition. However they readily suggested supportive measures within schools to counteract stressful situations. These included peer support programmes, home-room time, and easy access to form deans. One asserted that attendance at a middle school exacerbated any problems. Another attributed easy transition to a common outdoor experience for all Year 9 pupils in the first week of their secondary schooling.

**International literature**

Several USA studies indicated that providing students with a challenging and supportive middle school experience was an important factor in their making a successful transition into high school (Belcher & Hartley, 1994; Mizelle, 1995; Oates, Flores & Weishaw, 1998). Teacher continuity seems to be important. Mizelle (1995) found that students who stayed together with the same teachers through 6th, 7th and 8th grades, and experienced more hands-on, life related learning activities, integrated instruction, and co-operative learning groups, were more successful in their transition to high school than were students from the same school who had a more traditional middle school experience which copies organisational features of secondary schools.

Some organisational changes have been tried in order to increase the level of student engagement. For example, school structural options that responded to adolescents’ transition needs in Canada have included middle schools, junior high schools, “cycles” within schools and “foundation” programmes for grades 9-10. Lounsbury (1996) suggested that to facilitate successful transition, all options needed to have many of the following characteristics worked into an organisational school framework:

- teaching of a core curriculum;
- high expectations for all students;
• empowering teachers to make curriculum decisions;
• teachers trained and committed to work with adolescents;
• fostering of health and fitness of students;
• re-engaging families in the education of their children;
• connecting schools directly to their communities;
• a shared vision of education;
• an adult advocate for every student;
• a challenging, integrative and exploratory curriculum;
• varied teaching and learning styles;
• flexible organisational structures; and
• less emphasis upon formal tests and examinations and more on formative assessment.

In Australia the most urgent issue around the transition point between primary and secondary education was that students became less engaged (Bluett & Edgley, 2000), an issue referred to earlier. Schools in Victoria made organisational changes that included reducing the number of teachers that students have contact with by blocking subjects together and developing collaborative teams of teachers with special pastoral responsibility for groups of students (sub-school). In other parts of Australia, policy stated that schools should be structured for gradual transition from one class with one teacher to a number of classes with several teachers who are specialist subject teachers in the senior secondary school (Bezzina, 1988).

The Southern Regional Education Board (1998) in the United States recommended block scheduling in middle schools so students could study fewer subjects in greater depth, and develop greater understanding of content through comparing, analysing, summarising and reporting. They recommended lesson plans that focussed on what the students would do. Smaller classes, and small, personalised communities for learning, team teaching across subject areas, and providing students with guidance and advice, were thought to help achievement. Clear goals of academic achievement were needed, rather than helping students feel good about themselves. A focus on self-esteem and short-term instruction, rather than on academic achievement, led to students relearning content covered in earlier grades. Mac Iver (1990) made similar recommendations regarding strong application of sound transition practices.

School-based research (Beane, 1993; Lipsitz Mizelle, Jackson & Austin, 1997; Wood & Jones, 1997) showed that school learning environment for emerging adolescents should promote both academic and social development together if they were to be educationally effective. Reference has already been made to claims that schools at different levels have different characteristics: primary, intermediate and secondary schools. For example, primary teachers are regarded as “child-centred” and secondary teachers as “subject centred”. Organisationally, timetables are “blocked out” in primary schools and fragmented in secondary schools. Primary students are more dependent upon teachers, secondary students more independent. Such generalisations about schools, teachers and students should be viewed with caution, for there are in reality enormous differences within particular levels of schooling as well as between them.

**Structural issues**

Even so, research evidence indicates a close connection between school structure and student achievement and attitudes (refer to Brandsma & Doolaard, 1999; Ferguson &
Fraser, 1998), and distinctions are often drawn between primary and secondary schools. For example, student perceptions of classroom environment dimensions such as satisfaction, democracy and cohesiveness are related positively to student learning. Grady (1995) found that students in Tasmania still in primary school tended to see their classroom as being more satisfying and democratic than did their counterparts at secondary school.

Another example from Australia found that there was general agreement that there was a need for a critical review of educational structures, pedagogical practices, and curriculum offerings at middle and secondary schooling, and many schools have made changes in these areas (Kruse, 1996). The issue of organisational structure has been tackled in a variety of ways:

- team/small group model, where teachers work in teams of 3-5, and take responsibility for around three classes over a range of subjects. They model the team process for students, who also work in teams.
- mini-schools, sub-schools and strong house groupings have been used to develop feelings of belonging, and to promote smaller, more personalised learning environments;
- home room and pastoral care programmes provide guidance and support; and
- vertical modular grouping and multi-age elective programmes cater for individual differences and interests.

In a further study, out-of-school factors such as community support and resources had a direct influence on the achieved and anticipated student outcomes (Silins, Leithwood and Jantzi, 1994).

According to some researchers, school structures should be provided which take into account the special learning environment required by students in the process of moving from childhood to adulthood (Lawton, 1999). Group advisory periods for students help their emotional and academic well-being (Mac Iver, 1990). Progression between schools needs a curriculum which is operationally continuous and which allows children to position themselves, and be positioned by their teachers, according to the level of their own learning development (Nicholls & Gardner, 1999). These goals require changes to organisational structures.

**Administrative issues**

Organisation and structural issues include the timetabling of student classes. There are debates about how long blocks of time should be, to make sure there is enough time to focus on one topic or for students to engage in critical thinking and solve problems. Teachers who may see up to 180 children per day, have difficulty relating to each child individually (DeRouen, 1998). Effective methods for dealing with these problems include:

- form family units, or blocks where students who have the same core teachers, are provided with opportunities to bond with one another and to form helping relationships;
- establish cross-curricular instruction, where teachers have time to plan cross-curricular projects, discuss student behaviour and to meet as a team with parents;
• take proactive steps to avert discipline problems by forming special bonds with certain children; and
• eliminate the eight-period schedule; one middle school created an alternating-day block schedule where there were four 86 minute periods each day.
• place students in relatively small cohort groups for long spans of time (Kruse, 1996; DeRouen, 1996; Alspaugh, 1998).
• Create flexible schedules to support innovative, challenging curricula and instruction (Hopfenberg, 1991; Kruse, 1996; Green, 1997; DeRouen, 1998).
• discontinue whole group ability grouping and tracking (Russell, 1994).

