

YEAR 8

Easing the Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling: Helpful information for schools to consider



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Primary to Secondary Schooling:
Helpful information for schools to consider

Research Division

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The Transition Study team

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Preliminary Note

The present report is the last in a series of three. Each report presents findings from a Ministry of Education project *A Study of Students' Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling*¹.

The first of the previous two reports documents students' patterns of achievement as they transition from their final year at primary or intermediate school to their first year at secondary school (Year 9) and on into Year 10.

The second report in the series has a key focus on 'student voices', detailing students' views and experiences before, during and in the year following the transition to secondary schooling.

This third report, *Easing the Transition*, presents teacher and parent perspectives regarding the transition. It also incorporates key ideas from the previous two reports, supplemented by material from other sources, and identifies areas of focus for facilitating the primary to secondary schooling transition. It provides research-informed ideas and suggestions expected to be helpful for schools and teachers in their work with transitioning students. Suggestions for maximising students' experiences at school beyond the immediate transition are also offered.

Details of the previous reports are given on page 12.

¹ This study and the resulting reports are also part of a wider Ministry research and development programme to do with the teaching and learning needs of middle years (Years 7 to 10) students. More information about the work within this programme can be found on the Te Kete Ipurangi (TKI) Online Learning Centre website (<http://www.tki.org.nz/>) under the New Zealand Curriculum: <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/middleschooling>

Key Points

Students often anticipate the move from primary to secondary schooling with mixed emotions, especially when the transition also involves a change of school. And, for most students, as well as anticipating the move over a number of weeks or months, there is also a period of adjustment after the move takes place. How well students are equipped for and cope with this period of adjustment can have a critical influence on their ongoing education and future goals.

Outlined below are some main findings from the primary to secondary schooling transition study which are particularly relevant to the discussion in this report. These are followed by a summary of the major themes discussed in this document.

Major Findings from the Transition Study

- Most students quite quickly adapted to the more **immediate** changes inherent in a move from primary to secondary school², such as finding their way around in the new school, moving classes, becoming familiar with different rules and routines, and making new friends.
- Also, by the end of their first year at secondary school:
 - overall, Year 9 students reported many positive experiences at school;

- in the majority of cases, after a dip earlier in the year, in mathematics in particular, students' asTTle³ test results revealed sound or good achievement gains; and
- few students expressed a desire to 'go back to how things were' at primary or intermediate school.

- But, at the same time, the Year 8–9 transition represented a time of significant, deeper-level change and was generally 'unsettling' for students.
- Other significant findings included that for an important minority of students (around 10%), the Year 8 to Year 9 transition was a particularly challenging time, academically and/or socially, and exacerbated in some cases by emotional issues or difficult home circumstances. Late in Year 9, some of these students continued to express a preference for primary over secondary schooling.
- Evidence from other recent studies, as well as the transition study itself, show that during the middle years of schooling (Years 7 to 10) more vulnerable students in terms of their progress and well-being at school tend to become increasingly disengaged from learning and from school generally.⁴ This puts them at particular risk of achieving few if any qualifications to equip them for a positive future and of dropping out of school altogether.

² Similar findings have been reported by Evangelou et al (2008), for example.

³ asTTle refers to 'Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning. For more information about asTTle, refer to footnote 6 on p.13.

⁴ Ministry of Education statistics show that truancy, stand-down and expulsion rates escalate in the middle years, especially among some groups of students.

Overall Themes in this Report

On the basis of our transition study findings and other data it is evident that:

- Effective short-term transition strategies are necessary to prepare students well for secondary school and help them settle in.
- A vital element in effective transition strategies is that of closer links and more focused communication between teachers and schools in each of the sectors regarding aspects of teaching and learning, and student well-being, achievement and progress.
- As well as shorter-term strategies to address the transition event itself, there is also a strong need to address deeper-level issues in order to ensure that students get the best out

of their schooling and achieve and progress appropriately over time.

- One of two particular ongoing challenges in seeking to address deeper-level issues beyond the transition event itself concerns the fostering of various key relationships — at school, at home, and between school and home — in students' lives in relation to their progress and development. The second concerns supporting students to remain engaged in learning as they proceed through their schooling, an essential precursor to positive achievement outcomes.

CHAPTER 1:

Introduction



Children/young people make educational transitions when they begin school, progress through year levels, transfer between schools, move from primary to secondary schooling, and when they move from secondary to tertiary education and beyond.

Any transition poses challenges for schools, children and parents.

As stated by Sanders et al (2005), during transitions children/young people need to acclimatise to new surroundings, adapt to new ways of working, make sense of new rules and routines, and interact with unfamiliar adults and peers.

Transition as Event and as Process

Despite the inherent complexity suggested in the previous sentence, anecdotal and other evidence indicates that transition points, including the Year 8 to Year 9 transition, are frequently largely regarded as quite short-term 'events'.

However findings from our transition study and the work of other researchers who have investigated transition points (eg, Hughes et al, 2008; Dockett and Perry, 2001) show that the transition from primary to secondary schooling needs to be seen as a **process** in which students are required to make ongoing adjustments over quite some time.

A young person's ability to respond to the added challenges that a transition is likely to present may

be pivotal in how he or she progresses and develops. There is evidence — for example, from Wylie et al's (2006, 2008) longitudinal *Competent Learners* study — that young people experiencing particular difficulties at school at the time of transition are at considerably greater risk of poorer outcomes over the longer-term if their difficulties are not well recognised and addressed.

Schools therefore have a responsibility to provide systems, structures, and strategies that welcome and support their newest students if they are to meet Ministry of Education schooling goals⁵ concerning the provision of the best possible education pathways for all students.

The concept of transition as encompassing both event *and* process is integral to the ideas and discussion presented in this report.

The Purpose and Content of the Report

The aim of this report has been to provide helpful information, insights, and suggestions primarily for those in schools (but also parents and others) who are involved in the transition from primary to secondary schooling and beyond.

⁵ Exemplified, for example, by the Ministry policy documents, *Ka Hikitia—Managing for Success: Māori Education Strategy 2008–2012*, and the *Pasifika Education Plan 2009–2012*.

The report is mostly informed by findings from an in-depth exploratory project, *A Study of Students' Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling* (described in Chapter Two), undertaken by the Ministry of Education's Research Division.

There is also reference throughout the report to findings from a literature review on transitions, carried out by McGee, Ward, Gibbons and Harlow (2003), that was commissioned just prior to our study, together with other recent material.

Although there are no prescribed solutions that can be applied across all relevant contexts to ease students' transition from primary to secondary schooling, it is hoped that this document will provide a useful basis for schools to:

- evaluate what they are already doing to bring about positive experiences for students, and their teachers and families; and
- refine, refocus or confirm existing practices.

The report incorporates 13 short student case studies to illustrate some of the key ideas within the document. As well, the report contains a series of questions for teachers and schools to consider when discussing or planning how best to cater for transitioning students in the particular contexts they are in.

As detailed in the contents page, the remainder of this report is organised into a further seven chapters.

The Previous Reports

The report *Students' Achievement as they Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling* (Sharon Cox, Shelley Kennedy) discusses the impact of transition on student achievement. **The results of student assessments in reading, writing and mathematics carried out at four points throughout the transition study are considered, together with related achievement-based information from the student interviews and from questionnaires completed by teachers and parents.**

The Case of Emily: A Focus on Students as they Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling (Shelley Kennedy, Sharon Cox) has an emphasis on 'student voices'. As well as highlighting that the majority of students made a good overall transition, the report provides insights into the difficulties that students in general, and some students in particular, are likely to encounter at school.

Further Information and Contact Details

More information about the study and reports — a summary brochure is also available — can be obtained via the Ministry's Education Counts website: www.educationcounts.govt.nz/themes/research/transition_primary_secondary

Requests for copies of the reports and brochure, or other queries, may be made to the Research Division, Ministry of Education at:

Email: research.info@minedu.govt.nz

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CHAPTER 2:

The primary to secondary schooling transition study and selected findings

2

This chapter presents an outline of our transition study, along with selected findings — teacher and parent views of the transition as well as brief reference to student feedback — from the study, as context for the material presented in subsequent parts of the report.

The Study

In response to an identified need for more information about students' transition from primary to secondary schooling within a *New Zealand context*, the Research Division of the Ministry of Education designed an in-depth, exploratory study. Key findings from the literature review by McGee et al (2003) guided the scope and the design of the study.

The study followed a diverse group of just over 100 students for 18 months as they made the transition from Year 8 at primary school to secondary school, progressed through Year 9 (their first year of secondary schooling), and on into Year 10. Six full primary, two intermediate, and two secondary schools from two main centres were involved in the study.

The purpose of the research was to...

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

- overall learning and achievement;
- social development or adjustment; and

- attitudes towards school, learning and achieving well.

The ultimate aim was to provide information that would contribute to enhanced experiences and increased successes for students in the classroom and at school generally.

What was Involved

At each of four phases of the study, students took part in individual interviews and were assessed⁶ in mathematics, reading and writing in order to investigate how or if the transition impacted on *achievement* at school.

During interviews, students told us how they felt about moving on to secondary school, how they found secondary school once they were there, their views about different curriculum subjects, and about teachers, friendships and social relationships generally. They also talked about what most impacted on how they learned and achieved, how they felt about school in general before and after transition, and how they saw their schooling in relation to future goals and aspirations.

⁶ The students were assessed by means of asTTle (Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning). asTTle is an educational software package developed for the Ministry of Education by the University of Auckland which enables teachers to create and analyse literacy and numeracy tests, in both English and Māori, for students in Years 4–12 (curriculum levels 2 to 6). Further information about asTTle may be obtained from: www.asttle.org.nz

We also consulted parents, school staff (45 in total) — including principals, teachers, and Years 9 and 10 deans in the participating schools, and senior student peer supporters for their views on important issues concerning the transition from primary to secondary schooling and its effect on students.

Point to Note:

The transition study and resulting reports have a particular focus on when students' transition from primary to secondary schooling involves a *change* of (mainstream) school⁷. According to Ministry of Education data, this is the situation for the large majority of students in New Zealand (just under three-quarters).

Some findings from the primary to secondary schooling transition study follow. (The teacher and parent material presented has not been covered in our previous reports.)

⁷ This publication does not therefore specifically address student transition from primary to secondary schooling within the same school. Nor does it discuss more specialised transition situations (eg, when a student transitions from a kura to a regular English-medium secondary school). However, in light of evidence from the research literature that transition points in general, including year-by-year changes as students progress through their formal education, have features in common, it is likely that much of the material presented in this report is pertinent to the other contexts as well.

For further reading, refer to MacArthur et al's (2007) work on transition for students with special needs, and research by Berryman and Glynn (2003) regarding students transitioning from Māori-medium at primary level to English-medium at secondary school.

Student Views and Experiences of the Transition to Secondary School⁸

Year 8 students are often anxious or afraid about moving on to secondary school. Of their more specific fears, they worry about the possibility of being bullied. But for most students it is to a great extent simply that they are 'fearful of the unknown'.

Some weeks after the transition, however, despite earlier fears, most students in our study considered that they had 'settled', and were coping quite well with all the new or different experiences they were encountering.

In contrast, as discussed further in Chapter Four, students tended to become increasingly critical of aspects of school as they progressed through Year 9.

Positive Aspects for Students of the Transition

Often, when the subject of the primary to secondary schooling transition is raised, there is a focus on what will be 'difficult' about it, and an assumption that it will be a negative experience for students. While understanding possible stressors for students is undoubtedly important it is also important to recognise positive aspects of the transition for many students. This understanding can help alleviate student, parent, and teacher fears prior to transition. It can also lead to a positive focus on ensuring that a school's strength areas are actively promoted or built on to make students' experiences at school even more worthwhile.

Often, there is a focus on what will be difficult about the transition, but there are also many positives for students.

⁸ Students' fears and hopes about secondary school in the weeks preceding their arrival there, and their feedback about what it was like for them in and out of the classroom in the weeks and months following transition are reported in some detail in our previous report *The Case of Emily: A focus on Students as they Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling* (refer p.12).

Data presented in our previous reports on the transition study showed that there were many good things about transition, with students frequently identifying a range of positives for them personally regarding their move to secondary school, both socially and in terms of their learning.

Individual Student Characteristics and Expecting the Unexpected

Although there was considerable diversity among participating students, there were many common

There were common transition experiences for students but also important individual differences.

themes in their responses about the transition itself. Many consistent themes were also evident when students talked about their experiences and views regarding learning and achievement and about social aspects of their schooling.

As well, however, study findings revealed the importance of individual student characteristics for better understanding the needs of transitioning students. For example, where one student may require more input and support for their learning and achievement to make a successful transition, another may need more support around social relationships, or involvement in the wider life of the school.

A key message to emerge from the study findings was that, in order to provide students with the best possible support at times of potential added pressure, teachers should know students well, and have access to up to date information concerning their learning and achievement and what is going on in their lives more generally.

Selwyn's story (Case Study 1) illustrates how complex it may be to 'predict' how well different students will transition.

Case Study 1: Transition and individual student characteristics

Selwyn⁹ was a small, shy student who had been unable to find like-minded students to mix with at primary school. As a result, he spent most of his out of class time at school reading by himself. However, somewhat contrary to expectations, Selwyn's transition was a positive one. His move to secondary school, with its more diverse student population, wider extra-curricular opportunities, and option subjects available, resulted in him discovering compatible companions. Also, thanks to the insightful observations and subsequent mentoring of his performing arts, English, and form teachers in particular, in collaboration with Selwyn's concerned parents, Selwyn was able to get off to a good start at secondary school: he encountered opportunities to showcase his special aptitude and abilities in the performing arts in ways that he hadn't had before. As a result he blossomed, from the positive attention and recognition received from other students following his very successful appearances in school productions and through being able to extend his particular abilities. There were also positive spin-offs in the regular classroom setting: Selwyn now felt more at ease with his peers, realising that they accepted him for who he was, despite his quirkiness, and he was more able to speak up and contribute in class. His previous lack of confidence to contribute for fear of being ridiculed by classmates had often been a source of frustration and misery for him, especially as he was a capable, well-read student who often knew 'the answers', where others did not.

⁹ This is not the student's real name. Pseudonyms have also been used in all of the other student case studies presented in this document.

Teacher Views on the Primary to Secondary Transition

A number of teachers in the study, both primary and secondary, suggested that the transition to secondary school is an exciting and stimulating experience for some students, who enjoy the challenge of the transition and 'blossom' due to the wider range of social, academic, and extra-curricular opportunities.

There were also a few teachers who did not regard either this particular transition or year-to-year transitions generally as a particular issue, reasoning that change is simply 'a part of life that everyone has to cope with'.

In general, teachers overall considered that most¹⁰ students adapt to secondary school quite quickly, recovering from their fear and confusion before the beginning of the second term. However, at the same time, many also identified a range of what they saw as important transition-related issues which are potentially stressful or unsettling for at least some students. These are detailed below.

The Physical Size of the School

It was noted that in their first weeks at secondary school Year 9 students are often anxious about successfully negotiating their way from class to class, and also find it physically exhausting, especially if they are carrying heavy bags of books.

Coping with a Large and Diverse Student Body and 'Loss of Status'

The changed nature of the student population was considered particularly intimidating for students who moved from small, homogenous primary schools into large secondary schools with a more diverse ethnic mix. Teachers talked about Year 9s'

fears about being bullied by older students. They also referred to the shock for some students of losing the position and status that comes from being the seniors at their primary school to being 'bottom of the heap' at secondary.

Adjusting to Having Several Different Teachers

Some students were reported to struggle (or predicted as likely to struggle) to form concurrent relationships with five or more teachers at secondary school. It was felt that it can be difficult for Year 9 students to adapt to academic and behavioural expectations if these vary across their different classes. Participants emphasised the importance of students developing a strong relationship with at least one significant adult at the secondary school to provide a sense of consistency and support.

Adjusting to a More Formally Structured Timetable and Discrete Subjects

Both primary and secondary teachers suggested that secondary school is difficult for students who do not have the skills or organisational ability to readily follow timetables.

Furthermore, it was suggested that some students find it challenging adapting to the structure of discrete subjects taught in 50-minute periods at secondary school, a considerable change for them from the more integrated subject approach at primary school. Several primary teachers felt, too, that while some students would find a 50-minute period too long to concentrate, others would need more time than a single class period to really get focused on a subject and start learning.

Receiving Less Personal Attention and Opportunities

Primary teachers in particular were concerned that some students were at risk of getting

There was concern that the students would 'get lost' at secondary school.

¹⁰ Refer to Chapter Four regarding the view expressed by some teachers that a few students never really settle or adapt to secondary school.

'lost' in the much larger secondary school system. They worried too that Year 9 students would be disappointed and disadvantaged by not being given as many extension or leadership opportunities as they had received at primary school.

Negative Changes in Behaviour

A number of teachers expressed concern about evidence of deteriorating behaviour of some students post transition, a notable contrast to their good behaviour and progress at primary school.

Troublesome 'transition-related' behaviours were attributed to:

- disruption of social networks, both with teachers and with peers;
- less individual attention from teachers at secondary school because of the way secondary schools are organised, making personalised relationships between teachers and learners more difficult to achieve;
- Year 9 students 'testing the boundaries' as part of adjusting to the new school and growing up;
- inappropriate classroom placements of some students in relation to their learning and/or social needs, diminishing the student's self-concept and ability to cope well;
- less responsive teacher pedagogy leading to student disinterest and lack of engagement;
- peer pressure from other students resulting in skipping classes, decreased desire to do well in academic work, smoking, drinking, using drugs and general misbehaviour.

Despite the identified issues and stressors for students, there was a sense that teachers on either

'side' of the Year 8 to Year 9 transition did not know for sure how the transition affected their students, partly because over the longer term it is difficult to separate the effect of transition from the other factors affecting student behaviour and learning, and also because of lack of knowledge of each other's sector.

Parent Views on the Primary to Secondary Transition

Like many of the participating students and teachers, most parents expressed a range of fears and worries about the impacts of the transition from primary to secondary schooling. These worries included their child:

Parents are often fearful about the transition.

- becoming 'a small fish in a big pond';
- being bullied;
- finding the work too difficult or, in some cases, not challenging enough;
- not being well-organised enough to cope with (the anticipated) extra demands; and
- finding it difficult to cope without their best friends and having to make new friends.

They also worried that their child would 'get into bad company', and that their child would not have the same level of support and understanding that they had received from their teacher(s) at primary or intermediate school.

And, on their own account, they anticipated that if their child had a problem, it would be more difficult to know who to contact at the secondary school to talk about it.

Some weeks after their child's transition to secondary school most parents reported that their earlier fears had been largely unfounded. However, as well as identifying positive aspects of their child's first year at secondary school, parents also

identified less positive matters (eg, their child struggling with schoolwork), helping to identify some important areas to focus on when thinking about how best to ease the transition event and

address any ongoing adjustment or settling in issues for students.

Some representative comments from parents follow.

Parental comment on what their child was enjoying about secondary school

"He enjoys playing sport, very proud to wear his uniform and get on the bus with his friend and he is happy with his school work."

"Really enjoys computers at high school and using word processing programmes and is developing skills rapidly, plus making new friends."

"He enjoys doing his homework to research maths and social studies."

"[My daughter] enjoys her teachers and feels very confident to approach them with anything. She enjoys the peer supporters and often tells me how lovely they are and that they make her feel safe and are great to talk to. She is enjoying the different studies and is very happy with her new school friends."

"[My son is enjoying] being a librarian (access to huge amounts of books), being in the chess club, and being at the same school again with his closest friend who is a bit older."

"More independence and mixing with other children outside her normal circle of friends."

"New friendships, different teachers, enjoying her [option] subjects she's chosen, finding that she's coped quite well with all the changes."

"Choice of option subjects, teachers' enthusiasm/passion for their subject. Learning new things in her subjects."

"The variety of school activities that she can be involved with. She has just joined the Polyclub. Likes the teachers and finds them very helpful."

"Meeting new people, new friends, feels more grown up, enjoys having men and women teachers (has not had a male teacher before), the new things on offer — new subjects, feeling older — more freedom to do new stuff."

"Friends, more independence, stimulating work, feedback from teachers."

"Is with an older age group. They do different subjects each day which makes it more fun and the variety of subjects that interest him — eg, graphics, art (he wants to study architecture)."

"[Enjoys] everything — most of all, linking up with people: teachers, peer supporters, friends old and new."

"The social side and new friendships. And the work is harder and more of a [positive] challenge."

"He likes experiencing new subjects (science, typing). He likes dance — this surprised me."

Parental Comment on what their Child was not enjoying about Year 9

Teaching and Learning

"Finding science boring — no experiments, all writing."

"Doesn't like subjects that involve reading and writing all the time in class."

"The teacher doesn't engage her in the learning."

Teachers

"Being pulled up by teachers and not being given a chance to explain the situation."

"Liked the subject but clashed with the teacher."

"Finding that teachers in [two of her subjects] unable to relate to the students."

"Finds some teachers are not supportive."

Level of difficulty of the work

"Finding some work too difficult."

"Can't quite get to grips with the concepts in mathematics."

"Easy things she knows from past times and having to do it again."

"[My son] gets a bit bored. He has felt that sometimes the work is too easy."

Relationships/social

"She gets annoyed with other kids playing up in class."

"Getting used to the amount of different children who have different outlooks on life."

"Finding the older children intimidating."

"Not being able to play [as at primary school] — she says everything is about image."

The different expectations and responsibilities

"Having to be organised — his responsibility to have the right books, etc, at the right time."

"Getting used to all the different rules."

"He doesn't always enjoy the responsibility that goes with the greater freedom."

"Having to cope with the six-day timetable — it is confusing."

Homework

"Homework all the time and having to prioritise one [assignment] over the other."

continued ...

... continued

Environment

"Not being able to go into the classrooms at lunchtimes because privileges have been taken away from students in the past [for poor behaviour]."

"No activities at lunchtime, having to stay outside at tea/lunch breaks."

"Walking between classes when it's raining."

Discontinuity of teachers

"Missing almost two terms of [one subject] due to having 'relievers' who basically just filled in time."

"Was very disappointed when her English/form teacher left during the year."

Other things

"The tiredness. Starting earlier, finishing later. Having to carry a heavy bag of gear around."

"Having to get up at 6.30am to catch a crowded train (could just walk to school before)."

What Parents would Like Schools to Provide

Parents' predominant 'wish' was for schools to ensure that their child was safe at school.

More broadly expressed expectations of schools were that they would provide 'a quality, high standard education' and 'good discipline'.

While parents clearly wished schools to provide their children with the best possible learning opportunities, and effective discipline, they also wished for their children to be in an environment that was friendly, welcoming, and enjoyable and which gave them a sense of security and belonging.

In terms of their children's teachers and other staff in the school, they wished for them to be:

- approachable (both for their child and themselves);
- understanding;
- patient;
- willing to help their child with learning and homework they found difficult;

- responsive to their child's pastoral care issues;
- conscious of the need to give clear explanations to students;
- aware of the importance of having high expectations of all students and clearly conveying what the students would have to do to meet those expectations.

Parents also frequently expressed a wish for schools to help promote feelings of pride, self-esteem, and confidence in their children, and to encourage and foster personal attributes such as honesty, integrity, respect, and 'a continued love of learning'.

"[The most important things for the school to provide for our children is] to be proud of themselves as individuals and to teach them self-worth, [make sure they are] feeling safe (within the school environment), and encourage our children to want to learn more and enjoy it at the same time."

Parent of Year 9 student

Questions to consider

- To what extent do we agree with the views about transition recorded in the previous few pages? In particular, in light of our own situation currently, how accurate is the reference to schools'/teachers' lack of knowledge about what happens in the other sector and the possible implications of this for transitioning students?

Summary Comments

It is helpful to know what students anticipate will be the 'best' things about secondary school.

Systematically collected information from students, parents, and teachers about the sorts of anxieties and fears they have about the primary to secondary schooling transition helps show where efforts to

make this transition as positive and trouble-free as possible may need to be directed.

Similarly, it is helpful to know what students in particular anticipate will be 'best' or most exciting about attending secondary school, so that steps can be taken to successfully meet students' (appropriate) expectations and avoid disillusioning them.

CHAPTER 3:

Easing shorter-term aspects of the transition

3

The finding that many students are more fearful than excited about moving on to secondary school emphasises that this transition represents much more to them than simply the next step as they progress through their schooling.

Ensuring that policies and practices with a specific focus on transitioning students are in place is unquestionably important.

Preparing Year 8 students well and accurately for the immediate impacts of the transition helps reduce fears about secondary school and gives students a sound base on which to build their continuing learning and education.

And providing a special welcome, as well as sufficient assistance to quickly become familiar with what is required of them in their new setting, better enables newly arrived students to begin their secondary schooling with a positive outlook.

While there is no universal formula to ensure ease of transition for students moving from primary to secondary schooling, the thinking and practices outlined throughout this chapter (which are derived from our transition study findings, the transitions literature review and other information) have been found to be helpful. They are also a valuable basis for discussion about any transition-related issues and possible solutions, amongst the different parties involved in the primary to secondary schooling transition.

The material in this chapter is presented under two main umbrella sections. The first of these discusses preparing Year 8 students for secondary school. Factors discussed in this section are summarised in Figure 1 below. The second of the two umbrella sections (p.34 following) focuses mainly on helping students settle and adjust at secondary school.

McGee et al (2003) in their review of the transitions literature found that:

- It is important for schools to provide students with sufficient information about the transition and what to expect at secondary school and to have support networks in place.
- Family support, school responsiveness and student involvement in school extra-curricular activities are important [for a smooth transition].
- Most students have their own stories to tell of stressful aspects of transition, but with transfers between schools often being better handled than they once were, it appears that most students don't experience anxiety/problems with the actual 'transition' for long.
- Providing students with adequate information and ensuring that there are social support activities that help students to form friendship networks are crucial factors in their ability to cope with transition.
- Positive relations and a sense of school belonging are strongly related to students' positive attitudes about school, and to self-esteem.
- Involvement in sports, arts and other activities in school, and time spent in extra-curricular activities is positively related with academic success in the first years of secondary school.
- Well coordinated transition arrangements contribute to successful transition, and decrease adjustment time.

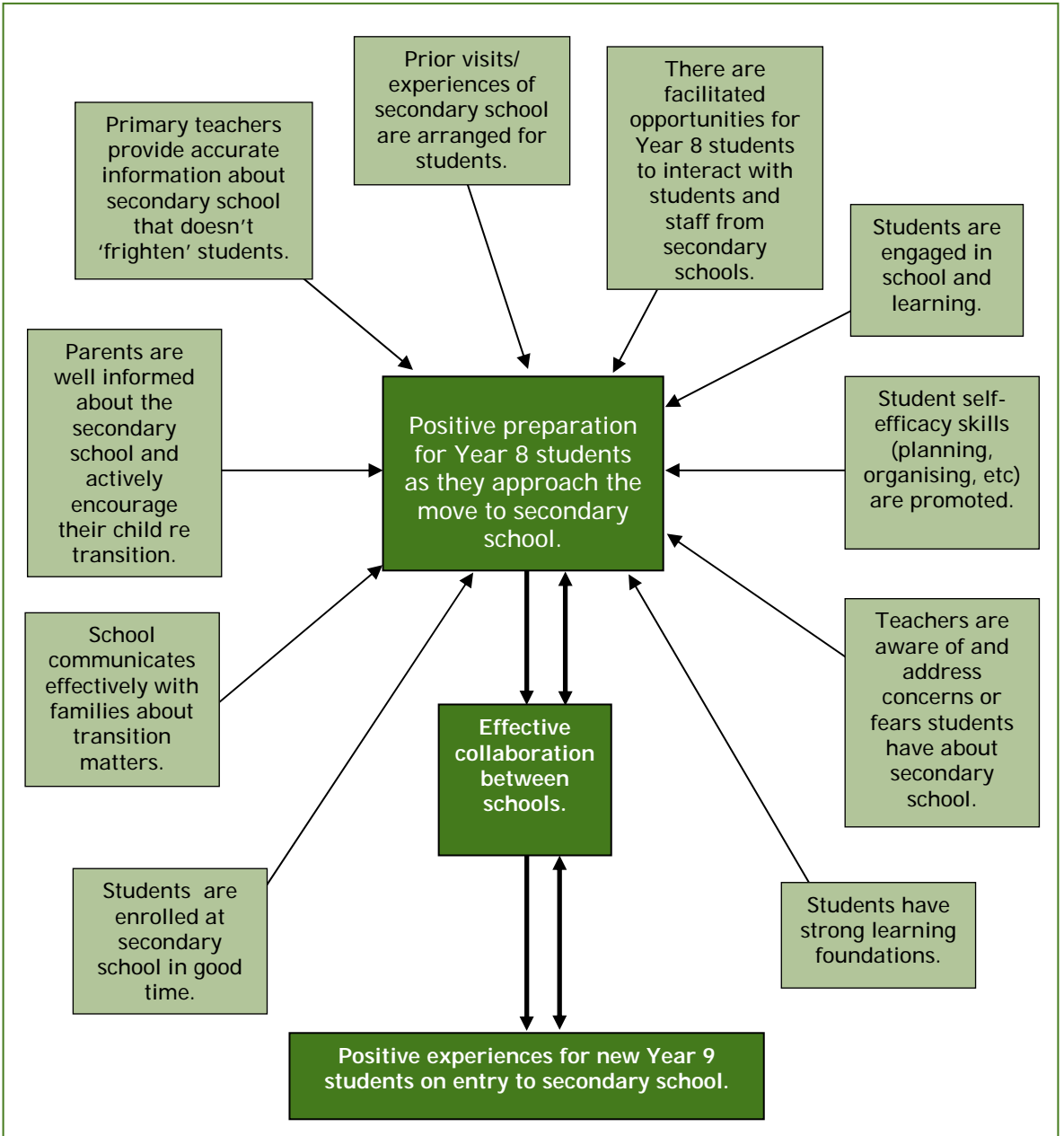


Figure 1: Important factors for a smooth transition to secondary schooling

Preparing Year 8 Students for Secondary School

Timely Enrolment

Study findings emphasised the importance of Year 8 students knowing as soon as possible which secondary school they are to attend so that they have a better idea of what they are working towards.

Some students do not know which school they will be attending until the last moment.

When students do not know which school they will be attending until the very last moment, amongst other things, they miss out on the steps that secondary schools take with incoming students as a basis for class placements. They also

miss out on activities to ease the transition organised by the feeder and secondary schools prior to the beginning of the new school year, such as an open-day visit to meet key people and gain some familiarity with the secondary school. And, as well, they cannot join in discussion with friends and peers about the school they will be attending.

It is therefore very important for primary schools to assist parents to enrol their child in good time, being especially aware when a child's family may find it difficult to understand or negotiate the steps involved in successfully completing the enrolment procedures.

Also, when schools have waiting lists for potential new students, they should ensure that they make decisions about successful candidates as soon as possible to allow families and students (who may have applied to two or more schools) enough time to prepare adequately for the transition.

Questions to consider

- In this school, are we aware of any families likely to have difficulty in enrolling their Year 8 children at secondary school in good time?
- What steps could we take to help parents with the enrolment process to ensure a more positive transition experience for both students and family?
- Would it be of benefit to enlist the support of key community leaders to promote timely enrolment and help solve potential barriers for individual families? How could we facilitate this?

Destination Secondary School

For many Year 8 students, the secondary school they are to attend will not necessarily be one that they or their parents 'choose'. Instead, matters such as school waiting lists and cost and travel implications will be the deciding factors. Both primary and secondary teachers therefore stressed the importance of helping all students feel that

whatever secondary school they go to, there will be valuable opportunities there for them.

For example, primary teachers noted that it was important not to be perceived by students in their classes as considering some secondary schools better than others, as this could be de-motivating and hurtful for students destined for schools seen as perhaps less prestigious.

Similarly, a number of the secondary teachers felt that students and their families who had missed out on a preferred secondary school were sometimes demoralised and lacked commitment to the alternative secondary school. They emphasised that it is important that parents/caregivers, in particular, avoid conveying personal disappointment about the destination secondary school to their children.

In addition, some teachers particularly emphasised that it is crucial that *all* schools should expect, and

be prepared to cater for, student cohorts likely to differ widely in terms of personality, learning needs, interests, goals and other characteristics such as ethnicity and socio-economic background.

Samantha's and Melody's stories (Case studies 2 and 3) illustrate some of the potential dilemmas associated with any given student's destination secondary school.

Case Study 2: Destination secondary school (1)

Some students are unable to attend the school of their choice.

Samantha was one such student. In Year 8, she was attending a high decile intermediate school, and, along with a group of her classmates, her particular friends, was keen to attend a secondary school with an equivalent decile rating.

But Samantha found herself attending a considerably lower decile school instead. This caused her to feel particularly negative on entry to the school, especially when her friends had successfully gained entry to the preferred school. Some students in similar circumstances adjust well after a time to the school they end up at; Samantha, however, did not. She continued to be unhappy and dissatisfied with everything throughout Year 9 in what she perceived as a much less prestigious school than she was used to. She chose not to join up for extra-curricular activities, did a minimum of work in her classes, and passed up opportunities for new friendships in favour of maintaining out of school contact with her Year 8 school friends.

Samantha felt that her teachers were not interested in her as a person and reported that no-one in the school had tried to encourage her to consider activities at school she might enjoy or to take part in the wider life of the school.

Perhaps fortunately for Samantha, the cycle of negativity was interrupted when her family did manage to achieve a transfer to the desired school for the beginning of Year 10.

Case Study 3: Destination secondary school (2)

Sometimes there is a 'poor fit' between the student and the school.

Melody, for example, did not like, and felt anxious about, all the 'rough, older boys' at her new secondary school. She would have much preferred an all girls school, but this was not an option available to her because of where she lived (the distance to travel) and family circumstances.

As she was a less assertive student and particularly in awe of more senior students, this meant that activities during breaks became more confined for her and she felt much less at ease about being at school than she had the previous year. Whereas at primary school she had enjoyed lunchtime sports activities with a group of well-established friends, at secondary school she felt intimidated by the older boys in particular and did not want to play games in the same spaces that they were in. She was also conscious of needing *"to sit in a ladylike way"* when wearing a skirt in the presence of male students.

While an older sibling attended the same school, this in some ways further reduced Melody's confidence as her more outgoing sibling enjoyed the school and had fitted in well from the outset. Melody also considered her older sibling to be much brighter and more successful than herself.

For Melody, feelings of belonging and being settled at secondary school were considerably delayed. However, she did gradually adjust, in large part due to the mentoring and support she received from a teacher assistant at the school (who also had links with her wider family), who helped her through the first difficult weeks and months.

Prior Links with the Secondary School

Some young people are in a position of knowing quite a lot about the secondary school they are to attend because of older relatives or friends already there. This is often¹¹ an advantage as it links them into social networks, helps them gain a sense of the atmosphere and systems of the secondary school and generally makes the new school seem less strange.

There are also Year 8 students who have regular opportunities, not to do with the transition itself, to

become familiar with the secondary school, such as when their primary school uses the secondary school's technology facilities or borrows its hall for concerts and other special events.

While it seems that many students have some prior contact with their destination secondary school, teachers in our transition study often felt there is scope for a lot more. For example, in the case of Year 8 students who have little or no opportunities for prior contact¹², it was felt that schools and teachers need to instigate particular procedures to ensure that students gain some familiarity with the site of their future schooling.

¹¹ Some respondents cautioned that these existing contacts are only helpful if the older students are good role models/ feel positively about the secondary school themselves, suggesting that it is important to keep an eye on newcomers whose older siblings or relations may be at odds with their schooling to help them avoid the same path.

¹² For example, when students attend small primary schools that are geographically distant from the secondary schools they are to go to.

Steps that can be taken to ensure prior contact or links (whether directly or indirectly via their teachers), include:

- secondary school staff and students visiting primary and intermediate schools to promote their school and answer students' questions;
- primary/intermediate schools arranging for Year 8 students to attend secondary school open days during school-time;
- maintaining ongoing contact between schools in a range of ways (eg, music classes, school productions);
- arranging exchange visits for teachers. This can provide opportunities for learning more about teaching and learning approaches in the other sector that have proved to be particularly effective, enabling teachers to then pass on the benefits of this knowledge in the sorts of experiences they provide for their students.

A teacher participant also talked about her experience within the Scottish schooling system: in

Year 8 students benefited from organised links with older students in which they learned that 'positive things happen at secondary school'.

a group of involved schools, towards the end of the school year, each year group went to the next year level for three days, in order to gain some first-hand experience of what the next stage of their schooling would be like.

A number of primary and intermediate teachers

mentioned too the value that resulted when they or their colleagues arranged for secondary school students to coach their Year 8 students in sports. The students benefited not only from the coaching itself, but also from the links formed with older students and the informal opportunity to learn that 'positive things happened at secondary school'.

Year 8 Teachers Preparing Students for the Transition

To prepare their students for secondary school, Year 8 teachers in our study most often:

- tried to ensure that their students were 'well-grounded in the basics' (ie, possessed strong learning foundations);
- emphasised to students the need to be well-behaved, diligent, and flexible in order to cope with multiple teachers, different expectations and lots of homework;
- warned students that they would find the work 'a lot harder' and the discipline a lot firmer;
- worked to give students the skills to work independently, and think for themselves;
- provided tailored academic and social opportunities for individual students, designed to maximise their particular strengths and minimise weaknesses so that they could go forward with greater confidence;
- encouraged students to have a positive attitude to change, and to always be prepared to take up new opportunities;
- promoted practical strategies, such as having students develop a personal notebook of key concepts, formulas, and vocabulary that they had learned during the year, as a helpful reference/reminder once they were at secondary school;
- listened to and responded to students' worries or concerns about going on to secondary school.

In preparation for secondary school, teachers particularly emphasised the importance of giving Year 8 students opportunities to develop

responsibility and/or take on leadership roles, as confident, independent students are likely to fare better at secondary school, both socially and academically.

Examples of opportunities to exercise responsibility made available to Year 8 students included:

Confident, independent students who are able to take responsibility for their own learning fare better at secondary school.

- helping in the library;
- acting as bank-tellers within the school;
- helping to run the canteen;
- mentoring or tutoring younger students;
- becoming student mediators;

- becoming sports team leaders;
- helping organise school camps, concerts, and other special activities;
- special projects or activities, such as helping re-model part of the school grounds or taking responsibility for school livestock/pets.

The teachers expressed the hope that students would be able to 'slot in' to similar activities at secondary school. In similar vein, they noted the importance of Year 8 students having some current involvement in extra-curricular activities that could provide a focus for them at secondary school and facilitate their integration.

Year 8 teachers further anticipated that because students would be 'more on their own' in secondary school with regard to their personal organisation and learning, they needed to develop good organisational skills prior to the transition.

An example given by one teacher to address this need was to draw up a contract with Year 8 students, gaining their agreement to complete

stipulated tasks over the course of a week, but leaving it up to them to decide when to complete each task.

Conveying an Accurate Picture of What to Expect at Secondary School

Teachers at Year 8 level also tried to prepare their students well for secondary school by simply talking to them as much as possible about what it was going to feel like in a strange, new environment and what to expect.

But while the teachers sought to prepare their Year 8 students for the transition, they often also stated that they were not sure 'what happened' at secondary school.

"Primary teachers don't know what we're doing and we don't know what they're doing."
Year 9 teacher

Also, some teachers admitted that they sometimes particularly emphasised that students would find many aspects of secondary school more difficult than their present experience of school and would have to learn to cope with less support than they currently received. They did this in an attempt to reduce the level of 'shock' for students when faced with different expectations and requirements at secondary school, or to try and 'spur on' disengaged students.

Correspondingly, secondary participants noted that students often did not seem to have an accurate view of what secondary school would be like when they first arrived: that there was a common perception among incoming students that the demands upon them in their classes would be much greater than previously, but that this was not necessarily the case.

Students may not be given an accurate view of what secondary school will be like, sometimes inadvertently fuelling their fears.

"A lot of teachers, I think with very good intentions, have held secondary school over kids' heads — how they'd have to behave, and the amount of work they'll have to do — in an attempt to motivate. I suspect in some cases that has backfired and we now have kids who think they're going to fail when they get here, or have a fear of the discipline, and the detentions."

Year 9 dean

Thus, for some students, at least, fears about the Year 8 to Year 9 transition may be inadvertently fuelled by usually well-meaning attempts by others — parents, and older students or siblings, as well as some teachers — to help them understand what they will find at secondary school.

Questions to consider

- There is evidence that some students are led to 'expect the worst' when they reach secondary school. How can we ensure that students receive information about secondary school that is accurate and appropriately encouraging and motivating?
- What steps can we take to ascertain and address the worries or concerns students may be experiencing about the transition?
- How aware are we of what students are most looking forward to about secondary school? Do we know whether different students' hopes are realistic or whether they may be facing possible or likely disappointment in some areas? What might need to be done about this latter situation?

Other Steps to Reduce 'Culture Shock'

Primary and intermediate schools sometimes attempt to replicate the procedures or practices in secondary schools as a way of accustoming Year 8 students to some aspects of secondary school organisation.

The procedures mentioned included:

- timetabling students' use of computers and other equipment so that they become aware that they 'need to think ahead' and not just expect free access at any time;
- requiring students to move between classes and teachers so that they know what it feels like to be taught by different teachers who do not necessarily have an overview of everything each individual student is doing;

- students having to carry their books and equipment with them rather than having a personal desk in which to store belongings;
- giving students more responsibility for organising their own learning;
- giving students work that they felt would be similar to what they would encounter in Year 9;
- requiring students to complete activities as a group (sometimes out of class time) to enhance their organisational abilities.

In contrast, a few respondents felt that rather than primary schools organising their Year 8 classrooms to be more like secondary school, it would be more appropriate for new Year 9 students to stay in one classroom initially and have a small number of teachers come to them. Despite a common

perception that it is particularly difficult for secondary schools to change organisational arrangements in order to cater for their students in different ways, there is evidence that successful changes of this nature can be achieved. For example, while acknowledging that 'there is no blueprint ... that can be applied to all school

situations — each school has its own history, culture and set of characteristics and will need to find its own reform pathway', Cole (2005) provides research-derived suggestions (see insert box below) for changing certain school structures to make them more suitable for the learning and other needs of Year 9 and other middle years students.

Considering School Structures and Procedures

Extract from Cole (2005, pp.8-9):

'Suggestion: Provide structures and procedures that deliver timetable flexibility and enable a strong bond to be developed between staff and students.'

'It is clear that neither the standard model of primary schooling, which is particularly effective in the early years, nor the standard model of secondary schooling, which is effective for average and above average students in the senior years, works well in the middle years.'

'Our knowledge of middle years students indicates that teaching and learning should be personalised to the maximum extent possible. By reducing the number of teachers with whom students interact on a regular basis, and having a stable team of teachers working with a consistent group of students, higher levels of rapport, trust and learning can be achieved and the potential for consistency between teachers enhanced. Each student should also have a single teacher who can act as both a mentor and role model and as their main point of reference within the school.'

'A focus on a team structure also provides benefits in terms of shared planning and collegiate support and increases the options available for curriculum delivery and for addressing student discipline and welfare matters. Team structures also offer increased opportunities for teacher initiative, development and leadership and the interaction with a smaller group of students enables teachers to be more informed about student learning needs. Timetabling arrangements that enable teams to exercise greater autonomy over the way they wish to engage in the learning process also enhances the possibility that conventional approaches will be supplanted by more innovative grouping arrangements.'

'The ability to deliver schooling on a more personalised scale is the most important reform ingredient, as it is a precondition for so many other practices of benefit to young adolescents such as team teaching, knowing students well, knowing and engaging with parents, effective student management, interdisciplinary studies, program spontaneity, and community based learning. However, regrettably, it is also one of the solutions most overlooked by schools as teachers are reluctant to confine their teaching to a particular sub-group of students within the school and consequently perpetuate student and teacher alienation.'

continued...

continued...

'Some strategies for improving structural arrangements and processes [are as follows].'

Structures and procedures could be improved by schools adopting:

- A teacher allotment policy within the school that results in a team of teachers with a range of teaching and extra-curricular skills and interests working exclusively or for extended periods of time with the Year 9 student cohort.
- The practice of the Year 9 teaching team working cooperatively to plan and deliver the diverse learning, social and emotional needs of young adolescents.
- The practice of designating an area or identifying classrooms within the school as the Year 9 area and whenever possible giving priority to timetabling Year 9 classes within this area.'

Questions to consider

- How do we feel about the concept of feeder schools 'replicating' secondary school procedures? For example, could this mean simply training students to 'fit in' with existing practices at secondary schools irrespective of whether the practices are best suited to the well-being and learning needs of the students?
- Would we like to see secondary schools become 'more like primary schools', especially for the newest/youngest students? Why or why not?
- What alternative or additional ways might there be to help students bridge differences in systems and procedures across the sectors? Are particular strategies to address these differences necessary for students to make a successful transition?

Teachers Gaining Knowledge of the Other Sector

The evidence suggests that teachers often do not have recent experience of how the other sector operates.

This lack of knowledge impacts on:

- primary teachers' ability to provide their students with accurate information about what secondary school is like;
- secondary teachers' ability to understand the experiences and perspectives of their new Year 9 students;

- all teachers' ability to plan and implement programmes of work that will connect smoothly with what the students have been doing or will go on to do at different levels of their schooling.

Suggestions for increasing teachers' knowledge of the other sector in order to facilitate students' transition from primary to secondary schooling included:

- ensuring regular, ongoing discussions between Year 8 (and sometimes also

"There's a huge amount of value to be had from staff at primary schools having more contact with staff at secondary school (and vice versa)."
Year 8 teacher

Year 7) teachers and Year 9 deans in their students' destination secondary schools, regarding curriculum integration and other student-related matters;

- arranging professional development opportunities whereby teachers visit schools in the other sector, and spend time in classrooms in order to directly observe how the other sector operates;
- arranging regular cultural, sporting and subject-based activities between primary and secondary schools to build awareness of the other sector in a range of contexts, and so as to facilitate and oversee links between primary and secondary students.

Schools' knowledge of the other sector is discussed in more depth in Chapter Five.

Helping Students Settle Well at Secondary School

Figure 2 provides a brief overview of factors to consider for assisting the settling-in process for incoming Year 9 students. As shown, a central feature is that of 'effective collaboration between schools' throughout the transition process.

Input by Year 9 Deans

In secondary schools, Year 9 deans have overall responsibility for the incoming group of new students. This responsibility is multi-faceted:

"You need a lot of knowledge of how systems within the school work: 'Who's responsible for what?' You need to be the 'middleman' in a lot of instances between the DP, teachers, form teachers and various parts of the school. In terms of skills you have to learn how to deal

with parents in an effective way, that's really important. How to get students on board yet still maintain discipline. How to not get stressed. Time management skills."

Year 9 dean

The role of a Year 9 dean is a demanding one, frequently stretching those holding the position.

"The Year 9 group this year have settled well and taken advantage of the opportunities available. This is, I believe, because we spent a lot of time with them prior to their arrival. We visited them in their schools, brought them in here, interviewed all the families ... so we were well known to the students when they arrived. We also taught the more needy students in their first year in the school which meant they got to know and trust us and to see we had their best interests at heart. This has helped to stop issues occurring for these students. But the cost has been high and neither of us are continuing with deaning after this year."

Year 9 dean

As well as regular teaching duties, deans have a range of responsibilities such as those outlined below.