All of these suggestions are, of course, open to debate about their utility and effectiveness.

Programmes for under-achievers

When USA high schools have adopted reforms aimed at providing an infrastructure for school improvement, it has been shown in one study that low-achieving students benefit the most (Felner, Primavera & Cauce 1981). In another study students from schools with practices aimed at improving teacher interaction and developing more personal support for students, including keeping students in the same homeroom throughout high school, bringing parents into school as volunteers, using interdisciplinary team teaching and developing smaller schools within schools, had higher learning gains in major subjects and were more academically engaged than traditional high schools (Lee & Smith, 1995, cited by Rice, 2001).

The most common reform for middle grade schools over the 20th century on the USA was to alter who attended, typically by altering grade span (Smith, 1997). This reform did not appear to make a difference to attainment.

Summary

• Some studies commented that the comparatively nurturing environment and child-centred approach to teaching offered by primary schools meant that transition to secondary schools was stressful.
• The difficulties some students have in transferring from the primary to secondary school structure have been found to be temporary.
• Prior to transition, students need to be held more responsible for their learning, to be taught about strategies for learning on their own, and to be provided with a more challenging curriculum, with clear goals of academic achievement.
• Holding high expectations of students increases achievement.
• Progression between schools needs a continuous curriculum which allows the positioning of students according to the level of their learning development.
• Low achieving students may benefit most from reformed school infrastructure that emphasises personal support for students, parent involvement, interdisciplinary team teaching and developing smaller schools within schools.
• Altering age span of schools does not appear to influence attainment.
• Well co-ordinated transition arrangements contribute to successful transition, and decrease adjustment time.
CHAPTER FIVE

PUPIL PERCEPTIONS

International literature on transition contains numerous references to difficulties faced by students as they approach transition and following it. The same is true of New Zealand literature. Yet it is known that many New Zealand secondary schools take steps to make transition a positive experience for students. But what do students think about it?

Workload and demand are major considerations for students. Fouracre (1993) studied Scottish students’ expectations of transfer and what actually happened after transfer. The secondary school workload was lower than many students had expected, including less homework. This raises the question of whether primary and secondary teachers understand each other’s work, and whether steps should be taken to ensure that they do. Green (1997) also found that many students in an Australian sample found secondary school academic work far less challenging than they had thought it would be. Some found that there was a lot of homework, often caused by disruptive behaviour (especially by boys) resulting in less work being achieved in class and so being given as homework. (Kirkpatrick, 1992; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997; Mullins & Irvin, 2000; also comment on lack of academic challenge in middle and secondary schools, see topic 1.)

The opportunity to make decisions about their academic work is important to many students. Whether students are given decision-making involvement over their own academic study – such as choice of topics – is related to how positive they are about their work (Midgley, Eccles & Feldlaufer, 1991).

It seems that many secondary schools take steps to ensure pupils are well prepared for transition, and that they settle into new routines with minimum disturbance. The degree to which previous achievement is built on varies from school to school and subject to subject. It also seems that much of students’ previous work is undervalued, which may result in unrealistic limits being set on what they can achieve in the early years of secondary school.

A longitudinal study of relevance to New Zealand was the 12 to 18 Project in Australia (Yates, 1999). The project built up biographies of students in several schools based upon their transition experiences and how their thinking about themselves and their schooling changed as they went through school. As such, the biographies did not provide statistical evidence about changes in achievement which might be related to transition and different school practices. The biographies showed that most primary students viewed their own upcoming transition to secondary school more positively than negatively - new subjects to be studied, new friends to be made, and the chance for more independence. Retrospectively, at the end of the first year of secondary schooling, the students made detailed observations of their experiences. At the forefront of their thinking were comparisons between different teachers. What students thought about a subject was dictated by what they thought about its teacher; a reminder of the impact of teachers. Yates also found confirmation of what had been found in other studies about how secondary teachers dealt with the students. The students felt that secondary teachers treated them as if they were immature and thought them younger than the final primary year teachers had done. There was somewhat of a paradox in before and after transition comments. While primary students looked forward to greater independence and less supervision, by the end of their first year of secondary school student comments showed
that they actually needed more care and attention from teachers to help their academic achievement. In other words, too much independence may come to mean lack of learning guidance and support. They reflected upon detailed help with learning from primary teachers; for example, with learning how to read.

There are calls for better sequencing of curriculum across schools to give students a sense of continuity. For example, Garton (1987) found that a sample of Australian students looked forward to going to secondary school to a greater extent if they had taken part in induction programmes. They were more positive than those who had not. The evidence from this study was that induction programmes need to take account of gender differences over what were seen as issues by students.

In terms of curriculum content, Yates (1999) found that many students were concerned that in their first year of secondary school they were studying too much content that they already knew, a matter raised earlier in this report. Boredom with their study was a major feature. In summary, many primary students are eager to leave for secondary schools, but soon look back with nostalgia about what they left behind – caring and closer relationships with teachers. It should be noted that the primary-secondary shift is not the first inter-school shift for many students. Measor and Woods (1984) suggested that some pupils’ expectation of harder schoolwork at secondary school threatened their self-image as competent learners. They found that, for many pupils, their confidence in themselves as high achievers, suddenly appeared fragile as transition approached. They report Nash’s (1973) comment that “schools teach hierarchal levels of self worth more successfully than anything else”. Measor and Woods (1984) found “status, competence and relationships … at the bottom of much of pupils’ anxiety”. Schaffer (1996) regarded the relationship between schooling and self-image as a reciprocal one. He suggested that schools affected the extent to which pupils saw themselves as being socially as well as academically successful. This was confirmed by Wood and Jones (1997) who suggested that educationally effective programmes for emerging adolescents should address both academic and social factors.

The above Australian research findings (Yates, 1999) differed from a recent American study (Murdock, Anderman & Hodge, 2000) which found that first year high school students reported that they felt greater teacher respect and support than they had had in middle schools. The researchers pointed out that these findings may be related to students’ stage of development, i.e. early adolescence, in middle schools where the students are 12 and 13 year olds. An important finding was that students who were at risk in their commitment to school and study at Grade 7 remained so in Grade 9. The implication is that intervention to help these students is needed prior to transition.

The 1989 Education Act in New Zealand allowed intermediate schools, traditionally set up to cater for the two-year transition period between primary and secondary school, to extend this to include years 9 and 10, thus forming three-year or four-year middle schools. Ward (2001) monitored both the expansion of a two-year school as years 9 and 10 were added, and the transition of the first year 10 class into year 11 at secondary schools. The perceptions of the pupils and their parents overwhelmingly supported the notion of delayed transition to secondary school, and especially for those pupils who foresaw difficulty in coping with secondary school at year 9, the middle school option was a viable alternative. The middle school was found to offer social and educational advantages to their students,
and in particular allowed more time for preparation for transition at year 11. But only a minority of students took up the middle school option.

Wylie & Chalmers (1999) found no interest amongst parents or students in having middle or senior schools in Palmerston North. This study suggested that parents of children attending primary schools rated the welcoming, pleasant and supportive aspects of their child’s school more highly than they did the school’s focus on learning and achievement, learning resources, feedback or the expectation they had of students. That these latter qualities are not so well achieved by the primary schools did not lead to overall dissatisfaction by parents. Intermediate and secondary schools were less likely to be rated highly by parents. Some parents of secondary school students rated “mutual respect and support” and “the provision of engaging learning resources which meet children’s needs” as poor or inadequate, although these were among parents’ priorities for preferred quality features. Ten per cent or more of parents rated as poor or inadequate communication between teachers and parents, feedback to students, a sense of community and high expectations of students. These appear to be the factors that would lead to achievement. However, fewer students than parents rated their school as poor or inadequate in terms of having high expectations of students. Perhaps students are more realistic about what they can achieve than are their parents.

**Anxiety**

Much has been written about student anxiety about transition which has been found to revolve around five major issues (Madge & Franklin, n.d.; Measor & Woods, 1984.):

- the size and more complex organisation of the new school;
- new forms of discipline and authority;
- new demands of work;
- the prospect of being bullied; and
- the possibility of losing one’s friends.

Wylie and Chalmers (1999) found that safety was one of the aspects of school quality that mattered to parents at all school levels, although they were most concerned about it at preschool level.

Perhaps too much has been made of student anxiety in reports on transition. It seems that most children adjust to the new school environment within six months, and many regain losses in performance by their second year (Mertin, Haebich & Lokan, 1989; Sebba, 2000). Nevertheless, research is needed on New Zealand students to see what concerns them, and how many of them are seriously affected.

Some researchers have focussed upon positive aspects, and Lucey and Reay (2000) saw the positive functions of anxiety as a part of the developmental process; an integral and necessary force in transitional states, particularly those connected to changes which impact powerfully on children’s construction of ‘self’. They argue that in order to gain freedom and autonomy from adult regulation one must be ready to relinquish some measure of protection which that regulation affords. They do caution, however, that although anxiety can be considered as central to the development of effective coping strategies, there is a level beyond which anxiety becomes counterproductive to the process of moving forward. And this is a matter that needs further investigation in New Zealand.
Summary

- Primary students view transition positively.
- Most students and parents in a New Zealand situation appeared to be happy with their secondary schools.
- Pupil anxiety has often been reported but recent research suggests that it is less severe than previously reported. Most children adjust to secondary school quickly.
- Some studies show that many students are not sufficiently challenged by secondary school academic work in the year or two following transition. Many students found secondary school workloads less than they expected.
- Students sometimes felt that their previous achievement was undervalued at secondary level.
- Better sequencing of curriculum across schools may give students a sense of continuity.
- After transition, students’ perceptions of the subjects they study are influenced by their relationship with the teachers of those subjects.
- The school affects the extent to which the students see themselves as being socially as well as academically successful.
- At-risk students need intervention prior to transition.
CHAPTER SIX

CULTURAL FACTORS

In a nation of cultural diversity such as New Zealand, it is important to access the impacts of transition upon different ethnic and cultural groups. The literature on this issue is disappointingly small, and much more is needed before impacts can be comprehensively assessed. This chapter outlines some research on Māori and Pacific students and some international research on minority students.

Little has been written specifically about Māori and Pacific students, as distinct from any other students experiences of transition to secondary school in New Zealand. Their progress through school has claimed some attention, but not the transition from one school to another, whether state secondary school, private school, or kura kaupapa Māori.

Bishop (2001) is leading a research study that is investigating the secondary school experiences of Māori students. The students have had a lot to say about their secondary teachers; how they (students and teachers) relate to one another; what teacher qualities the students relate to positively, and the perceived factors in the classroom that contribute to academic achievement and attitudes towards schools and teachers. Bishop’s work is of particular importance, for he has talked to a number of Māori students and found a considerable amount of disquiet among them about their schooling in Years 9 and 10. At this stage, it is not possible to say – from the personal contacts about the work – whether the students’ dissatisfaction is related to transition; or if it is related to other factors. But further work of this nature is urgently required. A report, Māori participation and performance in education (Else, 1997), discusses a Māori achievement gap but makes no mention of transition to secondary school contributing to this.

There is statistical evidence (NZ Ministry of Education, 2001) that Māori and Pacific students are over-represented in low decile schools. Parallels might be made with overseas situations. There is also statistical evidence of a problem with achievement. In 1999, leaving school with no formal qualification were 35% of Māori, 27% of Pacific students, and 17% of the total population. It is noticeable that many Māori gain post-school qualifications, and New Zealand-born Pacific students have a higher level of formal qualifications than Pacific students not born in New Zealand.

The well-documented school achievement gap between Māori and other New Zealanders is something that the education system has in recent years tried to address. Concerns are increasing as the number of Māori in schools is rising proportionate to the total number of children in school. DeBruin (2000) mentions long term attempts to bridge the achievement gap, including the Ten Point Plan for Māori education, the Māori Education Strategy, and the Pacific Island Education Plan. All these, she says, need to pay close attention to ways of making the school curriculum more suited to the needs of Māori and Pacific children. The Literacy Leadership programme also addressed this in Raising the Achievement of Māori students (2000) and Raising the achievement of Pacific students (2000). Gerritsen (1998) wrote of the need to find community solutions to the achievement gap between Māori and Pākehā. So far, though, none of the plans have focussed on transition between primary and secondary school. This situation signals a need for focused research.
Achievement may be seen differently by Māori, encompassing physical, emotional, and spiritual as well as intellectual growth (Hirsh, 1990). This perception of achievement may be more accepted by primary than by secondary schools. Preferred learning styles such as small group work, active learning and oral learning may be better accommodated within an integrated programme. Nevertheless, more work is needed to clarify what Māori mean when it is argued that the curriculum does not suit Māori students.