Before the students arrive at secondary school, deans:

- liaise with Year 8 teachers and primary/intermediate school principals to gain information about individual Year 8 students, including those with special needs;
- visit feeder schools to administer tests or arrange for Year 8 students to come to the secondary school to take the test;
- visit feeder schools to talk to students about the secondary school;

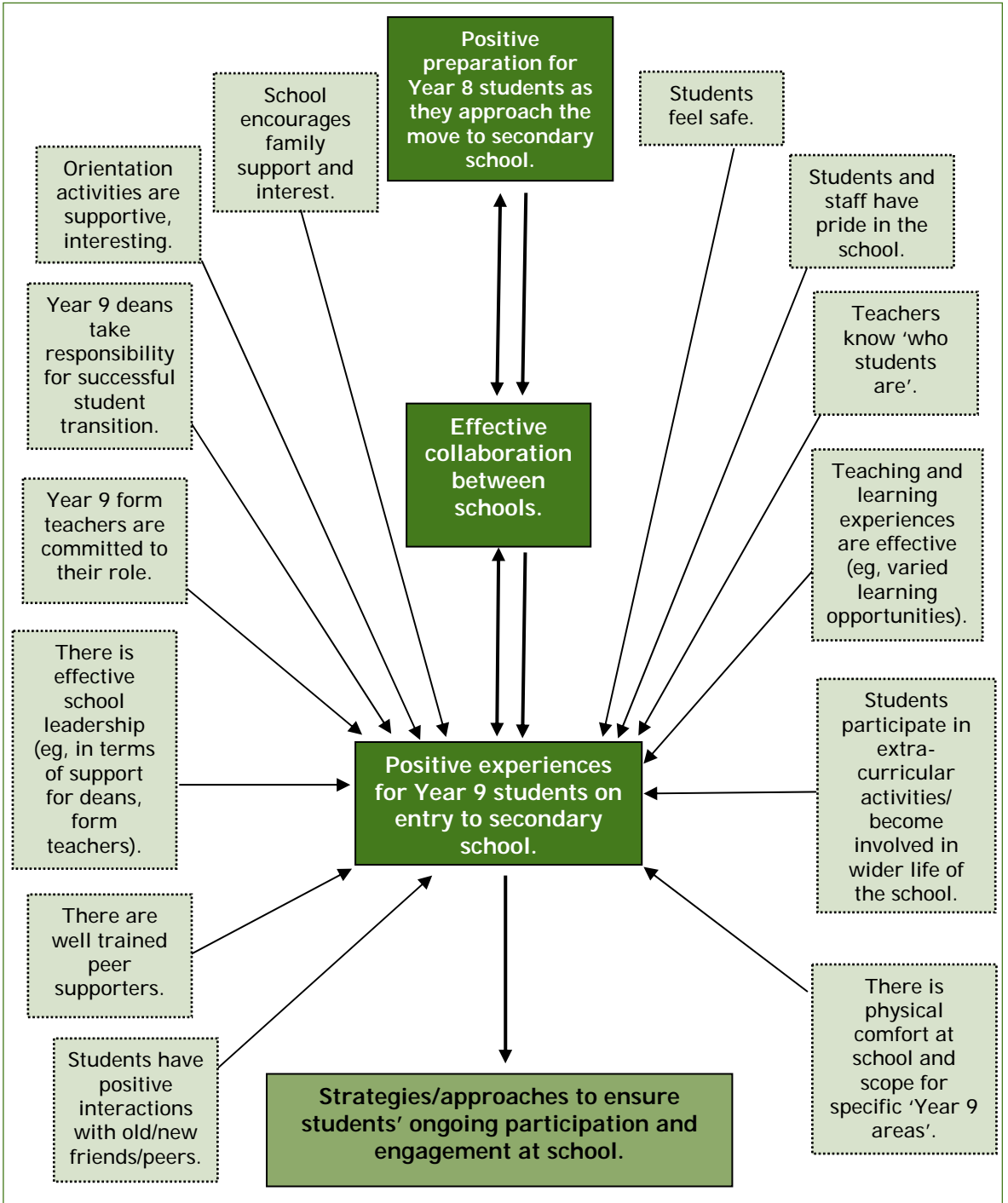


Figure 2: Important factors in helping Year 9 students settle well at secondary school

- interview parents and students as part of the enrolment process;
- create class groupings for Year 9 form/subject classes;
- meet with individual Year 8 students as required.

After the students arrive at secondary school, deans:

- oversee orientation and other Year 9 whole group activities, such as special outings or camps;
- take responsibility for information about students' academic and social needs, and arrange for this to be passed on to teachers as appropriate;
- oversee pastoral care and discipline for the Year 9 group as a whole. This involves liaising with teachers, counsellors, senior management and others to coordinate the support or discipline required for individual students;
- contact parents with information about students as required.

This extensive list of duties, and in light of the preceding quote from a Year 9 dean, strongly indicates how important it is for school leaders to allocate appropriate time to allow deans to perform all aspects of the role expected of them. If this does not happen, there is the risk that the deans will 'burn out', with the further consequence that the school would no longer benefit from their hard-won knowledge and experience.

Issues and Concerns Regarding the Role of the Year 9 Dean

Managing information about individual students is one of a dean's key roles. While some secondary teachers praised the way deans had passed

necessary information on to them, there were also concerns that important health and academic information about students did not always reach classroom teachers. This was said to be because the deans lacked the time to go through the information properly and make sure it was passed on in a timely manner. (Sometimes, however, the teachers admitted that they preferred to use information about students they had gathered themselves, rather than referring to information compiled by others. This suggests an ongoing need for more effective communication amongst teachers about the nature and purpose of any shared student information.)

For many primary and intermediate teachers of Year 8 students, the deans, sometimes in combination with the principal, are their main source of contact with the secondary school. While they appreciated the efforts that deans made to come and talk to them about their Year 8 students, they also expressed a number of concerns. Many of these were to do with how effectively, or even whether, the secondary schools used the student information that was passed on to deans during interviews with them, or provided by means of portfolios, letters or reports prepared for the secondary schools.

As deans have so many students to oversee, primary school teachers were also concerned that they would not have the time to get to know students individually or to make sure their needs were well catered for. Specific examples were mentioned where it was felt that poor decisions had been made about class groupings, despite the secondary school having access to information which suggested that certain student combinations would not be desirable (for example, where there had been a prior history of a student being intimidated by others either at school and/or in the neighbourhood out of school time).

Participating deans, too, mentioned that they would like to know students better before they reached Year 9, but that their teaching and other responsibilities prevented them from going out into primary schools sufficiently often to achieve this.

Study participants suggested that:

- it would be of benefit if deans could have considerably more contact with Year 8 students before they arrive at secondary school;
- consideration should therefore be given to the concept of a 'super-dean': whereby deans would make regular visits to their main primary/intermediate feeder schools throughout the year, rather than just in term 4, in order to get to know the Year 8 students and observe them in their primary school setting.

Despite the issues and concerns inherent in their role, participating deans noted that they had met most of the incoming Year 9 students several times (eg, when conducting enrolment interviews), and were positive about being 'a familiar face' at least for the students when they arrived.

Selecting Staff for the Role of Year 9 Dean

The extensive range of responsibilities that falls to those in the role of dean highlights the importance of ensuring that ongoing training and/or mentoring opportunities are made available to deans. It also underlines the need to carefully select deans with the right professional and personal characteristics to perform the role well.

Some important selection criteria to consider in respect of prospective deans is that they:

- have a good level of knowledge of key student assessment tools and their interpretation;
- have an in-depth understanding of the needs of young adolescent learners;
- are acknowledged among their teaching peers in the school as an effective teacher of Year 9 students;
- possess strong organisational skills;
- are able to effectively/skilfully communicate with a wide range of adults in the course of their work, including parents, and principals and teachers within and beyond their own school.

Questions to consider

- The role of Year 9 dean is clearly very important in the primary to secondary schooling transition. It is also very challenging. Do we in this school need to do more in terms of allocating time and resources to enable deans to more effectively carry out the requirements of the role and not suffer burn out themselves? If so, how could this realistically and equitably be managed?

Considering Parents/Caregivers in the Transition

Families are a key player in the transition process. One basic role that parents/caregivers need to play in transition is ensuring their child is enrolled in a

Parents and families play an important role in helping their child feel positively about the move to secondary school.

secondary school in a timely manner. They also play an important role in helping their child look forward in a positive way to secondary school. As well, parents have a part to play in keeping their child focused on learning and achievement. This can be

through showing an ongoing interest in their children's activities at school, and by monitoring the amount of leisure time the child spends on watching TV or playing computer games, so that valuable learning-enhancing activities such as reading are not seriously compromised.¹³

But many participants noted that the transition from primary to secondary school is potentially as much, if not more, worrisome for parents than it is for the students.

Also, while the great majority of parents value education highly and wish their child to do well at (secondary) school, some parents do not feel

confident about interacting with the secondary school or confident enough to support their child's learning in the most effective way.

Acknowledging both the integral role of parents in the transition and, often, their need for reassurance and support, the secondary schools in our study facilitated communication with the parents of Year 9 students through such means as:

Schools had strategies to facilitate communication with parents and bring them into the school community.

- interviewing all parents/caregivers of Year 8 students enrolled for the following year;
- the Year 9 deans holding evening meetings at feeder schools to tell parents about behaviour and other expectations at secondary school and to answer their questions;
- the Year 9 deans sending out an initial letter plus follow-up correspondence to parents before the new school year, to introduce themselves, outline stationery and other requirements, and offer guidelines to parents/families on how to effectively support students at secondary school;
- inviting parents along to the orientation day powhiri/welcome assembly for Year 9s;
- holding a special evening assembly for Year 9s and their parents early in the year: this included handing out information about the school, including expectations of students and the opportunities available, followed by each Year 9 form teacher spending time with their particular class of students together with members of the students' families;
- encouraging all form teachers to ring parents at home to introduce themselves and to let parents know how and when they can contact them if they wish to talk about their child.

¹³ Recent work by Mei Kuin Lai, Stuart McNaughton and others has identified what they refer to as 'summer learning loss'. In other words, loss of or 'plateauing' of certain achievement gains made by students during the school year over long summer vacation periods. The researchers emphasise that this is a particular concern when students are already more vulnerable in terms of their achievement and subject mastery in school, and who typically have lower reading attainment. The concept of summer learning loss highlights the importance of young people being able to experience interesting/stimulating activities or pastimes during breaks from school, and maintaining at least some level of reading activity. Ideally, too, awareness of the potential for summer learning loss will help focus collaboration between school sectors, and parents and schools, in such a way as to minimise enduring effects of any learning losses that occur.

Hughes et al (2008) offer some suggestions for how schools can help parents feel more relaxed and informed about their child's transfer from primary to secondary schooling. They describe a sample of suggestions as follows.

'In one primary school, Year [8] parents were invited to an informal evening at the school along with Year [9] parents from the secondary school. Year [8] parents expressed their hopes and concerns about secondary school and shared these in small groups with other Year [8] and Year [9] parents. Through these discussions, parents came to see how they could act as a resource both for their own children and for other parents.'

'Parents of [Year 9 students] were invited to informal, small-scale parents' meetings early in the [first] term. This enabled them to meet their children's teachers and to find out how the children had settled at a very early stage in their secondary school career.'

'One secondary school with a large Somali population held an event in the school which celebrated the Somali parents' cooking and other skills. The event was intended to provide recognition of the funds of knowledge in the Somali community and to generate ideas about how they might be used in school. The event was well supported by the headteacher, teachers, students and other parents.'

Orientation Days and Powhiri

The secondary schools ran orientation days for their Year 9 students at the beginning of term 1, before the return of the older students. These featured fun, getting-to-know-each-other activities (among students and between students and teachers), 'map reading' tasks designed to assist students to find their way around the school, and information sharing sessions to help students become familiar with key procedures and personnel within the school.

"[Just] them and their teachers and their peer support people. So they have a full day with them. That orientation day with no other seniors around is really important. The Year 9s feel entirely safe and they can find their way around. And they have a range of activities, so that they can get to know other students in a more relaxed, fun way."

Secondary school counsellor

"With the peer support leaders they go around the school, they have an orientation booklet and have activities around names of teachers, names of certain buildings, where's the library, where's the gym. ... Parents come in on that first day too. They are welcomed onto the marae, parents and children. That first day of school for Year 9s is important."

Year 9 teacher

Following orientation day, the whole school came together for a powhiri (welcoming assembly) in honour of the new Year 9 students. These included performances and presentations from more senior students to celebrate the different cultures within the school and to showcase a range of particular opportunities open to students within the school.

"Orientation day made me feel that there was no need to hide from going to school."

Year 9 student

Orientation days are generally agreed to be essential in order for Year 9 students to:

- have sufficient time and space to physically find their way around the school without the pressure of keeping to the timetable of a regular school day;
- receive undivided attention and support from their teachers and a small number of older students upon arrival in their new school;
- become acquainted with their form teacher and with other students in their form class before the real work of the year begins.

Orientation day, senior student peer supporters, and the powhiri were what students most often referred to when commenting on what their secondary school had done to help them settle in. Most comments were very favourable.

Some teachers, however, emphasised that, ideally, orientation-type activities should continue over a longer period than just the one day that new Year 9 students typically receive.¹⁴

"If it was possible to give them more than one day at the beginning of the year to get to know the school better and where they could just be in their [Year 9] group together and teachers could spend time with them so they get to know them better before classes start."

Year 9 dean

"I think we need to reduce the amount of the change for the students, stabilise them more. Perhaps keep them in one place a bit longer, with one teacher. And perhaps have a few more days which are based outside the classroom, like outdoor education or cultural activities. More things that would encourage the kids to mingle with each other and this would help them to feel less threatened. We do a bit of this on the first day of the year when they are with their form class and they do activities. We do other things in the first term but I think we could do more of it."

Year 9 teacher

¹⁴ However, if schools were to adopt an approach, such as that suggested by Cole, 2002 (see pp.32-33 of this document), in which a particular group of teachers and others was assigned to spend extended time throughout the school year working exclusively with Year 9 students, further orientation-type activities per se would probably be less important/necessary.

Questions to Consider

- What checks do we do on how welcoming and useful our new Year 9 students find our orientation activities?
- Might some or all students benefit from more or different orientation-type activities? If yes, who, what, and why?
- Should more and/or different people be involved in organising orientation activities? For example, could the previous year's Year 9 students be asked what they most and least appreciated about their orientation, and what they would have liked to see more or less of? Could parents/families have a role?
- Should there be a separate orientation day just for parents/caregivers? If yes, what key elements should be covered (eg, who parents can contact if they need to discuss their child and how they can do this)?
- What steps do we currently take to ascertain and address worries or concerns students may be experiencing as a result of their move to secondary school? Are there ways we could do this better?
- Students can be discouraged if they find that particular hopes they had about secondary school do not seem to be realised. Are we as aware as we could be about the hopes and dreams that students arrive with when they begin Year 9 so that we can better cater for their (appropriate) expectations and positively redirect any more unrealistic expectations?

The Role of Year 9 Form Teachers

Along with deans and peer supporters, form teachers are key contact people within the school for Year 9 students. Some participants saw Year 9 form teachers as potentially *"the most skilled teachers in the school"*, and emphasised that they should be selected for their empathy with, and ability to relate to, younger students.

"I would love to see a growing emphasis on building relationships within form classes."

Year 9 teacher

"I would love to see a growing emphasis on building relationships within form classes, something that's smaller than the whole school, where kids can feel they belong, feel connected. Quality time spent with form teachers is important, maybe

looking at goal setting, interviewing each kid individually, but also doing things like having inter-class sports challenges, doing fun stuff together, working through life skills within their form classes and letting the kids develop that relationship with a significant teacher."

Year 9 teacher

"I know that with my form class I've got to be a bit like a mother, you've got to have a band-aid and you've got to be prepared to spend the time to listen to them talk."

Year 9 form teacher

Ideally, the role of a form teacher is to:

- create strong relationships with the students in their form class and take responsibility for their pastoral care;

- foster class bonding within their form class and help Year 9 students feel they have a place where they belong within the school;
- act as a link between subject teachers, deans, counsellors and the student in relation to discipline or pastoral care issues;
- engage in activities with their form class designed to help students develop life and study skills;
- create strong relationships with students' parents.

Issues and Concerns Regarding the Year 9 Form Teacher Role

Finding from our transition study

The form teachers at secondary school often did not know the students in their form classes particularly well, especially if they only saw these students at form time [and not in any of their subject classes]. This was particularly the case for the form teachers of many of the low achieving students.

While participants identified a range of desirable aspects of a Year 9 form teacher's role, it was recognised too that there can be a gap between ideal practice and reality. Factors that can prevent form teachers from fulfilling all aspects of the role include:

- insufficient time to spend with the class: some form teachers do not teach their form class in any subject, and so may only see their form class students for 10 or 15 minutes a day, and with that time mostly taken up with administrative tasks such as reading notices;
- lack of the necessary enthusiasm or skills to undertake pastoral care or help with the ongoing development of their students' study and life skills. It was observed by some study participants that whereas some form teachers interacted a lot with their class, others simply

chose to focus on calling the roll and checking on absentees.

Although many form teachers do a good job of caring for their Year 9 students, it is clear that they do not always receive sufficient support to fulfil the important pastoral care and life-skills development aspects of the role, and to establish and maintain effective relationships with parents.

School leaders therefore need to decide how best to allocate sufficient time, training and resources for the support that form teachers require. For example, while one school in our study had attempted to put in place a training programme for form teachers, this had not succeeded due to the extra time commitment it required of teachers. This outcome called for a critical review within the school of what had gone wrong, and to establish how this could be remedied.

Selecting Staff for the Role of Form Teacher

As for the role of Year 9 dean, consideration needs to be given to the professional and personal characteristics that will best equip appointees to the role of Year 9 form teacher. Important attributes would include:

- an ability and inclination to mentor students;
- an in-depth understanding of the needs of young adolescents;
- sound experience of working with this year group;
- ability to liaise effectively with other teachers and the Year 9 deans regarding individual student needs;
- ability to communicate well with a wide range of parents;
- ability and inclination to monitor student progress across the spectrum, including academic and social development, and the nature and extent of their involvement in the wider life of the school.

Questions to consider

- What do we consider to be the most important aspects of the Year 9 form teacher role in this school? Should it mainly be a pastoral care role, or something else?
- Are the form teacher arrangements in this school working as well as they could be in terms of student well-being and needs? What are the main strengths and weaknesses of our current system? For example, how important is it, or might it be, to ensure that form teachers also teach their class in at least one subject area?
- Should we 'match' form teachers and classes in terms of certain, specified characteristics? Why or why not? If yes, what do we consider to be the most important matching criteria?
- Do we know what the particular pressures and positive aspects of the form teacher role are for the teachers involved?
- To what extent do our form teachers receive specific mentoring or professional development opportunities to support them in their role? Is it sufficient? If not, how could this lack be rectified?
- Should form teachers have a greater role in parental contact than a student's other teachers or should all teachers have equal responsibility for this?
- Are our form teachers (and/or other teachers) presently able to keep in regular contact with parents about student progress and well-being? If not, how might this be better achieved?
- Is there a need in this school for regular, timetabled meetings so that Year 9 deans and form teachers can spend time together to discuss and address the needs and progress of their students?

Peer Supporters

In common with other schools in New Zealand and overseas, both secondary schools in our study had a

Senior student peer supporters help Year 9s more quickly feel part of the school.

peer support strategy in place, in which between two and four previously trained Year 13 students were assigned to each new Year 9 class. As much as possible, the senior students were 'matched' with the

particular class they were assigned to. These Year 13s took part in the orientation activities with the incoming Year 9 students, following this up by introducing and leading various group activities with the students in form time throughout the first

term. Sometimes, too, the peer supporters worked alongside teachers, contributing to activities within subject classes. In most instances, the peer supporters remained involved with a form class for the entire year, albeit at a lower level after the first term.

Teachers commented that the intensive, initial support provided by the Year 13 students, as well as the ongoing support they offered, had been highly successful. (The students too provided very positive feedback on how the peer supporters had helped them settle at secondary school.)

The teachers felt that the senior students helped the Year 9 students more quickly feel part of the

school. Also that they acted as good role models, and helped to create cohesion and group feeling among students within each of the Year 9 classes and, to some extent, for the Year 9 group overall. The Year 13 students were further seen as additional or alternative sources of pastoral care and support for students, and as a help to teachers in identifying Year 9 students in need of extra academic or social support from the school.

Another positive aspect of the peer support strategy was that it helped dispel some of the fears held by the newest, youngest students in the school about 'older students', in particular that they would be bullied by them.

In addition, positive interactions between the different year levels or age groups in the school helped create a more integrated, unified student population and the opportunity for greater exchange of ideas, knowledge and skills.

Year 9 students commenting on peer supporters:

- *"The peer supporters helped us get to know our classmates really well. And they are really helpful for the Year 9s — can ask them if you don't know something."*
- *"Peer supporters — we do fun games with them. I really like that."*
- *"Talk to peer supporters sometimes when I need them. They introduced me to other people."*
- *"When peer supporters come to our social studies classes, they do activities with us and make it [learning the subject] more fun."*
- *"Peer supporters: if you need help you can count on them."*

Ensuring Good Practice in Peer Support Programmes

Several points about establishing peer support programmes were raised.

- Peer supporters need to be carefully chosen, ensuring that those selected fully understand the serious nature of the year-long commitment and have the personal qualities that mean they can relate well to younger students.
- Peer supporters need to be well trained in what is expected of them.
- The peer support programme must be well organised and supported, so that the Year 13 students who are selected have, for example, a range of activities at their disposal to undertake with their Year 9 charges, and the time and resources to carry these out.
- Having Year 13 students in the Year 9 classes for the whole year was consistently seen as beneficial for the Year 9 students. The leadership and mentoring role was further considered to be a valuable learning experience for the Year 13s themselves. Some caution, though, was advised in that the peer supporter role does separate the Year 13 students from their own peer group for at least some of the time, and means extra work and responsibilities on top of their own studies and other commitments. These potential disadvantages for the students involved need to be carefully managed. (It was however noted that with suitable preparation and planning some of the peer supporters' work could count towards NCEA credits. And the peer supporters themselves gave very positive feedback about the experience.)

The peer support programme needs to be well organised and supported.

Questions to consider

- If we wanted to introduce a peer support system into this school or if we think our existing peer support system could be more effective, how could this be achieved? Should there be 'peer supporters' from other year levels as well (eg, Year 10) rather than just Year 13 students?

Year 13 Students Commenting on their Role as Peer Supporters

Several peer supporters at each of the participating secondary schools in our transition study provided feedback about their experiences.

The purpose of the peer supporter role

Commenting on their role as a peer supporter, the senior students believed that they were there to help the Year 9s settle into secondary school. They talked about being a friendly face, smiling at the younger students in the corridors and being available to help with directions, information, and any worries or issues the students wanted to talk about. Some described their role as inducting Year 9 students into the culture of the school to *"give them an understanding of school values and expectations"* and some saw themselves as being expected to model good behaviour. A few added that the peer supporters provided an alternative view of senior students who are sometimes perceived by younger students as likely bullies.

More specifically, the peer supporters encouraged the Year 9s to get involved in extra-curricular activities. They also helped teachers in various ways, including organising sports and other activities, and providing feedback about individual students to help teachers more effectively *"monitor their [the Year 9 students'] progress"*.

Apart from general advice about school events, the peer supporters felt they helped Year 9s *"feel safe"* (eg, by dissipating bullying incidents) and acted as a sounding board for general worries and concerns. One peer supporter commented:

"They have a lot more on their minds than the average person would expect."

The peer supporters further stated that various Year 9 students *"ask why school's so boring"*, discuss problems they are having with particular teachers, and talk about present and future subject options. The peer supporters felt they were able to give the Year 9s a perspective on what school would be like for them in the future, sometimes even talking to them about possible future careers and *"what they want to do with their lives"*.

The Year 9 students were reported to particularly value the interpersonal and 'moral' support they received, and to be grateful for the visibility of the peer supporters as it helped them feel safe in the school grounds. And, especially in the first days and weeks at secondary school, they appreciated the peer supporters being available to guide them when they were lost. The peer supporters also saw themselves as advocates for the Year 9s when they got into trouble with teachers. Having *"been through that stage"* themselves, they felt they had knowledge about Year 9 students' concerns and issues and were therefore in a position to empathise.

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Selection, training and ongoing support

Commenting on selection and training to become a peer supporter, all of the participating peer supporters felt that the camp they had been on together had been very valuable for promoting a shared sense of purpose and commitment, learning how to relate to a wide range of people, and for establishing a strong bond amongst themselves.

"This required a great deal of concentration combined with hard work. We learned to really open up and connect with people in a way we never thought possible. Involved were several activities that helped me gain a better understanding of what peer supporters would possibly go up against."