Research reveals some problems that may be exacerbated at transition. NEMP and other research concludes that Māori students have fewer opportunities to talk to others in class than non-Māori (Cazden, 1988; Flockton & Crooks, 1997). This can have detrimental effects on learning. Teachers’ questions should go beyond drawing out predetermined answers which may be culturally set (Bishop & Glynn, 1999). Mainstream schools may teach a low prevalence of Māori topics and themes or themes across the curriculum (Glynn, Atvars & O’Brien, 1999; Wagemaker, 1993). For children who have attended kura kaupapa Māori, transition to a mainstream secondary school can be challenging. Berryman (2001) looked at how one school prepared its students for reading and writing competently in English without compromising their attainment in Māori. A 10-week programme to achieve competence in English was run for Year 8 children. Berryman did not express doubts as to whether such a short programme would have a major and deep-seated impact upon preparedness for the Year 9 English-medium curriculum.

An audit of the quality of teacher training for the teaching of Māori students found that most needed to develop their programmes to equip teachers to teach Māori students effectively (State Sector Performance, Te Puni Kokiri, 2001). The report showed the need for training in building relationships with Māori students, having high expectations of them, and a positive attitude towards them, valuing the experiences they bring to the classroom.

The U.S. Teacher Education Task Force Report (American Council on Education, 1999) said that the quality of the teacher is the single most important determinant of effective learning and academic achievement. Teachers who believe in their self-efficacy are more likely to make the effort to understand how individual children learn, and therefore cater for them. In the New Zealand situation new teachers with low expectations of Māori students tend to conclude that students are “lazy” or “difficult” rather than to examine the appropriateness of their teaching techniques (State Sector Performance, 2001, p. 22). Bishop (in press) found that 60% of teachers thought that “kids don’t do well at school because of the problems they bring to school”.

The learning environment for Māori and Pacific students

As most kura kaupapa Māori are full primary schools, one might expect that some of the experiences of Māori students beginning to attend secondary schools would be similar to those of students moving from other full primary schools direct to secondary school. However, it must be remembered that kura kaupapa Māori are Māori medium schools with a particular philosophy and that students transferring into mainstream schools are entering a completely different learning environment. Issues for Māori students entering mainstream secondary schools include:
• There is some evidence that Māori and Pacific students do not in any great numbers get to attend what are considered by the general public to be the best secondary schools (Waslander & Thrupp, 1995: Nicholson & Gallienne, 1995).

• Bevan-Brown (2001), in an article about Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour mentions the ‘negative, stereotypical attitudes towards Māori learners and their families’ that need to be overcome before expectations for these students can be raised.

• Transition from Māori-medium schools to English-medium schools, which often takes place at Year 9.

• Transition from a mainstream primary school to a whānau grouping at secondary school. Schools must ensure that this grouping is beneficial to Māori students and not just a means of isolating them from the rest of the school.

• Retention of Māori children in the early years of mainstream schooling, making Māori children older and at a different stage of adolescence when they commence secondary school, and so less likely to complete a full secondary school course (McDonald, 1988).

Information for key informants suggested that many Māori students from kura kaupapa contributing schools have difficulty adjusting to secondary school. In part this is a factor of school size but also a change of school organisation, teaching methods, and curriculum. All acknowledged the special needs of Māori students, but most respondents set these in a wider multi-cultural context. All described support mechanisms but these were available for all cultures and not necessarily designed for Māori in particular. Two principals of secondary schools with a high predominance of Māori students suggested that postponing transition to secondary school allowed Māori students the opportunity to stay together; as one principal called it, “closely connected”. All acknowledged that a kura kaupapa environment was supportive but that at secondary level the curriculum was under-resourced. This was not necessarily a factor of financial deprivation but that there are insufficient texts written in Māori. There was frequent mention of Māori and Pacific students coming from the lower socio-economic levels. Most informants perceived a correlation between socio-economic status and adjustment and achievement. One respondent attributed socioeconomic factors as the major indicator of the “ability to cope” and academic achievement, what was referred to as “patterns along socio-economic lines”. Others implied this correlation.

While both contributing school and secondary school respondents saw value in extending a kura kaupapa environment into secondary schools, parent support would be on a socio-economic basis also. While small contributing school size was seen by some to favour Māori students, few regarded smaller secondary schools as having the same advantage. There was agreement that some change in teaching methods was needed for Māori students. Two respondents questioned how confident secondary teachers were in “making meaningful connections” with Māori students in learning contexts. Segregation into home-rooms for Māori students was not seen as the answer because it overlooked the diversity of students within the group. Māori and Pacific students were seen by many respondents to have greater transition problems than other students.
International experience of transition for minority culture students

Transferring from primary to secondary school not only involves making a transition between two cultures of schooling, it can also pose specific problems and concerns for students who do not belong to the ‘majority’ culture. Sensitivity to and awareness of similarities, personal, social and developmental needs of all young adolescents must be part of any transitional programme.

At the point of transition, the development of literacy skills in English may still need to be completed, so special care in continuity of support of students whose first language is not English is deemed essential (Collins & Harrison, 1998). In at least three regions of the United Kingdom the support service for teaching multilingual/ethnic minority school students has devised specific programmes of support. They are committed to ensure that teachers should:

• liaise by passing on full records from primary to secondary school;
• liaise personally with each other and the service on children with special needs;
• ensure that secondary teachers visit primary schools and meet students;
• consult with the service on attendance, family problems, etc, for follow up;
• encourage new pupils to join support networks such as homework clubs and
• ensure that schools implement policies on handling the specific learning needs of ethnic minority students and school-home-community links for their students.

The transfer experience for bilingual students can be likened to the experience of transferring to a new culture, where someone may at first embrace it wholeheartedly, then find it unacceptable, then experience the dislocations of old and new environments with their accompanying instabilities, and finally resolve these instabilities by understanding an insider perspective of the new environment (Morgan, 1999). In a small-scale survey of first-year pupils at a bilingual middle school in Austria, Morgan compared the experience of transfer from primary to secondary school with that of students in the mainstream and found that although both groups of students focused on issues that related to new arrangements e.g. more subjects, more teachers, different timetable, different facilities, increased workload, the enhanced learning and language support intrinsic to bilingual schooling provided a more conducive environment for the transferring pupil from the bilingual school. The study emphasised that the way bilingual schooling is viewed and how it integrates into national language policies can be more important than the particularities of any primary or secondary programme.

Steinberg, Dornbusch & Brown (1992) found that the difficulties of African American and Hispanic groups in gaining admittance to academic high schools (e.g. in New York), and their difficulties at secondary school generally, were exacerbated by parenting practices, familial values about education, beliefs about the occupational rewards of academic success and lack of peer support for academic success. Asian Americans did not experience the same difficulties because parental and peer support for academic success was strong. Some African American students found that peer support for academic success was so limited that they had to eschew contact with other African American students if they wanted to succeed at school (Steinberg et al, 1992).

Noguera (2002) found that lower drop-out rates and higher achievement were more likely if “students of color” attended small schools. Not all small schools, however, provided
students with opportunities to succeed. The achievement factors, along with smallness, were a clear mission that teachers, students and parents understood and found meaningful, skilled teachers knowledgeable in their subject areas and able to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning.

Black British parents have sometimes chosen a majority white secondary school for their children because the ‘system lets down children who attend schools where the majority are black’ (Noden, West, David & Edge, 1998). Research by Nicholson and Galliane (1995) suggests this may also be so in New Zealand for Māori and Pacific students.

Summary

- Transition can pose specific problems and concerns for students who do not belong to the majority culture.
- There is statistical evidence that Māori and Pacific students are over-represented in low-decile schools and that more Māori and Pacific students leave school with no formal qualifications than their European peer group.
- Efforts have been and are being made to address the Māori/pakeha achievement gap, but are not focused on transition.
- Teachers and students have different perceptions of where problems lie. Students tend to think there is a problem with delivery of programmes; teachers tend to think that the students bring problems with them.
- Research is underway into the attitudes of Māori children towards secondary school, but there is a need for focused research into how transition affects Māori children.
- Children who have attended kura kaupapa Māori need to achieve competence in English prior to transition to mainstream secondary school.
CHAPTER SEVEN

SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

In addition to cultural factors, socio-economic factors have an impact upon transition to secondary school. New Zealand literature is reported, followed by international literature. Attention is also drawn to family-related factors that enhance the quality of transition for students.

Much of what is written about the transition to secondary school of different socio-economic groups has a close relationship to what is said of ethnic and gender differences.

SES in New Zealand

Socio-economic status was listed in a report to the Ministry of Education on Improving Achievement as one of the factors that may lead to poor achievement in school, (NZ Ministry of Education, 1998). Case studies of secondary school systems that supported students at risk were detailed. These were all low-decile schools known to have high proportions of at-risk students and the focus of the report was on what the schools’ responses were to the needs of these students, including how they dealt with transition. The report listed the factors that contribute to the ease with which students adapt to secondary school and then considered each in turn, by referring to a case study of a low-decile school that had a transition programme in place. Alton-Lee and Praat (2000) also report that students in low decile schools from low decile communities

“did significantly more poorly on about three quarters of the assessed tasks or more for mathematics, social studies, literacy and information skills on National Education Monitoring Project tasks. In every case, students in the highest decile schools did better, on average, than students in the low decile schools” (p. 299).

Only on physical education tasks did students from low decile schools perform significantly better on some tasks.

The Smithfield Project in New Zealand found that it made little sense to directly compare the outcomes of schools if their student level intake variable related to performance (Hughes, Lauder, Watson, Strathdee, Simiyu & Hamlin, 1997, p. 4). They reported that they found no significant differences between schools regarding the educational self-concept of students (p. 77). Academic achievement appeared to have remained stable over the transition. Form 2 PAT and Smithfield scores were related to fourth form scores (Hughes, et. al., 1997, p. 80). The Smithfield Project suggested that some low socio-economic status schools entered a “spiral of decline” (Lauder, Hughes, Waslander, Thrupp, McGlinn, Newton & Dupuis, 1994, p. 12). Issues of school choice and school popularity were “linked to questions of class and ethnic prejudice” (Lauder et al, 1994, p. 12). “Schools with small proportions of Pakeha and high SES students were the ones whose rolls were declining over the period of the study (Hughes, Lauder, Watson, Strathdee & Simiyu, 2000, p. 19). It “was mainly the well-off who managed to send their children to other than local schools under zoning” (Lauder et al, 1994, p. 33).

A study of schooling in Palmerston North (Wylie & Chalmers, 1999) found that when ranking schools, the only quality ranked significantly differently by parents with higher
incomes was that “teachers, students and parents believe in the value of education”. Few other differences were apparent between socio-economic groups, except that children from families with lower incomes (less than $30,000 per annum) were more likely to change schools than children from higher income families. This appears to be related to low income families lack of permanent homes and work, rather than a decision based on school choice.

Waslander & Thrupp (1995) support the idea that in a New Zealand context the socio-economic composition of school intakes may have a significant contextual effect on student achievement, and that working class students may be advantaged by attending schools that have significant numbers of middle class students. Students going to their nearest school come from a lower SES than students attending schools further away. The greater success of both boys and girls in single-sex schools in New Zealand appears to be due to the tendency of these schools to attract students from higher social classes (Hill & Hawk, 2000).