However, although all of the peer supporters agreed that the camp they had attended had been very helpful, they also emphasised that people who wanted to be peer supporters should already possess the "basic fundamentals" as *"most of what we do comes from how we feel about other people"*.

The peer supporters gave each other ongoing support, discussed situations with their form teachers, and met more formally as a group from time to time to raise issues of concern and collectively discuss possible solutions:

"We discuss real-life incidents that happen at school and how to tackle them."

The ongoing training sessions, and also the day-to-day work of the peer supporters, were overseen by teachers who had undertaken this particular responsibility. One of the peer supporters observed:

"We are encouraged by the help and the great wisdom of knowledge of our peer support teachers who have inspired us in a great way."

The rewards of the peer supporter role

Commenting on what the best thing for them personally was about being a peer supporter, the students often referred to the recognition and respect that resulted:

"The amount of respect that my peers show to me because I am a peer supporter and how everyone soon gets to know you and wants to be my friend. Also the difference you make in the confidence of the Year 9s [you work with]".

"People saying 'hello' to me; knowing I can help keep students on track."

There was also reward in the knowledge that what they were doing was worthwhile and could make a difference to younger students:

"The idea that there is a group of young, positive leaders who are eager to help the younger crowd coming in."

"For me personally it is that we can effect change. This gives me a chance to voice my opinions and be heard. Also I enjoy being a good role model and being a good influence on the younger students."

continued ...

continued ...

Some of the peer supporters simply enjoyed being with and helping younger students. And some saw the role as enabling them to give back to the school some of what had been provided for them. It was also observed that the role gave them an opportunity to develop skills that would be helpful later in life.

Challenges of the peer supporter role

The peer supporters took their responsibilities very seriously. But they acknowledged that there were difficult aspects of the role, including anxieties about *"letting everyone down"*, *"not living up to the image"*, *"fear of slipping up"*, or not being able to *"provide them with everything possible"*.

A number of peer supporters also experienced a tension between their desire to be a 'friend' and having to deal with disciplinary issues, as having to take a disciplinary stance could lead to unwanted confrontation. And one student found it hard to *"control a noisy class in the absence of a teacher"*.

Commenting on possible solutions to such difficulties, one student reflected that she needed to focus more on what was going well rather than worrying about possible failure, while others suggested that in terms of discipline that *"getting to know Year 9 students really well so they know who you are"* would help a lot, although the student having trouble with controlling a noisy class felt that she had to *"get tougher and involve the teacher"*. But overall the peer supporters felt that any issues they encountered were able to be solved effectively through consultation with the other peer supporters and with the teachers supervising the peer support programme, as well as teachers generally.

The following comments sum up how much the students valued the experience of being a peer supporter:

"I believe it is necessary to have these types of programmes in schools. And it has helped me a lot and will do so for many years."

"I've had the most rewarding experiences that I'll never trade for anything. I'm glad I became one and hope that I've done enough to make those before me proud and inspire those after me to carry on something special like our current accomplishments. The things I do I don't consider work, I consider it helping out."

"As a peer supporter I was given an opportunity to keep my word and do something for my school. It has also taught me how valuable my life and time can be to other people. What I learn as a peer supporter is how to value myself for the difference I can make by doing small, everyday things that mean a lot to someone else. Most people worry we peer supporters will struggle to balance study and duty, but I can see no reason why we can't do both and have proven to ourselves that we can handle it."

Friends and Social Interaction

The transition is seen by some students as an exciting opportunity to make new friends. Other

Facilitated social opportunities help students develop a sense of belonging in their new school.

students however particularly miss having their old friends with them and/or are more tentative about making new friends when they arrive at secondary school.

Before and after transition, 'friends' are almost always

mentioned by students as a key reason for enjoying school, and as a 'best liked' aspect of school.

Generally speaking, transition is easier for students who have at least a few existing friends or acquaintances at the new secondary school.

But irrespective of whether students come to their new secondary school in the company of established friends, it is important to ensure that new Year 9 students are able to develop a sense of belonging in their new school situation through form class-based activities (where possible, aided by peer supporters), and other facilitated chances to socialise, such as sports days, camps, and special events.

A particular aspect of students' social interactions on arrival at secondary school emphasised by teachers, and by some students and parents in our study, is the need to 'acclimatise' to the often much greater diversity among the student population.

Incorporating cooperative learning activities into subject classes was recommended as a good way of helping students integrate and to form a positive classroom learning environment.

Our data also indicated that ensuring that students of different year/age levels have chances to interact together in positive, non-threatening situations is of benefit — for example, to help Year 9 students

interact more naturally with older students, rather than fearing them or feeling they needed to keep out of perceived 'senior student areas' of the school.

Knowing the Students

Teachers either side of the transition talked about the need to get to know new students as individuals as quickly as possible.

It was evident too from our study findings that students have a strong desire to be known as an individual by their teachers.

"I think the most important thing is getting to know the individual."
Year 8 teacher

While it was acknowledged that the 'getting acquainted' process could be particularly challenging within a secondary school setting, given the greater number of students each teacher has to get to know, participants recommended developing personal techniques for achieving this.

For example, one Year 9 teacher's strategy was to ask each of his new students to write a little bit about themselves, emphasising what they wanted to highlight. With their permission, the teacher then took photographs of the students and together with the brief 'bios' compiled them into a folder. This served as a valuable reference until the teacher became well familiar with everyone.

A practice with a similar purpose was described by some of the primary teachers: this was to have their Year 8 students write a letter to their forthcoming teachers telling them about themselves and identifying what they would particularly like the new teachers to know about them.

Other teachers mentioned making a point of greeting their students as they passed in the school grounds to facilitate the getting-to-know-each-other process.

Questions to consider

- What strategies do we use to get to know our new Year 9 students? As individuals, do we ever seek out student information compiled by the students themselves, by former teachers and/or our colleagues who take our students for other subjects?
- How much do we know about what other teachers do to learn about their students: would it be helpful to share our knowledge and skills about this?
- How well do we feel we know individual students in our different classes?
- How important do we think it is to know as much as possible about individual students (eg, in terms of interests, abilities, home circumstances, and so on)?
- Are we as teachers (regularly) able to incorporate what we know about individual students into teaching and learning interactions in the classroom? If yes, what are (or will be) the benefits of this for us and for different students?
- If no, would we like to (more often) incorporate student interests into class activities? If we feel there are barriers to doing this, how might we go about overcoming these? What sort of help do we most need to achieve this? Would it be possible to obtain assistance from each other here in this school, or from somewhere else (eg, via the Internet/online discussion)?
- As students do not remain 'static', how do we personally keep up with changes in their lives or in them as individuals that are important to know about in terms of their learning and progress?

The School Environment and Facilities

Ensuring a Student-friendly Environment

Students quite often find the physical differences in their secondary school compared to primary school somewhat alienating.

Amongst other things, students in the transition study:

- felt there was less 'comfort' offered by the physical environment at secondary school. They particularly disliked being locked out of classrooms at lunchtimes during winter months, for instance, or having no shelter (eg, from covered pathways) when walking between

They felt there was less 'comfort' at secondary school.

classrooms in the rain;

- considered the secondary school environment generally to be less attractive (eg, more litter in the grounds, less colourful or well set out) than at primary/intermediate school;
- found carrying their books and other belongings around with them all day troublesome and tiring. Even when there were lockers available, students often chose not to use them because of the risk of damage and theft.

To facilitate students' transition to secondary school and feelings of belonging, suggested considerations include:

- ensuring that places are made available for students where they can be warm and comfortable when the weather prevents outdoor activities during breaks;

- finding solutions to the issue of how best to provide secure facilities (eg, in homerooms) in which students can safely leave belongings during the day and readily access them as required;
- displaying students' art work and evidence of other achievements and interests in prominent places in the school to be appreciated by students and staff and also parents and other visitors to the school;
- brightening colour schemes and general presentation of the school to reflect its main users — adolescents — and to promote school pride.

It was also emphasised that the school environment, in all senses of the word, should be as good as it can be, particularly for students with difficult personal or home circumstances.

Dedicated Spaces for Year 9 Students

Students in the first term or so in Year 9 often miss having an established space of their own in the school grounds in which to play games or 'hang out', which they had taken for granted at primary school. They particularly miss the relaxed, fun, or comfortable lunch-time breaks they had been used to. It was evident that this experience was making it more difficult for some students to adjust to secondary school, especially those who tended to be more unsure about the presence of older students.

Taking into account student feedback it seems important to ensure that:

- a range of lunch-time activities are available for different groups of students;
- students are well informed early on about what activities and facilities are available to them and regularly updated;
- for a time at least, Year 9 students have the option of spending their lunch breaks in dedicated spaces in the school grounds, or, alternatively, that the use of different parts of the school grounds is monitored to ensure that different groups/year levels have equitable access.

Cole (2005) also advocates 'providing [an] ... environment dedicated to Year 9', for example, through 'identifying a distinct physical location within the existing school facilities for Year 9' and 'supporting students to decorate or landscape their [own] learning areas'. He stated (p.11) that:

'Year 9 should be an experience that students are looking forward to and one that they look back on as being something very special. Establishing a dedicated location for Year 9 schooling assists in making the experience "unique" or in breaking the pattern of the previous years' experience. It also assists in building students' attachment to school and in generating a sense of belonging.'

Questions to Consider

- To what extent are we aware of how secure and comfortable Year 9 students feel about being at our school?
- What are key factors, from the students' point of view, that enable them to feel a sense of belonging at this school?

Students Feeling Safe

Year 9 students feeling safe and secure includes being sufficiently equipped to confidently handle

“Some of them don’t feel safe here.”

Year 9 teacher

such matters as finding their way around the school and seeking help with problems if necessary. It also includes

physical safety, in particular, freedom from fear of and actual bullying.

All groups of participants in the transition study — teachers, students, parents — talked about a certain level of bullying occurring at school.

There are many reasons for bullying and recommended steps to deal with it. While

discussion about these is beyond the scope of this document, comments from a number of participants in the study suggested that an important, practical, consideration concerns minimising areas and situations within the school where bullying is most likely to occur or go on undetected.

For example, toilet blocks were identified as areas where students encounter bullying.

Students talked too about the bullying or harassment that often occurs when students have to queue for most of their lunch breaks in order to buy food at the school canteen.

Questions to consider

- Are we as aware as we could be of where in the school, or in what circumstances, bullying is likely to occur, especially that which involves Year 9 students? What more might we need to do, or do differently, to prevent incidences of bullying?
- If students are experiencing long wait times to buy food at the school canteen, are there steps we could take to improve the relevant systems so that students are served faster, and opportunities for student misbehaviour are reduced?
- If Year 9 (or any) students have fears about using school toilet facilities, are we taking effective steps to resolve this issue?
- Do we provide a sufficient range of organised activities for students during breaktimes to encourage constructive participation and leave students less opportunities for bullying and other misbehaviours?

Minimise areas and situations within the school where bullying is likely to occur.

Promoting School Pride

Different but inter-related aspects of 'school pride' include students appreciating the physical

"They just need to feel that they belong in the school. ... We are trying to foster school pride."

Year 9 teacher

environment, and feeling proud of the accomplishments of everyone in the school, including themselves.

In contrast to students who are careless of the school environment (eg, damaging items and littering), and do not

respect the standing of the school, students who are proud of their school feel a greater sense of belonging and loyalty, and are more likely to experience — and create — positive interactions with other students and with teachers and other adults in the school.

Dinham and Rowe (2008) reported that findings from a study within The Longitudinal Surveys of

Australian Youth (LSAY) project conducted by Fullarton (2002) included:

- 'that levels of engagement were higher where students believed that their school had a good climate, that is, that their school had high quality teachers, effective discipline, high levels of student learning and a positive school spirit';
- 'that overall level of student engagement [pride] in the school was a strong predictor of [individual student] engagement and that high engagement at the school level moderated the negative effects of socio-economic status and [ethnicity], indicating that the school environment has an important influence on student engagement.'

'Levels of engagement were higher where students believed their school had a good climate and a ... positive school spirit.'

Questions to consider

- To what extent do we — staff and students — at this school feel a sense of school pride?
- To what extent do we feel that our families/community feel a sense of pride in the school?
- As a school, do we need to do more to promote or maintain a sense of pride in the school among students and families/community? If yes, what might we need to do to achieve this?
- What strategies that are seen as positive rather than punitive by students do we, or could we, use to minimise incidents of littering, theft, and damage to property within the school? How might students themselves take a lead in devising and implementing any such strategies?
- How good are we in this school at ensuring that we celebrate student and staff successes? Do we include parents/families/community in celebrations often enough?

Students' Involvement in Extra-curricular Activities

All groups of participants in our transition study recognised the importance of student participation

Students who regularly participate in and enjoy extra-curricular activities tend to do better at school and in life.

in extra-curricular activities for aiding the integration process throughout transition, for facilitating the interactions which are integral to social adjustment and well-being, and for providing additional opportunities for students to learn new skills or hone existing

ones.

For all of these reasons it was often emphasised that students should, where appropriate¹⁵, be actively assisted to become and stay involved in extra-curricular activities at school that they would personally enjoy. This was to help them feel more connected to the new school and in many cases to feel a greater sense of continuity with their primary school and/or after school or weekend experiences.

There are other important reasons, too, for keeping an eye on the extent to which individual students get involved in extra-curricular activities.

Evidence indicates that students who regularly participate in and enjoy extra-curricular activities tend to do better at school and in life generally than those who do not participate. For example, Wylie et al's (2006) *Competent Learners @ 14* (part of the longitudinal *Competent Children, Competent Learners* study¹⁶) reports that students who were engaged in the wider life of the school were more likely to have interests that provided them with goals and challenges and a sense of achievement.

Similarly, Fullarton (2002) found that an ...

'...emphasis ... on extra-curricular activity is important. Strong participation in such activities more closely connects students to the school and "...[results in] 'flow-on' effects to more academic parts of the curriculum".'

Reinforcing these findings, data from our transition study indicated that the high achieving students, particularly the high achievers in reading, were generally more likely to be taking part in extra-curricular activities at primary and secondary school.

They were also more likely to take on special responsibilities at secondary school, such as library or canteen duties or representing their class on student council.

Kassie's story (Case Study 4) below illustrates how students who miss out on finding a place for themselves in the wider life of the school can increasingly fall behind both socially and academically.

¹⁵ Depending on a student's home circumstances, cultural considerations, and involvement in activities outside of school it may be necessary to consult with a student's parents/caregivers to discuss the student's participation in certain activities.

¹⁶ For more information about this study go to: www.educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/publications/ho-mepages/competentchildren/index.html

Case Study 4: Involvement in extra-curricular activities

Some students tend to miss out on valuable social and other opportunities at school (eg, being in a school production, or joining a sports team) because, unlike other students, they do not 'know' how to join up, and do not have the confidence, resilience, or social maturity to find out. Alternatively, they may be too influenced by certain friends who don't want to participate.

Students least likely to have participated in extra-curricular activities at school often appear to be in greatest need of this sort of involvement to help them become well assimilated into the school environment. Once at secondary school, such students may also be at particular risk of 'getting lost' without the level of monitoring or overseeing that they had often received at primary school.

Kassie was one such student. She was a very quiet, shy girl who found it difficult to talk to anyone she wasn't familiar or comfortable with. Although she was progressing quite well in her school work, her Year 8 teacher indicated that she was working below potential in that she didn't like to ask questions to clarify her work, and stayed on the fringes, especially when there were out of the ordinary learning activities on offer. Kassie tended not to talk to her parents or other family members about school, and her parents were of the opinion that everything was going as it should for their daughter at school before and after transition.

Kassie did sometimes take part in lunchtime sports activities with classmates in Year 8 and acknowledged that she especially liked netball but 'didn't know' why she had not joined any team within or outside of school so she could play more regularly (it was evident that she had talent in the game).

Once at secondary school, Kassie continued the same pattern of behaviour, only more so, keeping a low profile and mixing almost exclusively with two or three friends from Year 8, mainly just wandering around the school grounds together at break times. Again, she did not join up for any sports or other extra-curricular activities, and because of her ability to 'hide herself away' she tended to get overlooked in favour of the more 'obvious' demands of other students in class time. Her form teacher commented that students like Kassie could be 'hard going' (it was difficult to assess what she was thinking and feeling) and admitted preferring more outgoing students. By the end of Year 9 Kassie was judged to be 'losing ground' both academically and socially in the much bigger environment of a secondary school where she had not yet found a particular niche for herself.

Questions to consider

- How important do we feel it is for students to become involved in extra-curricular activities?
- Should involvement in extra-curricular activities apply to all students or some more than others? If the latter, which students in particular?
- Who should monitor or oversee student involvement in extra-curricular activities (eg, ensuring that they either take part in something, or alternatively do not overdo things, and/or that they choose activities that will benefit them)?
- What are the implications for staff workloads and responsibilities and for managing these?
- What dialogue should there be with parents/caregivers about their children's participation in extra-curricular activities? What worries or concerns might they have about their child's involvement? Should they be able to prevent their child participating?
- What, if any, decisions might need to be made about the balance between students' school work and their involvement in extra-curricular activities? If necessary, how can this best be managed?

Pastoral Care

A significant aspect of orientation activities for new Year 9 students is to provide them with information about who they could go to in the school — school counsellors, Year 9 deans, form teachers, peer supporters — if they have problems they wish to talk about, and when and how they can do this. It is important to actively check with students that they have registered and understood this information and to remind them of it as often as seems necessary.

Many participants, including those involved in guidance services or in delivery of the health curriculum in particular, emphasised the importance of schools having programmes and processes (such as mediation) in place that specifically address Year 9 students' social needs, including health, sexuality and bullying matters. They felt that the availability of well developed systems within the school, coupled with good attention by staff to what was going on in students'

lives, aided overall student development, and contributed to the creation of healthy learning environments in individual classes and throughout the school.

"I think that maintaining a high level of pastoral care when they get to secondary school — so that they still have someone they can talk to on the same level that they would have talked to their classroom teacher last year — is really important. The interpersonal touch: you don't want them closing off or shutting down because there's no opportunity to communicate."

Year 9 teacher

"Being connected to a trusted adult. That's the key to it."

Secondary school counsellor

Manu's story (Case Study 5) shows how his teachers worked with him, his parents and others to help him work through personal/family issues and get back on track at school.

Case Study 5: Impact of personal issues on attitudes to school

In contrast to students who arrive at secondary school with low levels of prior achievement, there are students with the ability and prior learning to maintain very good or better levels of achievement and make significant progress, but who become progressively less positive about school and what they are learning. They also become less positive about extra-curricular activities, and sometimes less socially successful (getting off-side with teachers, choosing less desirable friends). This has the potential for putting them in as much, if not more, danger of dropping out of school prematurely as students significantly struggling with their schoolwork.

There may be many different reasons for a student's decreasing positivity about school, including: disengaging from learning because they do not feel challenged enough at school and lose interest; or because of problems that arise in their personal or home circumstances.

In Year 8, Manu was a bright, capable student, making good progress at school, academically, socially and in sporting and other extra-curricular activities.

However, when his parents separated quite unexpectedly towards the end of his last year at primary school, this came as a shock to him, and he did not react well. He became increasingly hostile to everyone at home and at school, and his schoolwork suffered. Nevertheless, at first, the good relationships he had built up over the years with teachers, and especially his current teacher, and peers at his primary school helped him.

But following the move to secondary school where he was no longer well known, he did not have a desire to form good relationships with his new teachers, did not want to put effort into his schoolwork (although his ability and prior achievement helped him 'coast' quite adequately in his first months in Year 9), did not want to join any extra-curricular groups or teams, and was drifting towards students with a tendency to get into trouble.

However, Manu's form teacher and a Year 9 dean were working with Manu, and with each of his concerned parents, to try and keep him on track and not waste his potential. His parents had also contacted his primary school teacher who had offered to collaborate with his Year 9 teachers. There was therefore an ongoing 'watching brief' on Manu to try and minimise the impact of his personal problems and coax him into a more positive frame of mind. At the same time, both school and home were aware that they could not be seen to be condoning some of Manu's more unacceptable behaviours.

Questions to consider

- How sure are we that our Year 9 students know who to go to in the school if they have problems? Do they feel comfortable about approaching those people?
- Do we know whether students feel personally connected to one or more trusted adults at secondary school? Are there students who do not? If this is the case, are these students likely to be in particular need of this sort of contact? What might need to be done to bring this about?
- Do we believe that the current pastoral care provisions in our school are adequate/sufficient? Why or why not?
- How effective do you think an 'at risk' register would be in helping to prevent (further) problems for students? What would be the main benefits or difficulties? What would the implications be for the nature and extent of information shared between teachers and schools about individual students?
- Who in the school should have access to such a register? Whose responsibility would it be to ensure the register is up-to-date? How would the information be used?

Setting Clear, Consistent Boundaries for Behaviour

Teachers before and after transition emphasised

"We try to be consistent so they know where they stand. ... It gives them a bit of stability within the system."

Year 9 dean

that students need to have clear and explicit boundaries for acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour early on. And, echoing a concern expressed by many students, it was also emphasised that these boundaries should be well-maintained and enforced in a

consistent way for all students.

While stressing that clear and consistent standards for behaviour were necessary, a number of teachers advocated that Year 9 students require time to learn and adapt to the rules at their new school, and that their teachers need to be flexible and to 'go easy' on students in the early part of the year.

"Teachers took it easy during the first week or so, didn't feel we were overloaded. Didn't do any work on the first day, just walked around and got used to places, and found out what the rules and expectations were."

Year 9 student

Questions to Consider

- How well do we do in ensuring that all Year 9 students clearly understand the rules and expectations of the school? Do some students need more help with this than others? If yes, do they receive the help they require, or are they more likely to receive detentions, etc, for non-compliance? If the latter, is this effective, or is it more likely to encourage disobedience and disengagement among (some) students?
- How effective are we across the school in ensuring that our rules and expectations are consistently applied so as not to favour or penalise individual students or groups of students? Can we be better at this and if so what would we need to do?

Sending Positive Messages Home about Student Progress

Students, teachers and parents talked about the value of sending home positive messages about student progress, attitudes and effort, as a way of encouraging students and their families, and helping them relate well to the school. Messages of this kind were especially appreciated in the early weeks following a student's transition to secondary school.

"Two 'good letters' have come home, sent through the mail. Both were for [my son's] social studies work. He was very excited about getting them. He knew the first one was coming as he kept asking if any mail had arrived: he was waiting for it."

Parent of Year 9 student

Pitching Classroom Work at the Appropriate Level

Year 9 students need to have academic work pitched at an appropriate level from the outset to help them settle in and feel positive about their secondary schooling experience. There is considerable complexity inherent in this issue.

Opinions can be divided over the appropriate level of difficulty of the work for new Year 9s. One view, for example, is that the students should be given work that is easily within their capabilities, so as to foster feelings of success and competence, and a sense of familiarity or clear continuity with their previous schoolwork.

Alternatively, there is a view that it is better to assign work that is more advanced than that undertaken at primary school to ensure students feel stimulated and stretched.

Principals and teachers made very frequent reference to the importance of links between the sectors. A consistent emphasis in their comments

concerned the effective sharing and use of achievement data and other information about transitioning students to assist in establishing appropriate starting points from the outset of their secondary schooling.

Appropriate starting points for Year 9 (and all) students at the beginning of a new school year also underline the importance of teachers in general being informed about well-researched assessment tools and how these can be implemented and interpreted to assist in targeting their work with students. However there is evidence (eg, Amituanai-Toloa et al, 2010¹⁷; McKinley et al, 2009¹⁸) that this is an area in which teachers often need support and more opportunities for professional development, again highlighting a challenge for school leadership.

The topic of appropriately pitched work for students is discussed further in Chapter Five (p.75ff).

¹⁷ Details about Amituanai-Toloa et al's *Pasifika Schooling Improvement Research* can be obtained via the Ministry of Education website. The summary report can be downloaded from:

www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/pasifika_education/61649 and the full research report from: www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/pasifika_education/61650.

As a result of findings from this research regarding the effective implementation of assessment tools, a team from the University of Auckland is developing a document to specify how schools can most effectively collect, collate, analyse and use student achievement data to inform teaching and leadership decisions. Support will then be provided to schools that took part in the study to help them effectively implement the recommendations in the document. For more information about this, please contact the research team (of the abovementioned publications) at the Woolf Fisher Research Centre, The University of Auckland.

¹⁸ McKinley et al's work, as part of the Starpath Project being undertaken by The University of Auckland, provides valuable information about establishing longitudinal data sets (academic profiles) for each individual student, both to help students achieve their academic aims (and increase student retention) and to facilitate overall academic performance through a systematic, whole-school approach to student achievement.

Questions to Consider

- Do we have an adequate understanding of how our Year 9 students feel about the level of work they encounter when they arrive at secondary school? Do we know if they mostly find it too hard, too easy or about right? How do we establish this? Are our main sources of data: What we collect ourselves within our individual classrooms? Data from previous teachers/schools? Data from standardised assessment procedures? Some other data? How well do we understand the relative strengths and limitations of each approach?
- To what extent are we successfully able to assess students' achievement and establish starting levels based on those assessments?
- If or when we adopt an overall starting level for a class, what do we think the main effects of this are, for the class as a whole, and/or for individual students or groups of students? Would the answer to this question be the same for all classes?

Homework

Research evidence (eg, Cooper et al, 2006; Robinson et al, 2009; Vatterott, 2009) indicates that homework assignments, under appropriate conditions, can have a positive impact on student learning and achievement. However, it is also acknowledged in the literature that homework is often a highly controversial topic, with wide-ranging views expressed among and across schools, teachers, parents, students and others about its necessity and value.

For a number of reasons, homework can be problematic.

Views expressed about homework by participating teachers and principals in the transition study reflected this same trend of diverse views.

Some of the points made included that:

- homework can be helpful for secondary students, but needs to be carefully planned and managed;
- homework shouldn't be the same for everyone in a class;

- it has to have educational purpose and not be assigned just because it is assumed to be good for students;
- schools need to have well-developed policies regarding homework;
- it is difficult for teachers to provide students with meaningful feedback on homework;
- homework can be inequitable, depending on a student's skills, knowledge, home circumstances, and so on, with students whose parents are unable to provide the resources for their child to complete homework being further disadvantaged;
- there can be mis-communication between schools, teachers, and parents over the nature, extent, and place for homework in a student's education, and the nature of support required of families for their child's education.

Also, although most students in our study understood, in theory at least, that homework was important because it could complement their learning in class and help to prepare them 'for the future', at the same time, many students perceived

the homework they encountered in their first year at secondary school as a worry and a burden.

This was usually less to do with the amount of homework, or the difficulty of it, but more about juggling assignments from different teachers, meeting deadlines on time, and understanding different expectations.

In a few cases, however, it was reported by parents and students that the homework *was* too difficult, and, although this would not have been the teacher's intention, that it necessitated the student (and sometimes a parent too) spending hours struggling with it, resulting in a very negative overall experience.

A number of students also felt that they were having to do at least some homework 'for the sake of it', rather than for any useful purpose they could see. And others noted that some homework was assigned as 'punishment' for not completing certain tasks during class-time, rather than as a way to extend their learning.

Hattie (2009) reports that while homework during students' middle years of schooling can benefit their learning and achievement, there are important cautions to keep in mind.

He refers (p.235) to research which 'focused on identifying the key components of homework that make the difference, with a particular emphasis on untangling the interactions between homework and student characteristics. [The researchers] found that a lot of homework and a lack of monitoring seem to indicate an ineffective teaching method. They warned against homework that undermined a students' motivation and that led to the student internalising incorrect routines, and they favoured short, frequent homework that was closely monitored by the teachers ... [as] teaching does matter when it comes to students' learning.' He added (on p.236) that 'homework in which there is

no active involvement by the teacher does not contribute to student learning'.

Hattie further reported (p.235) that the 'positive] effects [of homework] are greater for higher than for lower ability students and for older rather than younger students. For too many students, homework reinforces that they cannot learn by themselves, and that they cannot do the schoolwork.¹⁹ For these students, homework can undermine motivation, internalise incorrect routines and strategies, and reinforce less effective study habits, especially for elementary students.'

It is beyond the scope of the present document to go into the intricacies of best practice regarding assigning homework that will benefit students' learning and progress, but a clear message in respect of transitioning students is that in their first year or so of secondary school approaches to homework need to be carefully considered if students are to benefit from and not be disadvantaged by homework.

Vallerott's (2009) book (for example) provides a valuable reference for developing and implementing effective homework practices to cater for the needs and realities of today's students and families.

¹⁹ This resonates closely with Davey's story in this document — see Case Study 10.

Questions to Consider

- To what extent do we have an accurate picture of how our middle years students (particularly those in their first year at secondary school) feel about the amount of homework they are receiving, its difficulty level, and its relevance or appropriateness? What actions do we, or could we, take on the basis of student experiences and views about homework to modify overall school policies regarding homework and/or individual practices?
- How well are we doing in this school as far as coordinating homework assignments for (Year 9) students go so that workload across subjects is spread in a realistic way? Should we be implementing more formal coordination strategies across school subject departments and/or individual teachers in order to do this better?
- To what extent do we feel that the homework we assign for our middle years students is primarily intended to fulfil an important function for student learning?
- Are we as aware as we could be of when a student is having genuine difficulties with homework rather than just being disobedient by not completing it or by doing it poorly? How do we establish this?

Understanding Adolescence

The 'adolescent state' is a key feature of student–teacher relationships throughout the transition from primary to secondary schooling period and beyond. There is the ever present challenge of understanding and responding appropriately to

There is the ongoing challenge of understanding and responding appropriately to adolescent needs and 'state of being'.

aspects of adolescent behaviour and 'state of being' with teachers acknowledging that, at times, professional development and support opportunities in this respect would be welcomed. A recent study of Years 7 to 10 teachers in relation to teaching and learning in the middle years (Durling, Ng, and Bishop, 2010),

for example, found that teachers would like to know more about the theory of adolescence as a developmental phase, and to know more about

learning and social theories in relation to 'best practice' for this age group (Years 7–10).²⁰

There is also evidence from the relevant literature, as well as feedback from our transition study participants, underlining that the 'adolescent state' is not simply a stage that all young people progress through in a 'standard' way. It is observed that because adolescence begins at different ages for different individuals, this can make it even more complex for schools and teachers to adapt

²⁰ A helpful resource document *Understanding early adolescent development and its implications for teaching and learning: A literature review* by S. Cox is in progress and will be available from the Ministry of Education's Research Division later in 2010.

Amongst many other helpful insights, the report cites evidence which shows that certain behaviours exhibited by boys in the middle years of schooling — such as constant fidgeting, often incorrectly perceived as deliberate 'acting up' — are due to the physical changes that young adolescent boys undergo. These physical changes also explain why boys in particular respond much better to active learning activities at school at this period of their lives, rather than being required to sit still for long periods taking notes or listening to a teacher.

structures, systems, and approaches to best suit the needs of the individual, at the same time as catering for the student cohort overall.

Pania, Reuben, and Susannah's stories (Case Studies 6–8) illustrate how young adolescents of the same age may be at quite different stages of readiness for various changes in their lives, including the Year 8 to Year 9 transition. Also while some may be coping well academically at secondary school, in certain social areas of their lives they may struggle.

However, despite the diversity among young adolescents in terms of the ways in which they experience the physical, social, emotional and intellectual developmental changes they are going through, Cole (2005, p.3), for example, asserts that:

'...a great deal is known about what engages adolescents with schooling and learning and why middle years students disengage or become alienated from schooling and learning.'

'For example, we know students respond positively to a curriculum that links to and is meaningful in their lives outside as well as inside the classroom, an authentic curriculum. They value opportunities to explore new ideas in depth and to do so in cooperative learning situations in which they feel secure and are able to take intellectual risks. They respond well to teachers who know them well and whose teaching is student-focused and built on a sound knowledge of students and their needs and expectations.'

'Conversely, they do not respond well to a curriculum that ... fails to cater for their range of skills, interests and futures ... where their views and life experiences are ignored ... and where they are not valued as individuals.'

A summary of the 'characteristics of young adolescent students' according to Cole (2005, p.4)

'Young adolescent students:

- are 'intellectually at risk' because whether they engage with academic learning, or do not, can have lifelong consequences.
- learn what they consider to be useful, and enjoy using skills to solve real-life problems.
- prefer active over passive learning experiences and favour working with their peers during learning activities.
- tend to be moving away from dependence on family to establishing autonomous views and modes of operation.
- derive standards and models of behaviour from their peers and acceptance by the group is central to confidence and well-being.
- want significant adults to love and accept them and need frequent affirmation.'

Case Study 6: Maturity and coping with change

Some studies have found that the comparatively nurturing environment and child-centred approach to teaching offered by primary schools means that transition to secondary school is more than usually stressful for some students — often, the ‘less mature’.

Students who continue, well into Year 9, to say they would prefer to be back at primary school, are less likely than other students to have handled the transition well, taking longer to adjust to the overall changes. These students continue to miss teachers and the general environment of their former school, preferring the greater consistency and security of one teacher, one class.

This applied to Pania. In addition, she was upset by the disruption to her friendships from previous years and, in particular, felt very sad without her best friend who had gone to another school. As a result Pania would also have preferred the other school but had not been supported in this wish by her family. Compared to the friendly, relaxed girl she had been the previous year, Pania lost confidence, and became surly and disinterested in her work, although she was a competent mid-range student. She was also disinclined to form positive relationships with her teachers, or, on the whole, other students. Throughout most of Year 9, Pania returned to her primary school at every possible opportunity to see her former teachers and spend time with the younger students she had enjoyed ‘looking after’. She pulled herself together when she reached Year 10, eventually realising that it was just too hard being cut off from everyone and not enjoying any of her classes, especially when she was essentially interested in things around her and in other people.

Pania’s transition to secondary school was made more difficult by her lack of participation in extra-curricular activities where she could have met other like-minded students and found something to particularly enjoy. Although she liked sports she did not join teams because of after-school and weekend commitments (helping her family with their business and looking after other family members, plus other chores). Also neither her family, who were largely unaware of how she was feeling about school in Year 9, nor anyone at school took steps to ensure her participation.

Pania had especially enjoyed competitions and other activities at primary school which were organised around ‘whānau groupings’. She wished there could have been similar arrangements at secondary school as she felt that this would have helped her feel a sense of belonging at her new school early on and get to know people more easily and in a fun way.

Case Study 7: Adolescence — social adjustments (1)

Some students, while academically and socially successful at primary or intermediate school, do not settle as well as expected at secondary school: sometimes because other events arise in their lives to distract them from school concerns, and sometimes because of situations such as finding that being socially successful in a relatively small primary school does not necessarily transfer to being socially successful at secondary school, where there is added 'competition'.

Reuben was tall, verbally skilled, energetic, and apparently very confident and outgoing. He (and his parents) felt that his abilities in all areas were at a very high level. However, although he was a generally capable student, his Year 8 teacher advised that Reuben tended to over-inflate his own achievements. Together with his quite boisterous personality, this tendency could sometimes seem quite overbearing to other students. But because Reuben was well-known to everyone at primary school he was largely accepted for who he was; also, his Year 8 teacher was skilled at channelling Reuben's energy in positive ways. For example, Reuben successfully played an important role in the school production.

Once at secondary school, Reuben began to find that his interactions with other students were less than successful. What had worked for him as a 'quite big fish in a small pond' no longer worked so well, especially as he did not have a teacher who knew him well to help modify his behaviour when required. Reuben now found that he had many more potential 'rivals' than before and that some of the skills he had thought so superior didn't compare as favourably as he might have hoped with those shown by some students from other contributing schools. He also 'annoyed' other students, who felt he boasted too much and told him so.

Reuben learned to tone down his behaviour a little but generally felt less successful at secondary school and less 'at home' than he was used to. By the end of Year 9 he had negotiated with his family to enrol him in an all boys school for the beginning of Year 10 where he felt the structure and greater formality would suit him better.

Case Study 8: Adolescence — social adjustments (2)

Susannah was academically able and coped well with all her school work before and after transition. But social aspects of her new secondary school environment were much more of a challenge for her. She was a very reserved, introspective girl who could seem quite cold and aloof, with the exception of when she was with her family and one or two trusted friends she'd known all through primary school. Her reserved nature wasn't so much an issue at primary school, where she had frequent positive interactions with her special friends, was well known by her teachers (as was her family), and was well respected by her classmates because of her ability to quietly make valuable contributions to class projects, etc.

At secondary school, however, Susannah tended to shun friendly advances from other students (or, rather, because of her reserved nature *appeared* to do so) and preferred to work alone rather than take up any opportunities for shared activities/projects. While she was achieving well in all her subjects, her teachers felt that her social limitations were holding her back. After consultation with her parents, Susannah was encouraged (early in Year 10) to take part in a special programme for young people which focused on cooperative activities in community and outdoor settings. The aim of the activities encompassed by the programme was to encourage trust, resourcefulness, and effective collaboration among students in problem-solving situations, while at the same time having fun together. The programme was a considerable commitment, largely taking place in school time over much of the school year, and requiring skills to balance responsibilities of the programme with regular school work. At the end of term 1 of Year 10, Susannah reported enjoying being part of the programme and more than one of her teachers felt that her experiences were helping her interact more naturally with a wider range of students.

Summary Comments

There are many factors to consider before and after students undertake the move from primary to secondary schooling, for transition to be widely successful.

As well, many different individuals become involved in the processes that are put in place for helping transitioning students, including principals and teachers in each of primary, intermediate and secondary schools, parents and families, peer supporters, and the students themselves.

To briefly recap, it is important to:

- help students in the lead up to the transition to maximise their strengths and broaden the scope of their knowledge and experience so they can go forward with confidence;
- ensure that students gain both an accurate and realistic picture of secondary school, and are not unnecessarily alarmed by inaccurate or misleading information;
- encourage students to look forward to the positives about secondary school — such as the wide range of people to get to know, and new learning and extra-curricular experiences — and think about how they personally can make the most of the opportunities available, especially in terms of reaching shorter- and longer-term goals they might have;
- be aware when students new to secondary school may be experiencing particular difficulties, such as how to mix successfully with other students and establish new

friendships, cope with their class work, or engage with the wider life of the school.

As helpful tips:

- Ask students and their parents what they think will be the best and not so good things about secondary school. This could be managed by means of a survey tool developed within the school, which would contain a number of agreed upon questions. The answers obtained (perhaps through having parents come to the school to answer the survey in a group situation) could be used as a valuable starting point each side of the transition for helping ensure that:
 - the 'best' things about secondary school anticipated by students, and parents, do eventuate;
 - the things students dread most, such as bullying, and in the case of parents, in particular, their child becoming 'lost' or 'overlooked' in a much larger pool of students, are unlikely to occur.
- Arrange for senior students (diverse in terms of interests, achievement, ethnicity) with positive experiences of secondary school to visit primary and intermediate schools and talk with Year 8 students about secondary school.
- Where possible, facilitate teacher exchange visits so that Years 8 and 9 teachers have an opportunity to observe and interact in each other's classrooms and schools from time to time.
- Consider developing a custom-made survey form for use with staff, so that knowledge and views within the school regarding transition-related matters can be gathered in a systematic way. Those developing the survey form could perhaps turn some of the 'questions to consider' from this document into survey form items. The data generated, specific to your own school, could then serve as a focus for subsequent discussion and planning around transition.

CHAPTER 4:

Beyond the immediate transition: supporting students over the longer term

4

This chapter introduces some of the potential issues, concerns, and challenges associated with supporting secondary school students over the longer term.

Support beyond the Immediate Transition

The discussion in Chapter Three shows the importance of shorter-term measures for preparing students for the move to secondary school, and

Students were more critical about aspects of school in the latter half of Year 9 and mentioned more difficulties than they had early on.

helping them settle once they arrive there. But feedback from all groups of participants in the study emphasised that there are larger, ongoing issues to consider if students are to get the best out of their schooling over time and prepare well for the future.

McGee et al (2003) found national and international research evidence strongly suggesting that:

- students experiencing difficulties at primary school are most vulnerable at major transition points, and are likely to continue a pattern of underachievement after transition;
- variation (from very high achievers by international standards to those who perform below international means) in achievement within New Zealand has grown considerably;
- the degree to which students experience difficulty following transition is strongly correlated with likelihood of school dropout.

The beginning of their first year at secondary school may in some ways be a 'honeymoon' period for students, with the excitement of the new, and many teachers giving new Year 9 students extra support and attention in the early part of the year.

However, it was also evident that while students generally felt they had coped well with the transition early on, when they looked back over Year 9, many students had found the adjustments

required of them more difficult than they'd necessarily realised at the time.²¹

The most common explanations that students gave for when they felt less positive about school included:

- misunderstandings with some teachers;
- not being comfortable about approaching staff they didn't yet know very well with problems;
- when they felt work in class was not stimulating or personally relevant, and was 'not fun';
- anxiety about taking tests;
- unpleasant encounters with other students;
- when there were difficulties balancing homework and other schoolwork-related activities with extra-curricular responsibilities and interests.

While the level of extra support from deans, senior student peer supporters and others tended to reduce quite considerably as the year progressed, generally speaking, students' difficulties at school most often occurred, or at least were most often mentioned, in the second half of Year 9, and not in the first weeks following the Year 8–9 transition. Students in general also became comparatively more critical about many aspects of their school life in the latter half of Year 9, a finding reported in other recent publications (eg, Hughes et al, 2008).

There were also a number of teachers who noted that some students continue to be unsettled and unfocused throughout the first year following the transition, not fully adapting to secondary school until Year 10, and that, even more worryingly, a small group of students 'never really settle'.²²

A different but related concern in terms of student well-being and progress over time is that there are students who may 'transition' well in some respects but not in others. Sione's story (Case Study 9) illustrates one instance of this. Although Sione had a positive transition in that he fared much better socially at secondary school than he had in Year 8, in terms of his school work he continued to struggle substantially. This had important implications for him both in the short-term and in terms of his future: despite expecting that he would continue on at school until at least Year 12, neither he nor his teachers were optimistic that he would achieve more than low level qualifications. In addition, Sione was actively, and increasingly, disengaging from aspects of his work that he found difficult or particularly uninteresting.

²¹ For more about this, refer our previous report *The Case of Emily: A Focus on Students as they Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling*.

²² There is sometimes a belief that it is inherently a student problem in cases where students do not cope, adapt well, or 'fit in', as they progress through their schooling. In contrast, however, there is considerable evidence (eg, Bishop et al, 2007) that our education system does not always cater well for some groups of more vulnerable students. The result can be that they either get moved on to 'alternative education' or drop out of education altogether. A thought provoking report by Brooking, Gardiner and Calvert (2008) documents the voices of at risk young people (aged 13 to 16) attending alternative education after being expelled from mainstream schools. The report discusses, amongst other things, factors that led to their disengagement from school.

Case Study 9: Achievement and 'a pathway through school and beyond'

At the end of Year 8, Sione, a New Zealand-born Samoan student, expressed concerns about moving on to secondary school, primarily because he was afraid that he would not be able to cope with the schoolwork he would encounter there. He had real grounds for his fears, as his asTTle achievement scores and other information showed that he was achieving at a low level in each of reading, writing and mathematics.

Sione's main strength and interest at this stage of his life was PE. In particular, he loved, and demonstrated superior ability in, the game of rugby. Sione was keen to follow in an older cousin's footsteps and become a professional sportsman when he left school, although, by Year 10, Sione was also toying with the idea of someday working at 'something to do with cars'.

As well as his academic difficulties at primary school, Sione experienced difficulties in his social relationships. There were a range of reasons for this, including his large physical stature, which meant that he stood out in ways that made it difficult for him. In addition, he had problems concentrating and staying on task in class, which quite often resulted in other students taunting him at primary school, and Sione reacting angrily, including, at times, with physical retaliation.

Sione's behaviour towards other students earned him the disfavour of many teachers in the school, and he was reported as often seeming surly and uncooperative, and even intimidating.

And his own teacher in Year 8, of whom Sione spoke favourably, described him as a difficult personality, who bullied and disrupted others, was not interested in learning, and did not attempt to work hard.

However, although the teacher considered that Sione did not want, or attempt, to work hard, the teacher acknowledged that Sione could — and did — do much better when receiving one-to-one teacher assistance. In particular, the teacher stated that Sione responded very positively, and made good progress with his reading, when working with a volunteer reading assistant.

But, as Sione himself stated, this reading assistance didn't occur often enough, and was clearly insufficient to bring about real, sustainable improvements for him.

In contrast to the teacher's view, and the reports of him as surly and difficult, Sione presented as personable and mature in his Year 8 and subsequent interviews for the transition study. During his first interview in particular, he expressed his worry and dismay that his learning was not as good as it should be.

Sione's parents were very keen for him to receive a very good education and for him to achieve well and make positive social choices. They were aware that Sione was having difficulties with his learning and behaviour at school, and wished that they were better able to support his learning. His mother, in particular, felt that gaps in her own school learning meant that she did not feel confident to assist Sione in the way that she would have liked.

Once at secondary school, Sione appeared to be considerably more socially successful, or at least, to blend in and not create or attract trouble in the way he had with students at primary school. His Year 9 and Year 10 teachers too made generally favourable comments about his personality and

continued ...

... continued

behaviour in and out of the classroom. However, Sione continued to struggle with his school work. And, although Sione answered early in Year 10 that he 'definitely enjoyed' going to school — for the social and sports opportunities, and for the times when he enjoyed particular topics or activities — he had largely disengaged from learning in class in core subject areas such as mathematics and science. His teachers expressed very low expectations for the qualifications he would be likely to achieve.

Sione intended to attempt to gain a NCEA qualification but was not very hopeful of a positive outcome. He anticipated that he would stay on at school until the end of Year 12 and then look for work.

Supporting Students' Ongoing Progress at School

As well as acknowledging the importance of orientation activities and other short-term

Students need a sense of 'a pathway' through their schooling.

transition measures, study participants talked about the even weightier matter of how to ensure that students gain a sense of a 'pathway' through

their schooling and remain committed and motivated to learn: in other words, that they will maintain an ongoing sense of the relevance of schooling to their lives.

To help students maintain a sense of purpose throughout their education, participating teachers and principals felt that, first and foremost, it is

"They need to believe they can be successful and have that reinforced."
Year 9 teacher

necessary to foster students' confidence in themselves: a belief that they can be a successful, independent learner, and that they are equipped with the necessary skills to effectively achieve this.

Important attributes to foster in students were identified as:

- high self-esteem and a positive self-image;
- the ability to interact well with others and the confidence to form new friendships;
- personal resilience and ability to cope with change;
- an understanding of how secondary school is relevant to their lives;
- a belief that they can successfully manage secondary school-level work;
- a willingness to attempt work or answer questions even if they aren't sure they will get things right;
- ability to follow instructions and work independently;
- organisational skills (for example, to be able to follow timetables and come prepared with the correct books and tools);
- an ongoing focus on academic learning and a willingness to take responsibility for their own learning;
- adequate levels of literacy and numeracy to cope with secondary level schoolwork.

Student reports on when they learned best or least well²³ complemented the points made by teachers in relation to students gaining a sense of a clear pathway through their schooling. For example, according to the students some of the key elements for when they 'learned best' included: good teaching, incorporating timely feedback and help when they were experiencing difficulties; a positive relationship with the teacher; learning that was interesting, new, relevant and fun; and feeling confident in their ability to handle the work in class.

As discussed further in Chapters Six and Seven, students actively engaging in their learning at school, and the nature of the interactions they have with others around them are fundamental to the fostering of the student attributes that teachers identified as so important for students to possess.

As a helpful starting point, Cushman et al (2003, pp.4-11) advise that an important way for teachers to demonstrate to their new Year 9s that they care about their strengths and any concerns they might have about the subject area of the class is to ask each student early in the school year such questions as:

- Do you like this subject? Why or why not?
- What would you really like to learn about in this class?
- Describe the way you learn things best.
- How do you feel about working in groups?
- Is there anything that could make this class especially hard for you?

- Can you think of a way I could help you with this?
- Is there anything else about you that you would like me to know?