Overall achievement of students in a school may be more related to their socio-economic status than to any other factor. Nicholson & Gallienne (1995) looked at the reading achievement of thirteen year olds in their first year at secondary school in two contrasting socio-economic areas in New Zealand. While children in ‘Middletown’ had scores close to the national average, working class children had scores skewed toward the low end, with 9% above the national average and 91% below. Pupils were more likely to be successful at reading if they attended schools where most of the children were middle class. These results have implications for Māori and Pacific Island students, as well as SES. Ability to read is necessary to most secondary school courses, so these results carry strong implications for achievement at secondary school. Overseas research links reading scores with general achievement. New Zealand has very high achievement levels by international standards, and a bigger range than most countries; a high top, a relatively high middle, but a trailing bottom in achievement levels (Wilkinson, 1998; Programme for International Student Assessment, 2001). There have been many initiatives in New Zealand to attempt to raise the reading levels of low achievers, the latest of which is the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

Another example of an initiative to raise the achievement of students in schools in lower socio-economic areas is discussed in a report to the Ministry of Education by Hill and Hawk (2000). The project was called Achievement in Multi-Cultural High Schools’ Project (AIMHI). It was based on the Ministry of Education strategic plan for Pacific Islands education launched in 1995, and was set up to raise the achievement of Māori and Pacific students in eight low decile secondary schools. The researchers observed lessons in multi-cultural secondary schools in a broad range of subjects across year levels 7 to 13. At the beginning of the year teachers worked with their classes to establish “ground rules” (Hill & Hawk, p. 53). This gave the students a clear idea about what the teachers’ personal expectations were and encouraged group cohesion. The report describes how teachers used student-centred teaching techniques and provided positive feedback, sometimes given step-by-step, that helped the students learn more easily. Successful teachers talked about accommodating different learning styles, but it was more common for teachers to talk about providing variety and making learning fun.

Over the 1990s, the Assessment for Better Learning Programme (AbeL) was instigated in both primary and secondary schools in New Zealand. This was a programme applied by
Ministry of Education contracted providers. In 2000 an evaluation of this scheme was completed (Auckland Uniservices Ltd, 2000). Unfortunately this evaluation was able to include only one secondary school in its data. The document consequently has nothing to say about transition to secondary school. A key informant was interviewed regarding the AbeL programme for this review.

All the key informants interviewed made clear links between socio-economic status and the ability to cope, a finding mentioned in the previous chapter. All acknowledged that students from higher socio-economic backgrounds coped better students saw longer-term purposes for their learning. Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds tended to take leadership roles and were more likely to eventually become house captains or peer-tutors.

Lower SES students were seen to find transition more problematic because coping with change was associated with issues that the students might have grappled with throughout their schooling, particularly learning. Coping with different teaching styles at secondary level was seen as a significant problem.

One principal of a predominantly Māori secondary school suggested that transition problems for low socio-economic status pupils were reduced by shared experiences at the start of Year 9. In this case, Year 9 students spent the first week of school at a kapa haka camp, culminating in a school house regatta. The shared experiences were a leveller for all and were seen to avert major transition problems. Other schools, too, had shared peer support programmes, but these varied in nature and duration.

To informants traced behaviour issues of 15 and 16 year olds from low SES backgrounds to earlier school experiences, particularly in Years 9 and 10. One considered that the option of an alternative Year 9 – 10 programme was beneficial.

The principal of a kura kaupapa school attributed the ability to cope solely to SES status. The more affluent parents sent their children to “better” schools. Less affluent parents were seen to be more likely to send their children to the local school. Conversely, another school principal regarded the link between achievement and low SES as a myth to be dispelled.

Generally, the ability to cope was a factor of the effectiveness of linkages prior to transfer, the early experiences at secondary school and the ability to relate to teachers. More distant links were made with school size and vertical grouping. But the causal factors related to coping are very complex, and perhaps some key informants tended to oversimplify.

**SES and transition internationally**

Parents differ in the specific strategies they use to help their children through school, and this affects children’s school achievement. If the child’s home environment is not aligned with that of the school, parental support is less likely to be effective. In the U.K. lower SES parents, although confident in the primary school situation, did not know how to go about seeking the school’s help in the secondary school (Eltis, Law, Adams & Cooney, 1987). Baker & Stevenson (1986) found in the U.S. that the implementation of strategies varied by socio-economic status of the mother, even when they controlled for child’s academic performance. Mothers who had a college education knew more about their child’s school
performance, had more contact with teachers, were more likely to take action to manage their child’s academic achievement, and more likely to choose college-preparatory courses for their child at high school level, irrespective of the child’s academic performance. Mothers with a college degree were only active when their child’s performance required assistance, but they perceived the transition to high school as such a time. The influence of effective parents was cumulative. Rice (2001) found, however, that parent support had little effect on buffering problems associated with transition.

Hoy, Hannum & Tschannen-Moran (1998) looked at the effect of school climate on student achievement, and concluded that it was especially important in the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. High performance schools were those where teachers liked and respected their colleagues and were committed to their work and students. Teachers saw the principal as their ally in the improvement of instruction, committed to high standards of performance by them and their pupils. Their study showed that while the socio-economic status of the community is a strong predictor of student achievement, organisational climate variables were important in explaining achievement independent of socio-economic status. They felt that an emphasis on openness and the healthy social and personal development of adolescents was important to the academic effectiveness of all schools, although their research was in a middle school context.

Noden, West, David & Edge (1998) looked at school choices made on transition to secondary school in London. Middle class families tended to prefer selective schools or schools which were higher scoring in terms of performance. This in turn tended to increase the performance of those schools. About two thirds of applicants got their first choice of school, consistently across social classes, with slightly more middle class children getting their first choice. Middle class children who did not get their first choice of school ended up in high scoring schools, while working class children who did not get their first choice ended up in low scoring schools. The researchers thought that parents generally made applications according to realistic assessments of their child being offered a place. Costs such as travel were also a factor in choices for working class parents (Noden et al, 1998). The Smithfield Project in New Zealand made similar findings (Lauder, Hughes, Waslander, Thrupp, McGlinn, Newton & Dupuis, 1994). Attendance by low socio-economic groups at their nearest schools makes it more likely that they will move with their cohort to the next school, so that changes in achievement are less likely to occur.

Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell & Feinman (1994) found that transition was related to a decline in the self-esteem, class preparation, and grade-point average of poor urban youth which was common across ethnicity and gender. Poor adolescents must cope with: accommodation to a large, impersonal and bureaucratic educational milieu (Seidman et al, 1994); a dramatic increase in disciplinary specialisation; an increase in rules and regulations; an increase in the number of teachers and other school personnel; a new set of school peers with consequent interpersonal tests; a decrease in the number of extracurricular activities they can be involved in; greater anonymity; increased disengagement with school (Simmons & Blyth, 1987); fewer opportunities for decision making; lower levels of cognitive involvement; greater control exerted by teachers over student behaviour (Midgley & Feldlaufer, 1987); increased daily hassles with school; decreased school support; decreased involvement with school; decreased daily hassles with peers; peer values become more nonconforming. Lee & Smith (1997, cited by Rice,
reported that the negative effect of school size is most pronounced on students of low socio-economic status.

Eltis et al (1987) found that higher SES children had greater confidence and greater academic achievement, and that although lower SES children gained more on transfer to high school they did not reach the same level. Simmons, Black & Zhou (1991) noted that the relatively greater increase in problem behaviour and suspension/probation of African-American males was present only for the lower SES groups and disappeared within the highest class group. Is it the same for Māori and Pacific students?

Social advantages tend to compound. Smith (1999) found that students who attended schools with a full transition programme that targeted students and parents and staff were also more advantaged by family income, parental education and occupational status. Schools that offered partial transition programmes, or none, had lower SES and fewer aggregate resources from parents.

**Family support**

Family support is linked to achievement after transition. Several U.S.A. studies have shown that these factors promote school success after transition to secondary school:

- presence of books in the home,
- a place in the home to study,
- parents maintaining rules limiting television viewing,
- frequency of checking on homework,
- parents discussion of schoolwork with their children,
- parent participation in parent-teacher organisation,
- parents monitoring their child’s social life and creating a positive peer network for them,
- parent monitoring their child’s academic progress,
- parents knowledge of school structure and bureaucracy,
- self-confidence in making demands of the school and to intercede on their child’s behalf when necessary,
- ability to provide time, energy and money for resources, and
- ability to wield their resources in supervising, monitoring and supporting their children at home and at school (Catterall, 1998; Falbo, Lein & Amadow, 2001; Falbo & Lein, 1999; Rice, 2001).

Parental involvement is seen by researchers as important in transition. Parents need to attend meetings to discuss transfer arrangements and choices of schools. Meetings between teachers need to take place, and common understanding of curriculum arrived at (Nicholls & Gardner, 1999; Mac Iver, 1990). Williamson & Johnston (1998) found that underlying many parent concerns was a belief that American middle level schools lacked academic rigour. In one school, an examination of results on state achievement tests revealed a persistent pattern of underachievement by minority students; the school acknowledged its areas of weakness and used them as an opportunity for greater collaboration with parents to design solutions. Prior experience also affects success at secondary school.
Children with low achievement prior to high school may lack basic skills necessary to move on to more advanced levels, and may be less skillful in adjusting to change in teaching style and pedagogy (Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991). Low achievement in primary or middle school may mean that low academic demands are made at secondary level.

**Summary**

- SES is a factor that may lead to poor achievement. Secondary schools with low SES students generally have programmes in place to support students at risk.

- Students from low SES families have lower reading scores than children from high SES families. Reading is indicative of overall achievement.

- Several initiatives have attempted to raise the achievement of low SES students, e.g. AIMHI, AbeL.

- Clear goals and positive feedback have been found to help students in low-decile multi-cultural secondary schools.

- Family support is linked to achievement after transition and the influence of effective parents is cumulative.

- Where the student’s home environment is aligned with that of the school. Parental support is more effective and student achievement is higher.

- Social advantages tend to compound. Full transition programmes are more available to, and benefit more, middle to upper SES groups.

- New Zealand students in single-sex schools tend to achieve more highly than their co-educational counterparts – single-sex schools tend to attract students from higher social classes.

- Students from lower socio-economic families may be advantaged by attending schools with significant numbers of middle-class students.

- Lower SES families are less likely to be able to attend a highly regarded school.

- The negative effect of school size is more pronounced on low socio-economic students.
CHAPTER EIGHT

GENDER DIFFERENCES

There is a mixture of single gender and co-educational secondary schools in New Zealand. An on-going issue is whether academic attainment and social adjustment are affected by a school’s gender mix, and in particular, whether there are gender issues related to transition to secondary school.

New Zealand literature

Internationally, there has been concern recently that girls are achieving better than boys at school. However, in a recent literature review covering gender differences in learning, Alton-Lee and Praat (2000; 2001) show how in New Zealand this may be dependent upon subject area and how it may change as students move on from transition. For example, they found gender-specific differences in health and physical education, girls performing higher in the former, and boys in the latter. Although boys, comparatively, had a problem with literacy linked to the English curriculum, there was no gender effect apparent in the literacy assessment tool in science (Alton-Lee & Praat, 2000). The researchers were concerned about “boys’ poorer performance in information skills, because these enable access to information across the curriculum” (Alton-Lee & Praat, 2000, p. 295).

Transition appears to have a positive effect, particularly on the performance of boys, in maths and science. Performance of both boys and girls at primary level is low by international standards. The TIMSS assessments at secondary school leaving age indicate improvements by senior level, and boys are doing significantly better at school leaver age. Contrarily, girls do better on national assessments. The NEMP studies show that both boys and girls that are doing particularly poorly “are those in low decile schools from low decile communities” (Alton-Lee & Praat, 2000, p. 299).

Wright (2000) wrote that the community worries about boys doing less well than girls in a way that they do not worry when girls do less well than boys. It seems clear that in society it is not causing a problem for boys when they seek employment (also true in the U.K., Epstein, Elwood, Hey & Maw, 1998). Jones (1999, A13) wrote that while boys may see study as girls’ work, authority and status are not. “The message for (middle-class) boys is that being male may be more beneficial than studying”. Jones argued that it is not boys as a group who are failing, it is Māori and Pacific Island boys and girls. Wright agrees, saying it is a matter for concern that we do not appear to notice that middle and upper class white boys are still doing as well as ever (Wright, 2000). Eltis, Low, Adams & Cooney (1987) found this to be so in the U.K. The concern about boys’ progress does not appear to be linked to transition. Overseas literature suggests that it is girls who are most negatively affected by transition (see below).