Support for Teachers

In addressing the ongoing needs of students, it is essential to also consider teachers and the kinds of support they themselves may need over time in order to effectively manage the complexities of their role.

There are many demands on teachers who work with transitioning students.

There are many demands on teachers who work with transitioning students, but particularly, perhaps, for the Year 9 teachers, given that they often have to get to know, assess, and cater for the needs of students in several different classes simultaneously.

From the research literature, McGee et al found that: automatic (social) promotion means that students with a wide range of ability/achievement levels enter Year 9 in secondary schools in New Zealand. When schools teach students at one standard level, little progress is made by students who have not yet reached that level, and none by students who have passed that level. [But] ... with more training in how to deal with mixed abilities in students, teachers seem better able to cope with learning differences.

The challenges teachers face when working with students before, during, and following the primary to secondary schooling transition include:

- knowing how to obtain, record and monitor student data that will enable appropriate 'starting levels' to be established at the beginning of a new school year and that will provide both themselves and others clear insights into individual students' strengths

²³ Details about when students felt they learned 'best' and 'least well' and why they most and least liked subjects are given in our report *The Case of Emily: A Focus on Students as they Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling*.

and needs, and overall progress and achievement;

- how to clearly and constructively convey information to parents/families about their child's progress, including less positive results, and effectively collaborate with families as required;
- how to maximise engagement in their learning at school for diverse groups of students;
- how to understand and relate well to adolescent young people;
- understanding different cultural perspectives and relating in culturally responsive ways;
- providing or organising special help for some students as required (eg, students entering secondary school with low literacy or numeracy skills, which some secondary teachers note they do not feel well-equipped to deal with in their specialised subject classes).

And, as well as these and a range of other

Dealing with behavioural issues can be especially challenging.

challenges, it was evident that some teachers at least experience considerable difficulties dealing with behavioural and other issues

among their students, and with knowing about and using a wider spectrum of effective pedagogies to alleviate the problem.

"There are some teachers who are very vulnerable — not just first-year teachers but people who have been teaching for some time. I have just had two teachers in a meeting absolutely crying about their inability to hold these kids. And, in the school, in a way it's kind of like 'what do you do when you are just not coping', and I think people just keep on not

coping. Some teachers are open to [having someone come in to offer support and guidance] whereas some teachers [who aren't coping], I don't even get into their classes because of that. They sit on a knife edge hoping by being nice to students that maybe they will be nice back and so the things that go on in classes continue. I've just watched Year 9 kids imitating a teacher's accent. The students absolutely did nothing in that lesson and what was interesting was that the teacher focused on a couple of boys that in [his/her] mind were the naughty ones, but [s/he] is not actually seeing the rest of the class as well. The environments and cultures [at secondary level] are not always building on what good primary and intermediate schools are doing with students in terms of their responsibility and using their initiative. And there is not enough flexibility and resources (eg, having computers sitting in classrooms) to allow for a range of different ways of doing things."

RTLB in a secondary school

"When I started here a few years ago the students in the Year 9 class I had had reading ages ranging from 7–16 years. It was just hopeless. Most of them ended up doing nothing unless they had to, it was very hard to keep such a diverse class on track with all the work."

Year 9 teacher

"For teachers [who have been used to 'streamed' classes] it is a big learning curve for them moving to mixed ability classes. It is much more confusing for them. So it is really important that they get accurate information about their new students to give them a starting point for how they start planning around the needs of all these [mixed ability] students. And also that there is provision made

for support for teachers within the school and ongoing professional development opportunities for them to get to grips with what is often a very demanding juggling act.”

RTLB in a secondary school

Beginning teachers can have their own 'transition issues'.

There was evidence too to indicate that beginning (newly qualified) teachers may have their own 'transition issues'.

"[As a first year beginning teacher] I guess no one spoke

to me about having Year 9 classes or about transition. It would have been nice to know what I could have done more of and what was going to work well and help me. Because they need a lot of support, not just the students but parents into the school. The teachers should be made aware and a lot of support should be given to them in terms of what we can do to make Year 9s feel comfortable. And as a new teacher, I guess I'm having my own 'transition issues'."

Year 9 beginning teacher

As discussed in Chapter Three in relation to the roles of Year 9 deans and Year 9 form class teachers, critical discussions within schools need to occur around how best to provide ongoing support where required for teachers in their work with students, especially when teachers are required to cater for classes of increasingly diverse students in terms of needs, interests and abilities.²⁴

Summary Comments

In addition to strategies designed to help students cope well with the shorter-term aspects of the transition, there are ongoing, deeper-level considerations to address if students are to become or remain effective, responsible learners with confidence in their own abilities and skills, and with a strong sense of a coherent pathway through their education.

Such considerations include: knowing students well, especially in terms of their learning needs, but also with regard to their interests and other characteristics likely to impact on their achievement and motivation; and ensuring that teachers have the support, knowledge and skills to cater for increasingly diverse student populations.

One particularly important area to focus on to achieve the goal of confident, capable students over time is that of establishing effective links across and between teachers, schools, and education sectors, in order to improve transfer of information that will directly inform practice in respect of students' needs and progress at different stages of their schooling. This is discussed in the following chapter.

The discussion in Chapter Six also shows the necessity of supporting student engagement during the middle years of schooling for students to maintain an understanding of the relevance of their schooling. Chapter Seven then considers how supporting key relationships in students' lives may positively impact on their learning and achievement outcomes.

²⁴ Lessons from *Beginning Teachers: Challenges for School Leaders*, by Marie Cameron (2009), is a very user-friendly resource for school leaders and others on how best to support and mentor beginning (and all) teachers. Teachers who get off to a very good start in their teaching careers are able to form sound foundations that will stand them, and the students and families they work with, in good stead in subsequent years.

CHAPTER 5:

Communication and exchange across the sectors

5

A significant overall message to emerge from our study is that teachers are often not sure 'what happens' in the other sectors and require (more) opportunities to gain greater understanding of the ways in which their colleagues work. This message is reinforced by findings reported by McGee et al in their review of the transitions literature and other recent research (eg, Hughes et al, 2008; Whitelaw, 2008).

More specifically, primary, intermediate and secondary teachers need to know more about each others':

- approaches to teaching and learning in class;
- perspectives on the curriculum and on lesson content;
- ways of interacting with and getting to know students of different ages and stages;
- ways of interacting with and getting to know parents, families and community leaders;
- overall philosophies for teaching and learning, behaviour management, and for fostering students' emotional and social development.

Despite, or because of, the lack of certainty about what happens in the other sectors, there was considerable agreement among participants in our study that structured, frequent and collegial communication between primary, intermediate and

secondary schools is critical in creating the best possible transition for students and helping them maintain a strong sense of purpose throughout their schooling.

But while there was recognition of the importance of stronger links between schools, teachers, and students in each sector, such as cooperative information-sharing for facilitating a 'seamless' progression in student learning, it was also often perceived as difficult to achieve in practice.

Lack of resources (eg, release days to enable across-school visiting to occur), being personally too busy with everyday teaching duties, feeling overwhelmed by the task when the secondary school receives students from a large number of feeder schools, and historical division between primary and secondary teachers were the key factors identified as preventing better links and knowledge-sharing with the other sectors.

Teachers who'd had the opportunity to observe or work in the other sector(s) were enthusiastic about the benefits.

In contrast to these identified difficulties, however, teachers who had had the opportunity to observe or even more valuably spend some time working in the other sector(s) were enthusiastic about the benefits of this. They felt that it enabled them to better understand the broader and ongoing needs of their students, and better understand the ways in which teachers in different situations from

themselves worked. They felt too that these experiences helped them communicate more effectively and make links across the sectors that were beneficial for everyone.

As well as cross-sector links to increase understanding and knowledge about the curriculum and about different pedagogies, study

participants referred specifically to the compiling, sharing and using of information about the strengths and needs of the students they have in common. This particular aspect of communication and exchange across the sectors is discussed further on the next page.

McGee et al (2003) found that:

- New Zealand research suggests that primary–secondary school liaison/cooperation around transition is disappointingly infrequent.
- Overseas findings show that liaison between primary and secondary schools is often viewed with suspicion by teachers.
- [Students'] previous experience or achievement is often disregarded by secondary schools.
- Researchers who have reported that student attainment is negatively affected by transition variously attribute this to secondary teachers repeating topics already studied 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. Large numbers of feeder schools compounded these problems.
- One of the issues facing secondary teachers is how much they want to know or should know about their students coming from primary school. It has been found that teachers at overseas secondary schools often favour a 'fresh start' approach, and, faced with children from a variety of schools, tend to start everyone off at the same place, regardless of previous achievement.
- The degree to which teachers build on students' previous achievement varies from school to school and subject to subject. It also seems that much of students' previous work is often undervalued, which may result in unrealistic limits being set on what they can achieve in the early years of secondary school.
- Studies have found that many students are surprised to find academic work in their first year of secondary school no harder, or easier, than in their final primary year. [This can contribute] to students becoming increasingly negative (eg, disillusionment about lack of academic challenge) about their school work as the year progresses.
- As well as the issue of continuity in individual student learning from year to year, there is the related issue of **curriculum continuity**. International data (plus anecdotal evidence within New Zealand) suggest that among teachers there is often a perception that there is a primary

continued ...

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school curriculum and a secondary school curriculum, in spite of a national curriculum in place designed to ensure continuity across the two sectors.

- Little use is made of standardised achievement measures. Many secondary teachers prefer to apply their own entry assessment tests.
- Continuity of peer group appears to be associated with continuity of achievement. Low achievers at primary/intermediate schools may do better with a new peer group at secondary school.

Sharing Information about Individual Students

Almost all teachers agreed as a general principle that it was or would be valuable for secondary schools to receive information about:

- students' academic achievement up until they arrive at secondary school;
- any learning or behavioural difficulties they might have;
- any particular factors that should be taken into account when dealing with the student, such as a history of abuse or a recent death in the family.

Many primary teachers also wished to pass on more general information about students' personalities and all-round needs and abilities, in order to help the secondary school cater appropriately to the individual needs of each student. Some also suggested that it would be valuable for secondary schools to contact primary schools for added insights if they were having difficulty dealing with individual Year 9 students. A number of secondary teachers indicated that they too would welcome such information.

Issues and Concerns Regarding Student Information

Although there was a general feeling that better communication and information-sharing between

the sectors was highly desirable, most respondents also expressed concerns about this.

Systems for transferring information about individual students often appear to be ad hoc and variable in nature. Some secondary schools request specific information from primary schools, either through forms or interviews with the teachers or both. Others rely on receiving whatever information their feeder primary schools choose to send them.

Systems for exchanging information about students often appear to be ad hoc in nature.

And while it appears that some primary schools have particular systems in place to transfer information about students to secondary schools, others do not. Similarly, whereas some secondary schools may be especially effective at ensuring that information received from feeder schools is passed on to teachers as appropriate, others appear less able to do this.

There were as well different views about how student information should be used. For example, a number of the secondary teachers believed that it was appropriate for deans and senior management to have access to information from primary or intermediate schools about individual students, but that it was best for classroom teachers to start with a 'clean slate'. In particular, some secondary

teachers questioned the objectivity and accuracy of the information received from primary schools.

Conversely, while acknowledging what they saw to be the difficulties and constraints for secondary

There were concerns about the extent to which student information was disseminated and used.

teachers, participating Year 8 teachers expressed concerns about the extent to which the information they compiled about each of their Year 8 students to pass on to secondary schools was disseminated and used.

As illustration, a couple of primary teachers noted that they had prepared portfolios or reports for secondary schools about individual students, only to visit some months later to see the portfolios sitting in an untouched pile in the office. This highlights the importance of communication between schools so that teachers agree on the data that will be useful, and do not waste precious time and effort preparing unwanted material.

And another primary teacher reported specifically advising a secondary school that a group of students did not work well together and should be separated, only to find that the students all ended up in the same form class in Year 9. She stated that the group of students went on to have significant behavioural and discipline troubles.

Others expressed concerns about Year 9 class placement in terms of students' prior achievement.

There was particular reference to the difficulties involved in the effective transfer of information when, as in most cases, there is not simply a situation of one primary and one secondary school, but, instead, a group of schools involved in the transition process. The transfer of individual student information is therefore made more

complex because each Year 8 teacher has students going to several different secondary schools and secondary schools often receive students from a wide range of feeder schools.

From the secondary school point of view, dealing with a wide variety of information delivered in different formats was logistically difficult and sometimes beyond the scope of their resources. Several secondary school teachers commented that although information about the individual students had been gathered, the deans did not always have the time to take account of that information when selecting classes, for example, or to ensure that vital information was passed on to classroom teachers.

Overall, it was evident that there is often insufficient communication across the sectors about the desired nature

and extent of shared information about students and how it can best be used. On the one hand, primary participants were saying that they often spent considerable time and effort compiling comprehensive information about students for their destination secondary schools which they felt went largely unheeded, while on the other hand secondary respondents were saying that when information was provided it tended not to be in a form that, for a range of reasons, they could realistically use.

Davey's story (Case Study 10) draws attention to the regular, informed, insightful communication between teachers, between schools, and between parents and schools that needs to occur for the ongoing welfare of students.

There is insufficient communication across the sectors about the desired nature and extent of shared student information and how it could best be used.

Questions to Consider

- **Primary/intermediate schools:** What do we most want Year 9 teachers to take into account when they begin the year with our former students? In what form can we best convey the information we want the secondary school to know about students? Do we know what information the secondary schools would be most likely to use— that is, how much student information they want from us and in what form?
- **Secondary schools:** Primary schools are usually keen to pass on helpful information about their (Year 8) students. What guidance can we provide for the nature and extent of the information we would like them to provide — that is, information that we would use in practice? Do we need to re-think the value of material supplied by primary/intermediate schools (eg, portfolios) that we don't currently take into account?

All schools:

- Thinking about it from a student's point of view, are we aware of what they would or would not want teachers/schools to pass on about them?
- From a parental point of view, are we aware of what information they would feel should or should not be shared about their children? What might be their reasons?
- Other than essential details regularly collected by schools, is there additional information we should obtain from parents, to better inform our work with students? Are there effective procedures in place for this to happen?

Case Study 10: Communicating about students at risk

Studies such as Wylie et al's (2008) *Competent Learners @ 16* (a recently completed phase of the longitudinal study *Competent Children, Competent Learners*) have noted that some of the students at particular 'risk' of poor outcomes are those who arrive at secondary school with established patterns of low achievement and who mostly continue to find class work too challenging. They may also show social or behavioural difficulties, although not necessarily.

In Year 8, Davey was a lonely, troubled boy who said that he had no friends at school and only an occasional, usually younger, playmate outside of school. Davey was achieving reasonably well in maths but had real difficulty with reading and writing. He found it very difficult to concentrate for long and when tasks became too difficult (or he perceived them to be) he would usually give up, sometimes feigning sickness so he could either leave school early for the day or not attend at all.

Although Davey often said he 'hated' school and his subjects and couldn't see the point of them other comments suggested that this was bravado and that he *did* want to succeed and do well. He even had tentative goals for his future.

His parent was very concerned and anxious about Davey's progress at school and kept in regular contact with his school, although for much of his schooling she often did not feel she was 'heard'. However, she was very pleased with Davey's teacher in Year 8, who provided a lot of mentoring for Davey and coached him in his favourite sport — the only activity in fact that Davey expressed any enthusiasm for. She felt that Davey was happier at school than he had ever been and that he was beginning to make some real progress with his school work, albeit still with a lot of catching up to do. Although they did not include Davey amongst their friends, most of his Year 8 classmates had responded to encouragement from the teacher to tolerate Davey's differences and not make trouble for him.

Davey's parent was very worried about the transition to secondary school: she felt that Davey would not cope well with what she expected would be more difficult academic work, feared he would no longer have a particular teacher to keep an eye on him in the way that he needed, and foresaw that she herself would not know who to contact when she wanted to talk over concerns about Davey.

Contrary to expectations, at first Davey made a positive transition to secondary school, saying in term 1 that he now had a few friends to spend time with at lunchtimes. He still said much of his class work 'sucked' and that his hand hurt a lot from all the writing in class (he found writing physically demanding and was very slow at it), but at the same time he identified some topics and activities in his various classes that he was enjoying and considered he was doing 'all right' at.

But as the year progressed, Davey found his class-work increasingly difficult. He particularly disliked homework which both he and his parent said took 'hours' to do, a source of considerable stress for them both. Davey reverted more and more to his avoidance tactics, including staying away from school, sometimes with pretend sickness, but also quite often due to genuine headaches.

In addition, Davey stated that he wanted to leave school as soon as possible (while at the same time contradicting himself by saying he did not want to fail 'graduation' to Year 10).

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His early friendships lessened and a particular blow for Davey was hearing that due to a health problem he could not play his favourite sport for at least a year. (He had joined a team at secondary school, actively encouraged and enabled to do so by his former Year 8 teacher who still coached him, and had earned a special award at school for his contribution to the team which he was very proud about, an unusual feeling for Davey). But when he could no longer play his sport, Davey became more negative about everything, much to the anxiety of a parent who felt that no-one seemed able to help her son get on a path to a positive future. She did not feel that the information about Davey passed on from his primary school had been taken into account, suggesting that Davey's form and other teachers may not even have been aware of it at all.

By the end of Year 9, Davey was reported by his teachers to be losing ground. No particular strategies had been devised for him in order to help address his problems.

Important Overall Reasons for Effective Information Sharing across School Sectors

As identified earlier, there are a range of reasons to support strengthening communication and links among and across teachers in the different sectors. Some of the key ones are discussed in a little more detail below.

Continuity of Curriculum and Pedagogies: Understanding Work within the Other Sector

Teacher awareness and understanding of the sorts of pedagogies colleagues in the other sector use and of how they impart the curriculum is fundamental if students are to have the best possible

Student learning pathways are facilitated when teachers in the different sectors have current knowledge and understanding of each other's pedagogies and approach to the curriculum.

opportunities to gain a sense of continuity throughout their schooling.

The New Zealand Curriculum for English-medium teaching and learning in Years 1–13 document (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.44) outlines five learning pathways: early childhood, Years 1 to 6, Years 7 to 10, Years 11 to 13, and

tertiary education. These learning pathways each exhibit unique foci and attributes, while at the same time providing for smooth and positive transitions between each stage of learning: '... students ... should find that each stage of the journey prepares them for and connects well with the next. ...' (p.44).

Of particular relevance to the primary to secondary schooling transition, the curriculum document states in respect of the Years 7 to 10 learning pathway that:

'A responsive curriculum will recognise that students in these years are undergoing rapid physical development, becoming increasingly socially aware, and encountering increasingly complex curriculum contexts. Particularly important are positive relationships with adults, opportunities for students to be involved in the communities, and authentic learning experiences.

"I think what is really important is making the link with the New Zealand curriculum framework from the [other sector's] perspective. ... Somehow we have to free up teachers ... to build relationships with our contributing schools."
Year 9 teacher

Students' learning progress is closely linked to their ongoing development of literacy and numeracy skills. These continue to require focused teaching.'

There were participants in the study who commented similarly. Also, Blatchford et al (2008, p.29) stated that ...'curriculum continuity has been shown to play a key role in successful transition.

The development of consistent policies relating to the quality and quantity of transfer of information is needed, as are strategies to help teachers take account of pupils' prior learning and special needs. These strategies should not be restricted to core subjects'

A Ministry of Education (2002, p.16) report regarding transitions between learning settings²⁵ states that:

'...as students progress through school, they face increasingly complex text material that is expository in structure. It is this more complex structure that [can cause] problems for young high school readers. Some are able to read the stories in their "readers" but not their content textbooks, which contain a more extensive vocabulary and concept load and require more background knowledge.'

'...Transition is a process whereby the domains of inquiry that students engage in become segregated into distinct fields of knowledge. Students in transition from primary to secondary school [can] find that, at secondary school, content areas quickly become technical, topics and vocabulary are often unfamiliar, and text appears in new forms.'

The report further indicates that students often need help with the different literacy demands they encounter at secondary school but that, instead, of being taught how to deal with the more complex information by developing information skills, information may simply be passed on to students (involving students spending 'a great deal of their time copying information from books or classroom boards').

Key strategies emphasised in the report for addressing this issue included: 'careful planning between sectors' [eg, by]: 'visit[ing] local contributing schools, [to] ... learn about the learning environment'; and 'access to and use of information about learning [at different stages]'. Case study schools in the project also referred to the need to ensure that there is an explicit focus on developing and extending students' literacy skills as part of primary to secondary schooling transition programmes.

²⁵ This was part of the Ministry's Literacy Leadership in New Zealand Schools Years 9–13 work (for more information go to <http://literacyonline.tki.org.nz/>).

How Well Students have been Doing in Particular Subjects

As well as having information about individual student progress to hand, knowledge of overall

Knowledge of patterns of achievement can help better focus efforts with students.

patterns of student achievement can help teachers better focus their efforts when working with students.

The IEA Third International Mathematics and Science Study

(TIMSS)²⁶, for example, indicates that many students in New Zealand schools are largely in a 'holding pattern' for mathematics between Year 5 and Year 9 — that is, they do not show as much movement across curriculum levels as might be expected during this period, for whatever reason. This is perhaps why, amongst students in our study, their mathematics scores suffered the greatest decline following transition²⁷, emphasising the rather 'vulnerable' state of their maths mastery.

The following findings from our transition study also suggest that prior patterns of low achievement are likely to endure over time unless specific steps are taken to 'diagnose' and overcome any gaps in the knowledge, skills, and attributes that students possess that could hinder effective learning.

Findings from our transition study

- While asTTle results showed good achievement gains for most students by the end of Year 9, there was need for concern about some students' learning and achievement, particularly those students in the lowest achievement quartile in mathematics. Between the

end of Year 9 and early in Year 10 students in the bottom achievement quartile for mathematics had the lowest rate of progress.

- The gap between the high and low achieving students in mathematics widened at secondary school.
- Although students' achievement scores fluctuated over the four phases of the study, around half of the students who were in the bottom quartile in one or more of mathematics, reading or writing in Year 10 had also been achieving in the bottom quartile in Year 8.
- Two-thirds of the students achieving in the top quartile in mathematics and reading in Year 10, and half of the students in writing, had also been high achievers in Year 8.
- The high achievers in mathematics and reading were more consistent in their achievement patterns than other students. Around half of the high achieving students in mathematics or reading consistently achieved in the top quartile across all four phases of the study.

A number of teachers also noted that some students were not being sufficiently challenged following transition.

Students' Experiences of Assessment

Students' understanding of what is required in assessments can affect how well they perform.

Secondary teachers and deans observed that Year 9 students often became very anxious when first faced with more formal test situations that they hadn't encountered at primary or intermediate school. And although some of the Year 8 teachers

²⁶ See Chamberlain (2007).

²⁷ For more information about participating students' achievement in mathematics (and in reading and writing) refer to our previous report *Students' Achievement as they Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling*.

tried to give their students some advance experience of 'secondary school-type tests', they felt that being more informed themselves about secondary school assessments, both generally and in different subject areas, would have helped them prepare the students more effectively.

In particular, it was noted that it is important to be aware that students, especially early on at secondary school, need clear explanations of how tests relate to what they are learning in class, and help to understand what skills and concepts — from previous as well as current learning — they need to bring in order to prepare well.

Special Needs, including Literacy, and Emotional, Health or Behavioural Issues

There was concern that students with special or extra needs would struggle to adapt to new systems at secondary school, and that this difficulty could be compounded by the secondary school either not having prior information about these students' individual needs, or not having systems in place to ensure that the information was passed on to relevant teachers so that it could be acted upon in good time.

As well, there were reports of students whose previous support systems, such as a reader/writer in place at primary school, did not carry on automatically at secondary school, making transition extra difficult for these students.

Other evidence too indicates that, overall, certain groups of students may be at greater risk of unsatisfactory schooling outcomes than others. For example, in common with other studies we found that Pasifika students were over represented in the bottom quartile for reading. They were slightly more likely to be in the bottom quartile for mathematics than students from other ethnic groups and were not present at all in the top quartile for this subject. This was the case before

and after transition. Findings of this sort suggest a particular need for collaboration in order to effectively analyse and address barriers to the students' learning and achievement.