It is possible that the school type plays a role in differences in achievement and to this end Wagemaker (1993) compared reading achievement of New Zealand 9 and 14 year-olds in co-educational primary schools and in both single-sex and co-educational secondary schools. He found that apart from boys having higher mean scores than girls in the document domain, there were no statistically significant differences in the mean scores between the boys and girls single-sex schools. However, when compared with the co-educational schools in terms of an average composite score, the single-sex schools were
found to have a higher mean score (Wagemaker, 1993, p. 46). But the girls in co-educational schools showed only slightly lower levels of performance at domain level and overall when compared with girls at single sex schools. Hill and Hawk (2000) conclude that the weight of evidence suggests that the achievement of boys and girls is not significantly affected by whether they attend single sex or co-educational schools. Selection factors, that is, the tendency of single sex schools to attract higher social classes, probably account for the differences that have been observed (Hawk & Hill, 2000; Wagemaker, 1993, and others).

Disruptive students affect boys’ learning more than that of girls in the New Zealand situation (Wright, 2000) and overseas. Three quarters of the children suspended from school are boys (Sturrock, cited by Alton-Lee & Praat, 2001, p. 23), the vast majority in the two or three years following transition. However, as is the case overseas (Williams, 2002), these comparisons may be misleading because girls simply stay away from school without any formal arrangement being made. At primary school, the pattern of bullying was similar across ethnic groups and there were no gender differences. Bullying was more prevalent among boys than girls at age 13. There was evidence that boys were hassled for achieving in the arts at secondary school (Alton-Lee & Praat, 2001). Peer group pressure is not confined to boys – gifted girls often “go underground” at adolescence because “they realise that it is no longer socially safe” to be intelligent (Hoddinott, 2000).

Internationally there appear to be subject differences. In the U.K., girls out perform boys at age 7, 11 and 14 in National Curriculum assessment in English. Achievements in maths and science are broadly similar between boys and girls (Epstein et al, 1998). Under the U.K. National Curriculum there was concern that girls, low achievers, gifted pupils, pupils with different ethnic backgrounds and pupils with special needs all tend to fail to realise their full potential in science. This tendency can be traced back to early days in secondary school. “There is a gender division of knowledge within the education system and the subjects in which girls predominate are not those which ensure entry into high status occupations” (Sikes & Measor, 1992). Hirsch and Rapkin (1987) undertook a longitudinal study into the transition to junior high school (America) and found that girls reported a significantly greater decline than boys in commitment to school. Croll (1983) found that girls did better than boys in the first year of transition to secondary school although they did not always feel as though they were doing better. Thom (2002) also reports that girls feel less confident of their mathematics skills than boys, although evidence in the last decade has generally found girls doing better than boys in all subjects, including mathematics and science (Bower, 2002; Francis, 2000; Thom, 2002).

Parents and teachers have different expectations regarding male and female mathematics achievement, and encourage males more than females to achieve in maths (Brusselmans-Dehairs, Henry, Beller & Gafini, 1997). 75% of girls perceived maths as being ‘different’ from primary school in the way it was presented, and feared to ask for help (Truran, 1990).

Traditionally secondary schools have ‘offered a much more sex-segregated curriculum to pupils than primary schools’. Pupils come to see school subjects as being only suitable, or more suitable, to one gender. Girls still tend to take biology rather than chemistry or physics (Sikes & Measor, 1992). Girls start high school with a more negative attitude to science than boys, and this increases with the high school experience. Ferguson & Fraser (1998b) investigated girls’ and boys’ perceptions of the learning environment in sciences and found that while both genders perceived a decrease in friction and difficulty across the
transition, perceptions of classroom cohesiveness decreased more for girls than for boys. Girls said that teachers did not understand their interests or needs in science, and shifted their attention to matters that did meet their needs, such as social events outside the classroom.

Regarding attitudes and behaviour

An association between self-confidence and performance is strong and consistent with boys, but neither as strong nor as consistent with girls. Even when girls do better they often have a lower self-image (Brusselmans-Dehairs et al, 1997). Girls are more prone to depressive symptoms in adolescence, related to school change (Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987). In the U.S.A. pubertal status in 7th grade was significantly related to subsequent depressive symptoms (Ge, Conger & Elder, 2001; Hirsh & Rapkin, 1987). Girls experience decline in self-esteem and increases in depression in the first year in junior high (Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987). Perceptions of teacher understanding are particularly important to girls because, for them, a positive teacher/student relationship is directly related to positive class and subject attitudes (Ferguson & Fraser, 1998b). Boys have more negative attitudes towards schools and learning and display more anti-learning behaviour. In turn, teachers interact more negatively with boys than they do with girls (Sukhandan, 1999). When making a choice of secondary school London parents of girls were more likely to prefer a single-sex school to parents of boys. Boys were perceived to comprise a threat to girls’, or even to each others’, education (Noden, West, David & Edge, 1998). There are dangers in introducing ‘boy-friendly’ teaching styles and classroom environments that have negative connotations for girls. Girls “should not be exploited to police, teach, control and civilise boys” (Sukhandan, 1999).

All the key informants’ comments could be grouped into two themes: first, all considered that girls coped better than boys because they had fewer problems. Boys tended to be more disruptive than girls and tended to socialise around sporting connections. Girls socialised in friendship groups and appeared more attentive to schoolwork requirements. Suspensions at Year 9 and 10 were predominantly boys. Second, the issues of gender were subsumed by more dominant variables such as liaison measures, attention to class placement and linkages.

Summary

- Gender differences have been and, although to a lesser extent, still are related to subject area.

- The experience of transition may be affected by subject choice on entry to secondary school.

- Attendance at single-sex or co-educational schools does not appear to have significant effects on achievement once SES factors have been taken into account.

- At the time of transition girls’ attitudes towards teachers and learning are different from those of boys. The tendency to ‘teach the boys’ because they need more help or make more demands is considered unfair and exploitative by some researchers.
FINAL COMMENTS

Following a review of international and New Zealand educational literature, it is clear that there is a considerable amount of international concern about transition from primary to secondary school. In the case of New Zealand, comparatively little research has been carried out on transition.

Consequently, there are numerous gaps in what is known about transition. Much of the New Zealand information is anecdotal, and there is a shortage of research information that links transition to school achievement. Furthermore, much more needs to be known about different student populations, for example, Māori, Pacific groups and other ethnic groups, low achievers, high achievers, boys, girls, and different socio-economic groups.

Key points are summarised at the end of each chapter reporting on the eight major themes: academic attainment, social adjustment, linkages between schools, organisational issues, pupil perceptions, cultural factors, socio-economic factors, and gender differences.
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SOME WEBSITES:


http://www.dfes.gov.uk/index.htm

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