A primary teacher provided an example of good collaboration, describing how the local secondary school had sought her input to design a special programme for one of her former students which catered to his strengths in practical rather than academic subjects. She felt this had been successful in supporting his self-confidence and ensuring he was focused on schoolwork rather than disrupting classes.

Class Placement

Prior information about students' social networks and development can be as important for placing students in appropriate classes as information about their learning and achievement.

Following transition, students often find that they have few, if any, of their former friends in the same classes as themselves. The views of students in our study about this situation were divided, however, emphasising one aspect of the challenge for schools in attempting to achieve the best class placements for individual students.

More than half of students were either glad to have some of their previous year's friends or classmates in their Year 9 classes, or were sad that they had not. However, around a third of students didn't mind either way, and just over a tenth of students preferred *not* to have previous friends with them, primarily because they tended to distract one another from their learning in class. Thus in cases like this, the transition represented a potential

Prior information about students' social networks and development can be as important for placing students in appropriate classes as achievement data.

opportunity for students to escape from troublesome social interactions which they weren't able to handle effectively.

But it was also pointed out by a number of participating teachers that the logistics of taking individual student information of this nature into account as fully as might be desired is problematic, especially when a secondary school's Year 9 students come from a considerable number of feeder schools.

Participating deans for instance stated that while they might try as hard as they could to take into account advice from one feeder school that two of their students needed to be in separate classes, they

often found themselves having to simultaneously consider perhaps even more compelling recommendations from other feeder schools about certain students. The end result could be that the first two students mentioned did, nevertheless, end up in the same class — usually simply because there were not enough different classes to accommodate every request about desired groupings.

Despite identified difficulties, there was still overall agreement that it is extremely worthwhile continuing to try and find workable solutions to this ever-present challenge.

On the basis of the available research evidence, McGee et al stated:

- Primary schools rarely seek feedback about the success of their students once they go on to secondary schooling, but in cases where this has happened, the information gained has been used successfully to modify and develop teaching programmes in order to raise achievement standards.
- It has been found that secondary teachers find it difficult to find a starting point for students with different kinds of educational background; this is compounded by having students from several contributing schools.
- Achievement information forwarded by primary and intermediate schools has been found to be a helpful supplement to secondary schools' diagnostic testing of new students for appropriate placement.

Other Evidence on the Importance of Cross-sector Links

Results of an 18-month evaluation of three pilot initiatives in Scotland which aimed to improve the transition between primary and secondary school (The Scottish Executive Education Department, 2007) indicated that 'it was not so much the precise model that affected the smooth running and success of the projects, but other factors and processes, [including] issues related to staffing, the importance of cross-sector liaison and interchange, effective communication, and the ability of the pilots to be flexible and responsive.'

Key findings included:

- Staff (other than key project staff) 'should be given control over their level of involvement — asking for volunteers will attract those most committed to cross-sector working';
- 'Transitions projects can be used to enhance/improve existing transitions arrangements and cross-sector relationships. This can lead to more effective teaching in both sectors, and also provides pupils with some familiarity with secondary work and at least one teacher when they arrive [in Year 9];'
- 'A well-specified, purposeful observation period should work both ways, with teachers from each sector observing in the other; this leads to true reciprocity of learning from each others' teaching methods';
- 'Projects should build in adequate time for discussion and feedback between primary and secondary teachers'; and '[Cross-sector] social events can successfully improve communication'.

Summary Comments

- In addition to recognising the importance of social integration for students during and after transition, it is equally important to know about and give recognition to transitioning students' prior learning and achievement in order to ensure optimal 'starting' points for the resumption of their studies at secondary school.
- Meeting students' ongoing needs within the framework set for the overall class also requires knowing as much as possible about the individual student, including awareness and understanding of their broader skills, knowledge and interests, as well as specific strengths and weaknesses.
- This has implications for the sorts of information about students that is passed between primary and secondary schools and for how and when that information is used.
- Evidence that some new Year 9 students were finding their work in certain subjects too difficult while other students were not finding it challenging enough is a particularly compelling reason for very good communication between the sectors regarding students.
- Also, the evidence that students are increasingly likely to disengage from aspects of their schooling as they move through the 'middle years' (Years 7 to 10), emphasises the need for teachers and schools in each sector to understand how different approaches to

and understandings about the curriculum, and different pedagogies, may impact on students' attitudes to subjects, their ongoing motivation to learn, and their levels of achievement and progress.

- Although it is always likely to be complex to achieve, continuing to strive for the best possible class placement for students is highly

desirable, as the overall dynamics of a given class with its particular mix of students and teacher(s) can have a powerful impact on every individual within that class.

For all of the above reasons, and more, it is important to foster improved links between schools and teachers in the different sectors.

CHAPTER 6:

Supporting student engagement

6

When schools, teachers and families take suitable steps to help ease the transition, the move to secondary school in itself need not be a major issue for the majority of students.

We found that most students understood the reason for and value of school. Most expressed a

Many found a lot to enjoy at school. But a drop over time in the extent to which students engaged in their learning suggests that many do not get the best out of their time at school.

preference for going to school rather than staying at home. And many found a lot to enjoy at school — before and after the transition — both socially and in their learning in class and for the range of other opportunities afforded them through school.

Despite these positive findings, another key finding to emerge from our transition study was that of a steady decline (from Year 8 to Year 10) in positive

attitudes to subjects²⁸ and a simultaneous drop in the extent to which students overall engaged in their learning, suggesting that many do not always get the best out of their learning time at school. While some degree of disengagement may be inevitable at times for almost everybody, there were

indications that the extent to which this occurred for some students at least was too great.

Student interview data also showed that towards the end of Year 9, the students were generally much less likely than they had been in Year 8 to record that they did interesting or fun activities in class, or that they tried new or different things. And there was an overall increase in the proportion of students who indicated that they had to 'learn about too many boring things'.

Other studies, both national and international, reveal similar trends of a decline in middle years (Years 7 to 10) students' attitudes towards particular subjects. Information collected from the *National Education Monitoring Project* (NEMP)²⁹, for example, illustrates how students' enjoyment of reading in their own time decreases as they progress through the school system.

And the longitudinal *Competent Children, Competent Learners*³⁰ study shows a drop in students' attitudes towards reading and writing between primary and secondary school. A recent phase of this study — *Competent Learners @ 16* — also indicates that students who become disengaged from school tend to do so before the

²⁸ As measured by the attitude scale in asTTle (Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning), which participating students completed on four occasions over the period of the study.

²⁹ For further information about NEMP go to: www.educationcounts.gov.nz/research/nemp.html

³⁰ The website address for this study is: www.educationcounts.gov.nz/publications/homepages/competentchildren/index.html

age of 12 years, with their lack of engagement escalating in adolescence and secondary school.

The tendency for students to become more critical is undoubtedly part and parcel of growing up. However, an increasing ability to become more (constructively) critical is essentially a good thing, and it is important to carefully analyse student feedback to see where certain conditions for learning may need to be improved or changed in order for students to experience greater satisfaction and achieve better outcomes.

Findings from our transition study

- Student feedback revealed that keeping all students engaged in their learning at school can be problematic, and increasingly so over time.
- While students generally had fairly positive attitudes towards mathematics, reading and writing at the outset of the study their attitudes declined as they progressed through secondary school.
- Although a significant proportion of the low achieving students in mathematics nominated this subject as one they liked best in Year 8 the proportion of those mentioning mathematics as a best liked subject decreased in each of Years 9 and 10.
- Describing what it was like to teach or generally deal with individual students in the study, participating teachers used the descriptors 'difficult' and 'worrying' for between 10 and 13 percent of the students. They also considered that around one-fifth of students showed 'poor concentration when working'.

What Do We Mean by 'Engagement'?

The topic of engagement in learning is a complex one.

'Engagement' at school can mean many things, ranging from a student choosing to attend school rather than truant, to a situation where students remain on-task or 'engaged' throughout an activity or task because they find it to be 'fun' (but where learning of key concepts from the task may or may not be realised). It can also refer to a learning situation involving deeper-level cognitive engagement, in which the students actively problem-solve, think more broadly than the immediate topic, and can make insightful links to other learning areas.

'Engagement' at school can mean many things.

It is outside the scope of this report to delve into all the intricacies of student engagement³¹. This chapter therefore focuses on some of the most common reasons students give to explain why they are more or less likely to become engaged in a topic or activity. This is important, as effective levels of student engagement (interest, motivation, curiosity, etc) is an essential precursor to effective achievement.

Factors Affecting Student Engagement or Disengagement

There are a range of factors that can impact in various ways on how well students relate to and are engaged by what they are learning at school.

³¹ However, suggestions for further reading regarding student engagement are articles by Fredricks et al (2004), Yonezawa et al (2009), and Gibbs and Poskitt (2010) as listed in the References section of this report. Also, student engagement is a focus of current work being carried out by NZCER (The New Zealand Council for Educational Research), Wellington.

These factors — also summarised in Figure 3 — include:

- nature of relationship with a teacher;
- nature of the relationship with other students in a class;
- the perceived relevance of the learning material;
- levels of knowledge and skills that students bring into each learning situation (eg, whether they find the work too easy or too difficult);
- the intrinsic interest of the subject or activity to a particular student;
- the way in which the learning task is approached (eg, teacher-directed vs. student-directed learning);
- the extent to which there is variety in learning approaches (for example, active involvement in an activity, in addition to simply copying notes from a board or reading from a text book);
- the nature and extent of teacher feedback on a student's progress;
- the extent to which students are able to take responsibility for their own learning.

Some of these factors are now discussed in more detail.

Learning in a Variety of Interesting Ways

For learning to occur, students first need to become interested in the learning material or tasks. Students frequently talk about their desire for more opportunities to experience learning in a range of (innovative) ways, to spark and maintain their interest and bring what they are learning to life.

In accord with these student views, Aitken and Sinnema (2008) report that approaching subject material in a number of different ways is not only important for creating interest on the part of the students, but is also necessary for helping students retain what they learn. They further state that '... the repeated use of even the most effective of classroom tasks is likely to become counter-productive'.

Approaching subject material in a number of different ways is necessary to help students retain what they learn.

While it seemed that not all teachers were fulfilling students' hopes or expectations regarding opportunities to learn in interesting ways, teacher participants in the transition study in general understood this need, even though they felt it was not always straightforward to achieve. Aitken and Sinnema provide suggestions for how teachers might work towards this, which can be very briefly summarised³² as:

'Meet diverse motivational needs.
Maximise student interest.
Use a variety of activities.'

³² The extract on pp.94-95 from Aitken and Sinnema's 2008 publication provides some details about how to achieve these goals.

What we learned from students

Issue: The students said: There is frequently too much writing and copying work to do at secondary school, and too many lessons generally that are not interesting or fun. Also, when our expectations or hopes about a subject, topic, or activity do not match reality — that is, when we think there will be interesting content and approaches to learning, and this does not happen — it is hard to stay motivated.

Comment:

Often, the writing and copying work was just considered 'boring' because it did not promote or allow a sense of involvement with what they were learning, but some students — especially boys — also found it physically difficult, making it a challenge to write everything down in time and not 'get left behind' in classes.

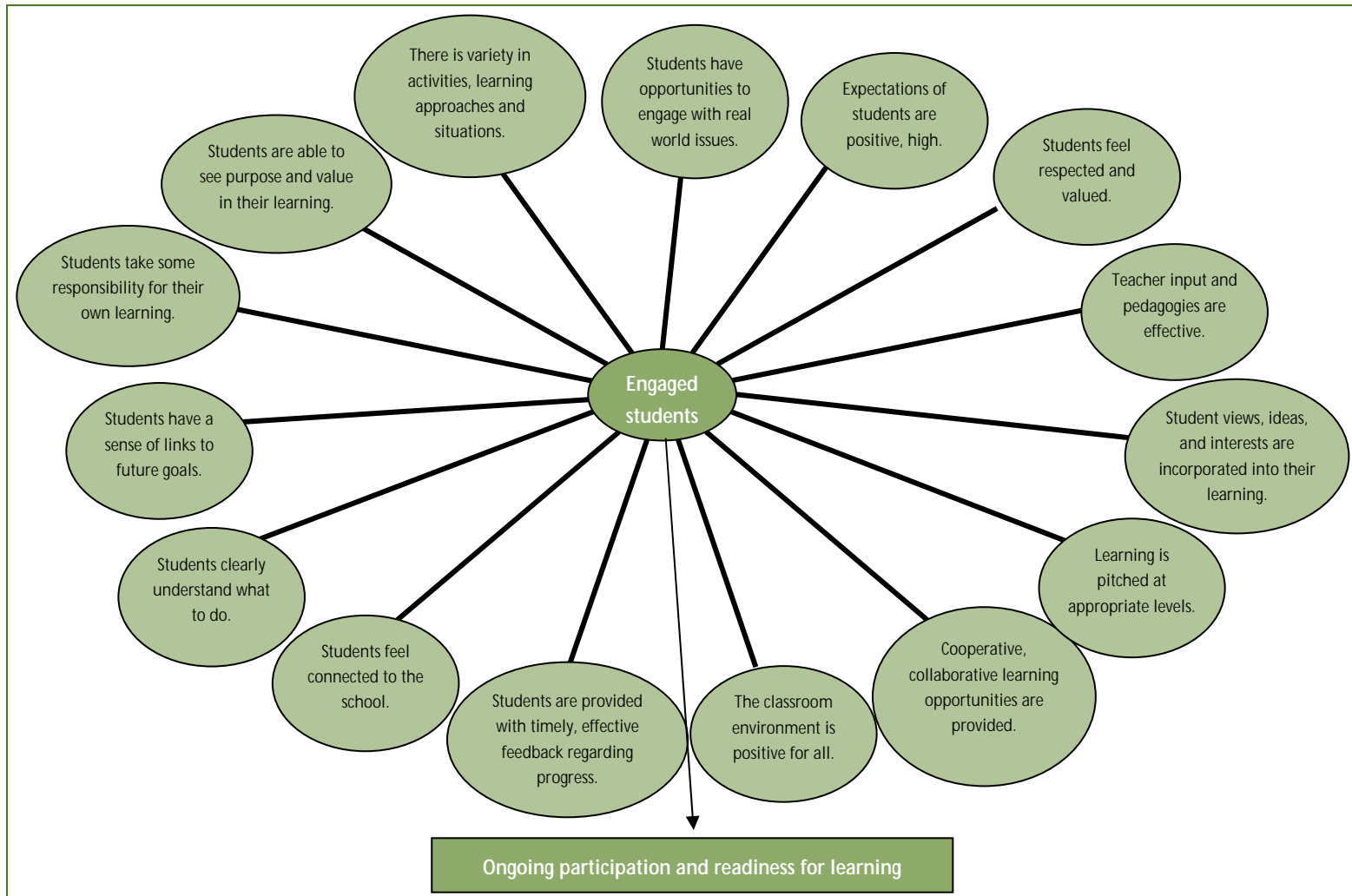
Student suggestions:

Ensure more variety in approaches to teaching and learning;

Incorporate 'fun' when learning, through increased use of humour in class, for example.

Students also liked it when teachers showed they were enthusiastic about the subject they were teaching as it helped them feel positively about what they were learning.

Figure 3: Factors in engaging students in their learning at school



The following is an extract from Graeme Aitken and Claire Sinnema's 2008 publication *Effective Pedagogy in Social Sciences/Tikanga ā Iwi* — Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES] (pp.179–182), produced for the Ministry of Education.

Why designing interesting experiences matter

"We had a sheet about it ... it was just an activities sheet. Had a bit about it and some questions ... I remember doing it but I don't remember a thing about it."

Aitken and Sinnema (2008) state: 'This comment from [a student some months after studying a unit of work], illustrates how students attach memories about what they learn to the way in which they learn it. [A focus on making learning experiences memorable and on how learning activities can stimulate motivation to learn is important.] It is through learning experiences (activities) that students encounter the knowledge, understandings, skills, values, and participatory opportunities that are important. But those activities first need to capture their interest. [Hansen (2002)* wrote]: *Engagement, involvement and engrossment, but not learning per se, [is] the immediate aim of teaching. If teachers cultivate and support conditions that engage students in an activity, whether it be interpreting a poem, conducting an experiment, or debating the cause of an historical event, learning will more likely be the outcome...*³³

[Csikszentmihalyi (1990)** put] the importance of this motivational orientation even more directly: *The chief impediments to learning are not cognitive. It is not that students cannot learn; it is that they do not wish to. If educators invested a fraction of the energy they now spend trying to transmit information in trying to stimulate the students' enjoyment of learning, we could achieve much better results.*

[Aitken and Sinnema explain that] learning activities can be designed to increase engagement and interest and, as a result, generate learning that is memorable. [They emphasise that designing effective learning activities means taking into account diverse motivations, selecting activities that are intrinsically interesting, and incorporating a variety of activity types.]

Diverse motivations

Learners are not all motivated in the same way: what interests one may not interest another. (And what teachers envisage as motivating may not prove motivating for students.) For this reason, it is important to understand and take account of different motivations for learning. ... teachers need to find out what motivates *their* students. One approach is to list teaching methods/approaches (such as role playing, reading historical novels [eg, in the teaching of the social sciences], participating in small-group projects) and ask students to rank these in order of preference.

Another approach [is an instrument that] ... enables students to record their subjective experience of tasks as they engage in them and keep a log of their experiences as they move from one activity to another. The instrument is based on general principles of motivation and comprises the following items:

continued ...

³³ But see authors' caution in the further extract from their report (given on p.105) that providing interesting activities is not sufficient in itself to ensure effective learning.

... continued

- Challenge. To what extent does this activity make you feel excited or make you want to get involved?
- Skill. To what extent is this activity important to you? To what extent do you feel that it is related to your future goals?
- Interest. To what extent do you wish to be doing this activity? To what extent do you enjoy what you are doing? To what extent is the activity interesting to you? To what extent are you concentrating on the activity?
- Success. To what extent are you feeling successful at the current activity? To what extent are you feeling in control as you work on the current activity?
- Relaxation. To what extent do you feel relaxed rather than anxious while you are doing this activity?
- Self-esteem. To what extent are you living up to your own expectations as you do this activity? To what extent are you feeling good about yourself as you do this activity?
- Cooperation. To what extent do you feel cooperative rather than competitive while you are doing this activity?

Interesting activities.

Although student motivations are diverse, some activities are more intrinsically interesting than others and, therefore, have greater potential to generate learning.

Variety of activities.

The combination — and particularly the range — of experiences in a sequence of teaching activities affects the extent to which students learn from and remember those experiences. Even an activity that has proven very successful in terms of generating student interest can't be used over and over again to the same effect. ... We highlight evidence for what teachers understand intuitively: students need to experience a variety of activities of different types.

'... the repeated use of even the most effective of classroom tasks is likely to become counter-productive.'

When students experience a narrow range of classroom activities they rapidly lose the ability to distinguish one activity from another in memory. As a consequence, they lose the ability to recall the curriculum content embedded in those activities. Classroom experiences become not only boringly repetitive but rapidly forgotten ... the repeated use of even the most effective of classroom tasks is likely to become counterproductive (p.337)³⁴

* Hansen, D.T. (2002). Dewey's conception of an environment for teaching and learning. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 32(3), pp.267–280.

** Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). Literacy and intrinsic motivation. *Daedalus*, (Spring), pp.115–140.

³⁴ Nuthall, G. (2000). The role of memory in the acquisition and retention of knowledge in science and social studies units. *Cognition and Instruction*, 18 (1), pp.83-139.

Incorporating Student Interests to Encourage their Learning

Students find it easier to stay engaged when what they are learning incorporates topics or activities that they are particularly interested in. Teachers too

report personal experiences of positive outcomes when they know enough about their students to be able to integrate individual interests into what is being studied in class.

*"T-J, he's an amazing little fellow, he's sort of average, just below average, [but] an unbelievable sports person, and he's always happy. We had ERO [here] not long ago and we had to pick some students to be interviewed and I picked T-J because I know he's confident. And the ERO guy said to me later: 'I spoke to this one little guy and he bloody nearly made me cry!' Because they asked him what does he think about reading, and T-J said 'Oh, I actually **hate** reading but I try hard at it'. ... He sees me as his role model, because I've been hammering at him all the time about reading — [saying] 'I know you hate reading' but we'll try and find something that you **like** and read about it. Different approaches, you know. And he can see that I'm trying to get through to him the importance of reading and so that's why he tries. And that really got through to the ERO guy, and I thought 'Ye-s-s!! Thank you T-J!' He was a thorn in my side all year, and then he came through with that!"*

*"I actually **hate** reading but I try hard at it."*

*"All the time I've been at this school I've tried [to really focus on reading], 'cause it's usually been the boys, especially the Polynesian boys, [who are reluctant readers]. I go 'I know you don't like reading but what **main** five things do you like? Right, now go find books on those things. I know you like rugby.' And they grumble 'There are so many things on rugby!' So I say to them, 'What are the rugby players that you like? In our library we've got rugby biographies, you know. And that's how you **start**. You don't even realise but you're actually improving your reading year and then you can branch out [and read other things you're interested in].' Yes, and one of our boys, he wouldn't read anything, so I said to myself, 'What does he like? Surfing, he's always outside surfing, so when he comes back in, get him to read a surfing magazine'. So that's what I do; he likes surfing magazines, and it has helped him — he's more positive about reading and class-work now."*

Year 8 teacher

Seeing students in different learning and social contexts also provides teachers with greater insights about their students' abilities, interests, and needs, which with some creativity can be used to advantage in the classroom.

"I'd been really interested in trying to work out one of my most difficult kids and I was down at the auditorium after school one day a couple of

weeks ago and there he was in the singing group preparing for [a local festival]. And I thought, 'just goes to show, there he is singing along like an angel, doing exactly what he was told!' While he

"One of my most difficult kids, there he was in the singing group ...singing along like an angel, doing exactly what he was told!"

Year 9 teacher

finds it really difficult to cope with the requirements of being in class and being seated and putting his hand up and not calling out and getting the work done and asking for help instead of saying 'I can't do this, it sucks', he can be on task, concentrating. Brilliant!"

Year 9 teacher

Darryl's story (Case Study 11) shows how a student who perceives — and experiences — school as largely irrelevant to their interests and goals, can seriously disengage from all learning opportunities at school.

Case Study 11: Relevance of school to student's life

The students most at risk in terms of disengagement from learning and school generally were the ones least likely to nominate a range of subjects or topics they enjoyed, least likely to find much of what they were learning of interest or relevance to them personally, and/or most likely to say that they were experiencing difficulties with a significant proportion of their schoolwork.

Throughout the transition study, from near the end of his time in Year 8 to term 1 in Year 10, Darryl frequently mentioned his desire — and intention — to leave school as soon as he was legally allowed to. He had a strong desire to begin his career as a mechanic, and was impatient with everything at school, as he did not see it as relevant to his future.

By the end of his primary schooling, although he didn't have obvious, significant difficulties with his schoolwork (such as a markedly low reading mastery), Darryl showed a pattern of lower level achievement across his subject areas. Also, according to his Year 8 teacher, he tended to mix with other students most likely to get into trouble, and quite often exhibited social immaturity — rudeness on occasions, and inability to see things from another person's perspective.

By the time he entered secondary school, Darryl was sometimes helping out in a local mechanic's garage, and would have much rather stayed on there full-time than go to secondary school. Consequently, he found little that was positive for him about Year 9, saying he could not see how what they were learning in class was relevant to him either currently or for his future. He did however say that he sometimes liked it when there were practical, hands-on learning activities in class, although these didn't occur nearly often enough in his view.

Darryl 'hung out' with a few other boys at lunchtimes but did not regard them as close friends. He did not have any particular interests other than in cars, did not like reading, did not communicate a great deal with his family at home, and especially not about school, and did not want to engage in the wider life of the school by signing up for any extra-curricular activities.

For Darryl, secondary school was not a place of particular adversity; he had simply 'decided' that it was not relevant to him, and it was likely that without active intervention to persuade him otherwise, he was just going to 'sit out' his time there until he could leave. Although Darryl seemed to be in a much better position than other students who seriously disengage from school, in that he did have a definite, future goal in mind, he nevertheless was still missing out on opportunities to perhaps broaden his horizons or learn more that would help him get the best out of his intended career.

Relating Learning to Real Life; Students Understanding the Purpose of what they are Learning

“Science is often seen as something completely foreign and they can’t see the point of it. So I try to get them to think about how it applies to home and set questions around it.”
Year 9 teacher

Findings from an increasing number of recent studies, including our transition study, show that students frequently express a wish to learn in ways that ‘relate to real life’, and have a clearer understanding of the purpose of what they are learning.

Some concepts, skills, and knowledge are necessary building blocks for subsequent

and deeper-level learning, understanding and applications. However, while certain material may be important, it does not necessarily mean that it is inherently fascinating or ‘fun’ in the ways that students so often state that they want or need it to be.

This can be a potential issue. But when students receive clear, convincing explanations of *why* they have to learn things, this helps them maintain a positive attitude and persevere with a topic which

Not all learning material can be ‘fun’ but convincing reasons for why it is relevant or important can help make up for this.

they may otherwise have seen as pointless and quickly disengaged from, especially if the material was also difficult.

Teachers gave examples of what they did to encourage students to see how what they were learning at school related to real-life situations and also

how they could actively apply that learning.

Although some of the examples represented a great deal of planning and work for those involved (eg, organising students to run the school canteen), other examples illustrate that the same effect can

be achieved on a more manageable, ‘everyday’ scale (eg, making links between what the students are learning in science to everyday items in their homes).

“Science is often seen as something completely foreign and they can’t see the point of it. So I always endeavour to put it into real life terms, to put it in the context of something that they are used to in some way. For example, we have just been doing separating liquids and most of the techniques involved in this we use all the time at home without realising it. So I try to get them just to think about how it applies to home and set questions around it. Things like filtering, a sieve is a filter, we use a filter when we make coffee; a centrifuge — things like a washing machine at home use the same principle. All things like that I try and tie in to make it meaningful: using a theme and starting to push things out. And I try and tie things in with TV programmes that I know they watch, CSI [‘Crime Scene Investigation’] is good for that, I will use examples from that.”

Year 9 teacher

“When I am doing the workshop classes with them, they may not necessarily want to make a jewellery box but what we do in the workshop are life skills and in the future they may want to put up a shelf and they will have the confidence [from what they learn here] that they can do that, even though they might not see that at first. They won’t have to call a builder in. I think it is all about life skills and that’s very important that they can see and understand that. So we talk a lot about how what we are doing is relevant to everyday life.”

Year 9 teacher

When teaching and learning with high relevance for students was occurring in the classes, teachers and students alike reported enjoying and being excited

by the learning and creativity that was occurring, and the positive experiences engendered by cooperative enterprise.

Cole (2005, p.13) made similar observations about the particular importance of teaching and learning that is perceived as relevant by middle years students.

He noted that 'student disinterest can be partly addressed by bringing into the learning program events that young adolescents will get excited about or that open up new horizons for them (eg, speakers who are young people's heroes or youth culture icons or events that provide them with a physical challenge or enable them to learn and demonstrate skills valued by their peers).'

He provides some examples of 'special events' that could be considered for incorporation into the learning programme for Year 9 students, including adventure camps, work shadowing, mini enterprise activities, providing opportunities for students to work on projects involving computer software development or film or multi-media products, 'engaging experts that enable students to engage in practical activities and/or skills development and result in the production of a valued service or product', or 'providing students with the opportunity to engage in a learning challenge that requires intensive effort and support (eg, ... repairing a piece of equipment)'.

What we learned from students

Issue: The students said: It is difficult to learn and stay focused when we are unable to see the *relevance* or *purpose* of what we are learning.

Comment:

The students were not necessarily criticising curriculum *content* per se, although sometimes they were. It was more a case of emphasising that they needed to be provided with convincing reasons or a recognisable context for learning on the occasions when the purpose or relevance of a topic was not readily apparent.

Student suggestions:

(1) Receive clear explanations or demonstrations of why subjects or topics are relevant to them and how they link to everyday life.

For example, while some students were able to appreciate Shakespeare for the 'drama' or the beauty of the language, others could not understand why they needed to study such a long-ago writer in today's world. These students therefore needed an explanation of the valid, deeper-level reasons for doing so, which to them were not obvious.

(2) Learn new concepts by means of 'real life' examples, or experiences.

As an illustration, some students mentioned especially enjoying an assignment on 'careers' because it brought to life the learning concepts. The task was to carry out their own research to discover what qualifications and personal qualities it would take to become an engineer (say) and to then consider the life-style that would be possible for an engineer in terms of salary earned, job requirements, and so on.

Classroom Environment

Students overall often referred to times when disruptive behaviours in class³⁵ detracted from their learning and engagement.

Some students wished that teachers would intervene more in situations in class where other students' behaviour obstructed their learning.

The students frequently admitted too that they were often at fault themselves, some stating, in

Student misbehaviour in class is a recurrent theme for many teachers and students, interfering as it does with the processes of teaching and learning.

effect, that they would have liked teachers to 'rescue them from themselves' — that is, somehow diverting or re-engaging them on the occasions when they knew they were talking too much or were generally inattentive.

Although students in question claimed to be 'unable' to stop

these behaviours on their own (the temptation to gossip being 'too strong to resist'), they knew that the result of their disengagement ultimately made it more difficult to keep up in class.

Student misbehaviour in class is a recurrent issue for many teachers as well, interfering as it often does with the processes of teaching and learning. Dealing with disruptive behaviours at the same time as trying to cater for the diverse learning needs of everybody else in the class, is undoubtedly not only taxing but also often a significant challenge for teachers. This challenge is one which may require collaboration with or support from colleagues (and sometimes parents and others, depending on the

nature and extent of the problem behaviour) to effectively manage.

What we learned from students

Issue: The students said: 'We find the classroom environment is not always helpful for our learning.'

Comment:

Students' comments about classroom environment fell into two main categories: that noisy, disruptive classroom environments interfered with their learning — a particular concern among quieter, less assertive students and those already struggling to learn unfamiliar or more difficult material; and that tension, strife or unpleasantness within the classroom did not create a positive atmosphere for learning.

Student suggestions:

More relevant or enjoyable lessons to reduce the temptation to indulge in off-task, disruptive behaviours;

More emphasis on student input into lessons to increase engagement and interest;

Teachers showing that they like and are interested in students;

Teachers intervening to reduce disruptive behaviours without penalising others in the class;

Students taking responsibility for their own learning and behaviour by addressing their tendency to talk too much and not listen or stay on-task.

³⁵ Note: 'Student misbehaviour' here refers to relatively low level incidents and not to more serious behavioural issues (eg, active aggression towards others, drug taking) likely to require specialised training and support for teachers and schools.

Appropriate Level of Difficulty for Learning Material

From their review of the literature, McGee et al reported study findings that showed that many students in their first year of secondary school were concerned they were studying too much content that they already knew. This led to boredom.

Evidence from our study also showed that students were not always well placed in terms of

Students desired lessons that were more targeted to their needs and abilities and current levels of achievement.

starting/continuing levels of study so that at the commencement of their secondary school career, some found the work too easy or not challenging enough, while others found it too difficult. This tended to impact negatively on

at least some students' early experiences in their new school and on their developing attitudes to secondary level teaching and learning.

Accurately establishing students' levels of understanding for ongoing teaching and learning purposes in different subject areas can be complex. This complexity may be deepened at major change points such as the primary to secondary transition, when there is usually a change of schools involved, with people using different ways of assessing students, or information about students that could perhaps better inform decisions about them not always being exchanged or available.

What we learned from students

Issue: The students said: Our class-work is often not at the right level for us: it is either too difficult or not challenging enough.

Comment:

This is a complex issue but effective data and information sharing among those involved in student transitions through school (whether year to year transitions within the same school, transition to another school, or concurrent 'transitions' between teachers/classrooms) can help ensure better targeting of class work for students individually and overall.

Also, effective communication about students, and subsequent practice, need to be based on valid, reliable assessments of students' achievement levels and learning needs, on deeper-level knowledge of how students learn, and greater awareness of the knowledge and skills that students bring to class from their wider lives beyond school.

Student suggestions:

The students themselves did not offer direct suggestions about this issue; they simply identified it as a reason they tended to develop a dislike for a subject or said that it contributed to when they found their learning particularly difficult or particularly unsatisfying. It was clear, though, that students desired 'lessons that were more targeted to their needs and abilities, and current levels of achievement'. This reinforces the importance of teachers regularly checking with students about their reactions to content, including the level of difficulty of that content.

Expectations of Students

Another dimension regarding the level of work students are given is that of the expectations that teachers and others may hold for different students.

There is evidence in the research literature (eg, Bishop et al, 2007) that expectations of certain

“For some of those kids [in the lowest streamed class], school became meaningless really.”
RTL

students or classes of students (high vs lower achieving students, for instance) may sometimes, at least, be based on certain assumptions or stereotypes rather than ‘hard data’ on the students’ abilities and attributes. As well as

affecting how students are perceived and treated generally, incorrect assumptions can result in disengaged students who are in danger of dropping out of school.

Hattie (2009, p.259) refers to studies that provide ‘a portrait of schools that produced high achievement even though they had previously failed’. A discussion of effective teaching and effective teachers followed. In part, it was stated that ‘Effective teachers have high expectations and increase the academic demands on their students (ie, consistently encouraging students to attempt slightly more advanced books and write slightly longer and more complex stories). From the first day of school, effective teachers communicate high expectations for students to self-regulate and take charge of their behaviour and academic engagement.’³⁶

³⁶ This statement was preceded by other descriptors regarding effective teachers which included: ‘Effective teachers do explicit teaching (and reteaching as required) of skills, and this teaching includes modelling and explaining skills, followed by guided student practice. That is, effective teachers show a strong balancing of skills instruction and holistic reading and writing activities. ...’ (Hattie, 2009, p.259)

As discussed at various points in this document, knowing students as well as possible, including obtaining accurate, up-to-date information about their achievement, knowledge and skills is vital. It leads to better alignment between expectations of students and their reality, helping to maximise previously under-recognised student potential in some cases, or, in the case of students having real difficulties, facilitate effective intervention that is based on accurate analysis of their needs. It also helps ensure that students will remain engaged, successful learners.

Findings from our transitions study:

- By the end of Year 9, and early in Year 10, the high achieving students were generally more likely to find the work at secondary school more demanding or challenging than their peers. In contrast, the low achieving students were generally more likely than the high achievers to think that the work at secondary school was easier.
- In Years 9 and 10, the low achieving students in mathematics and reading were more likely than the high achievers to consider they were repeating work they had already done.

Effective Pedagogies

In addition to their wish for more opportunities to experience a range of interesting activities to engage them, and undertake learning that was relevant to their lives or personally meaningful, students emphasised the importance of knowing how well they were progressing: not only praise for when they were doing well, but regular, constructive feedback that would help them know how to correct mistakes and focus on areas of weakness.

Heidi's story (Case Study 12) illustrates the critical importance of effective feedback and support for students and also some of the complexities/dilemmas involved in this.

Participating teachers similarly highlighted the need for pedagogies that were responsive to the needs of individuals or different groups of students. Some particularly identified the importance of culturally responsive pedagogies to ensure better outcomes for all students. For example, they made a case for adapting teaching strategies to take into account Pasifika students' more group-focused value system. They felt that many of these students are often disadvantaged in the 'individualistic' environment of secondary school because they hesitate to put themselves forward or 'take risks' with their learning.

Learning needs to be interesting to engage students but interest alone does not ensure learning.

Another important consideration raised, and emphasised by Aitken and Sinnema (2008), is that although learning needs to be interesting in order to engage students, interest alone does not ensure learning: clear identification of

learning goals, effective pedagogies, and appropriate monitoring and assessment of student progress are all essential as well.

What we learned from students

Issue: The students indicated: We need to experience teaching approaches and learning activities that reflect our particular learning needs and the ways we learn best.

Comment: For some students, at least, adjusting to a range of pedagogies, and differing expectations of them, in several different classes, can be a particularly challenging aspect of the move to secondary school.

Student suggestions:

More opportunities for one-to-one instruction time with teachers, especially when struggling with concepts or tasks; regular feedback that is timely, constructive, meaningful, and accurate, in order to progress their learning and achievement and help them remain engaged and motivated.

To be recognised as an individual, with specific strengths and needs, and also respected as a young adolescent and/or as part of their 'identity group'.

Case Study 12: Effective pedagogies — feedback and support for student

Some students have difficulties because of unrealistic or distorted perceptions of their own abilities, perhaps exacerbated at times by ineffective or misleading feedback.

Heidi appeared to have an inappropriately elevated view of her own achievement. She talked enthusiastically about her plans for the future in a specialised, professional career field and said she spent much of her spare time doing activities in a special workbook (of her own making) that she perceived would help her progress towards this goal. She also reported loving to do her homework and wished she had more of it. Sadly, her achievement levels in maths and science in particular, but in other subjects as well, were well below what she would need if she was to achieve her desired goal. They were also at quite a low level generally. Heidi's parents expressed their satisfaction at Heidi's progress at school and her committed, hardworking approach and did not appear to be aware of the reality of Heidi's achievement levels. She was actively encouraged by her parents to spend time on school-related tasks rather than pursue social activities beyond the family.

Heidi's case illustrates a real dilemma faced by schools, teachers, and parents: that is, how to effectively provide feedback that will lead to genuine learning and progress, without crushing the spirit of a child whose enthusiasm for reaching their future goals, albeit based more on wishes and dreams than reality, is to be admired.

A delicate situation such as this highlights the need to know a student well in terms of range of interests, what motivates them, and how they would cope with feedback contrary to their own beliefs about themselves and other factors: for example, while Heidi advised that she had a number of friends at school, other information suggested that those she designated as a 'friend' were more accurately simply acquaintances or fellow classmates whom she would have *liked* to become friends, further indicating that Heidi often lived in a world of her own imagining. There is also a strong need as early as possible in the student's schooling for sound data on their levels of achievement, strengths and weaknesses, in order to build more meaningfully and positively on the skills and knowledge that they do have and to help with any emotional issues.

From their review of the research literature, McGee et al stated:

Primary students often look forward to greater independence and less supervision after transition, but by the end of their first year of secondary school, comments from the same students show that they actually need more

care and attention from teachers to help their academic achievement. Researchers have interpreted this to mean that too much independence for students too soon may come to mean lack of learning guidance and support.

The following is an extract from Aitken and Sinnema's 2008 publication *Effective Pedagogy in Social Sciences/Tikanga ā Iwi* — Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES] (p.217), produced for the Ministry of Education.

'Caution: It is not sufficient that activities be interesting'

'There is a strong tendency to equate motivation with learning. Much of what goes on in classrooms is based on the belief that if students are interested and involved in an activity, they will learn from it. Being attentive and engaged is equated with learning. However, students can be highly motivated and actively engaged in interesting classroom activities, yet not be learning anything new. Learning requires motivation, but motivation does not necessarily lead to learning.'

'In many of the studies [we have reported], the 'interesting activity' that engaged students and supported their learning worked because other things were going on that capitalised on that interest. What is important is that the interesting activities ... align to the important outcomes. The two ... should go hand-in-hand.'



'Interesting activities, then, are necessary but not sufficient. Tumblety** notes this point in relation to role play in history [for example]: "[It] may lead to greater student interest in the topic but almost certainly does not lead to better academic performance in itself" (p.4). While teachers need to be aware of the extent to which activities interest and engage their students, they must also attend to the longer-term goal of the enterprise, which is the achievement of important learning outcomes.'

* Nuthall, G. (2007). *The hidden lives of learners*. Wellington: NZCER, p.35.

** Tumblety, J. (2004). *Evaluating role play in history teaching*. Paper presented at the 6th annual Conference for the Development of Teaching and Learning in History, University of Oxford.

Student Responsibility

The discussion so far has focused more on the role of teachers alone in promoting student engagement

“We have to be careful that we don’t take away the opportunities for them to take some responsibility for their own learning.”

Year 9 teacher

in their learning. However, feedback from participating teachers and parents, and from students themselves, emphasises that students too must take some responsibility for their own learning. In other words, to realise that not all learning can necessarily be ‘fun’, that application,

willingness to learn, open-mindedness (such as giving learning material that is not instantly attractive a ‘chance’), resiliency and perseverance are all important attributes to bring to any learning situation. These skills may need to be actively taught, and fostered both at home and at school.

Summary Comments

Of the considerable range of factors that students felt impacted in important ways on their learning and achievement and attitudes to subjects before and after the transition, the message that predominated was: ‘learning is easiest and most satisfying when the material and the ways in which we are undertaking it are interesting, relevant or personally meaningful, and enjoyable.’

Fundamental to achieving the goal of interested, committed (young adolescent) learners is knowing the students well, so as to better establish their prior achievement levels, their learning strengths and weaknesses, particular interests, and also the particular pedagogies to which they relate best and will be most likely effective for helping them attain learning goals.

Other key points to keep in mind include the following:

- Input from the students themselves should be actively taken into account as early as possible as part of the process for addressing student disengagement.
- Students may often need very *deliberate* or specific guidance or demonstrations to help them see how what they are learning is applicable to their lives and that certain knowledge and skills acquired in one context can be meaningfully transferred to other contexts.
- An important area of ongoing focus is that of how to encourage or enable students to take more responsibility for their own learning, and (have the opportunity to) more often actively contribute to improving conditions for their own learning and achievement. Such a focus might include:
 - teaching or motivating students (through innovative approaches) to: develop good organisational and other self-help skills, such as an ability to seek out information that they need; listen more; and engage in less off-task talking and other disruptive behaviours in class;
 - helping students understand that not *everything* they need to learn can be ‘fun’, and that qualities such as perseverance and an open, enquiring mind, are necessary if they are to gain satisfaction from their learning and, like any favourite role models they might have, reach certain goals for their future.

In addition, as part of the processes of getting to know students well, actively seeking student input, and assisting students to become more responsible for their own learning, it would be valuable to encourage students to articulate what they mean when they describe aspects of teaching and

learning at school as 'boring', as they often find it difficult to be more specific. It would be helpful for themselves and their teachers if they were to learn to better define and communicate their thinking and feelings. It would also be advantageous if they

were encouraged to think about and offer constructive ideas on what would make learning contexts more satisfying and to work in partnership with their teachers and each other to achieve this.

Questions to Consider in Relation to Supporting Student Engagement

Learning in a variety of interesting ways

- As teachers, what approaches have we found to be *most successful* in engaging students in activities in our classrooms in order to bring about desired learning outcomes? What key points can be derived from the examples we have come up with that we think could helpfully inform our ongoing practice in the classroom to ensure students are engaged by their learning? Similarly, what lessons can be learned from any *less successful* practices identified?
- Today's students are growing up in a heavily technology-orientated world. It is also a world in which the predominant media has tended to adopt a 'short attention bytes' approach. How might this impact on how students prefer to learn at school?

Incorporating student interests in their learning

- It has been established that it is important to incorporate individual students' interests into lesson content as much as possible. What have we found to be helpful, practical strategies for successfully achieving this?

Relating learning to real life; students' understanding the purpose of what they are learning

- Student feedback indicates that they often disengage from material that is not obviously relevant or useful to them. Their feedback further suggests that it is often *assumed* that they understand why they are learning these less obviously relevant or useful things. How can we in our individual classrooms ensure that all students receive clear, valid explanations or reasons for what they are being asked to learn (especially in relation to more 'obscure' topics)?

Classroom environment and relationships

- There is sometimes divided opinion over which comes first in the classroom: students being well engaged in their learning, or effective behaviour management. What links are there between student misbehaviour in class, student levels of engagement or disengagement in their learning, and/or their prior levels of learning and achievement?
- What strategies have we, in our different subject contexts/classroom settings, found to be successful in dealing with problem behaviours from students, particularly in relation to teaching and learning? For example, how important is it to establish that work in class is at an appropriate level of challenge for the students to keep them on task?

...continued

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Expectations of students

- What 'conscious' expectations do we have for the students we teach? Do our expectations vary for different classes or students?
- How well do the expectations we hold of students align with their skills and potential? How do we know?
- Is there anything we might need to do as teachers in this school to achieve better alignment between expectations and student potential in order to maximise positive outcomes for students overall?

Sharing collective knowledge, experience and expertise

- How could we (more readily) share our experience and knowledge with one another about proven ways of achieving a positive learning environment for all middle years students within the classroom? For instance, would it be valuable to put in place particular structures or processes in the school to ensure that this happened and was sustained?

CHAPTER 7:

Supporting key relationships

7

For many students, *'enjoyment'* of school is more heavily influenced by friendships with other students, relationships with teachers, and other social opportunities and experiences, than it is by what they learn in class. At the same time, however, students frequently express a desire for good teaching and learning opportunities. And integral to what they regard as desirable learning opportunities are satisfying interactions with their teachers and classmates.

In common with many international and national studies, Bishop et al's *Te Kōtahitanga* project emphasises the importance of certain key relationships in terms of their impact or potential impact on students' educational experiences and outcomes.

These relationships include: those among students in the classroom; between teachers and students; among teachers within the same school, and, as previously discussed, across schools and sectors; between the school and parents and families; and between students and their families.

Blatchford et al (2008, p.29) state that:

'The extent and quality of communication amongst ... schools and families has been shown to impact considerably on successful transition. Research that would promote policy and good practice in the area of communication is needed. Specifically, pupils as well as professionals and parents/carers need to be

involved in any such research, with a view to addressing the concerns of all parties and taking account of each perspective when formulating possible actions to deal with challenging transitions.'

Aspects of these key relationships in relation to student learning, achievement, and well-being are briefly touched on in the remainder of this chapter.

McGee et al found that:

- School-based research has indicated that in order to be educationally effective, a school learning environment for emerging adolescents should promote both academic and social development together.
- When asked about matters of transition, students often focus on teachers. What students think about a subject is frequently dictated by what they think about the teacher of that subject.

Classroom Dynamics

Evidence from our study identified the importance of fostering a classroom environment characterised

Students and teachers alike are unhappy when there is friction as it undermines ability to learn, enjoyment and well-being.

by positive relations between teacher and students, and among students. Students and teachers alike were unhappy when there was friction (eg, people being told off), and constant disruptions, feeling that it undermined ability to learn, a sense of enjoyment and well-being, and ultimately,

attitudes towards one another, and to subjects or to learning overall.

Classroom dynamics are not only affected by the personalities and behaviours of students and teachers, but also to an extent by the way lessons are structured and conducted. A comparison of our transition study students' ratings at the end of Year 8 and the end of Year 9 revealed differences in how they felt they were able to interact with other

"It's been a really supportive year for the class. We started off with camp and that's a really neat time to build relationships and break down barriers."
Year 8 teacher

students in class before and after transition — for instance, the students were less likely as time went on to say that they helped each other during lessons, less likely to say they discussed work with one another, and less likely to say they laughed while they worked/learned.

Another identified ingredient of positive classroom dynamics was the need for boundaries

and expectations for behaviour being agreed upon and clearly conveyed to everyone, and fairly and consistently applied.

There are therefore a number of dimensions for achieving positive classroom dynamics, from providing a range of opportunities early on for helping students get to know each other well and establish a level of trust in and respect for each other, to ensuring that well understood and maintained rules and procedures are in place for the benefit of the class as a whole.

Other dimensions include thinking about how and whether the ways in which teaching and learning are conducted in the classroom foster interest, involvement, and constructive working relationships, and whether the approaches followed are flexible and responsive to the characteristics of the given class of students.

Teachers and Students Relating to One Another

The Year 8 to Year 9 transition represents some quite marked changes for many students in relation to teachers: not only do they have more teachers to relate to over the course of a school day, but the nature of their interactions with teachers also undergoes changes, with the greater compartmentalising of the secondary school day compared to primary school, and the greater numbers of students overall that secondary teachers work with.

Being less 'known' by their teachers at secondary school was hard at first for some students, particularly for those who had had a close relationship with their previous teachers.

However, it was also evident that as Year 9 progressed most students established very good relationships with many of their teachers and were as likely to say these teachers cared about them as they had been to say this about their primary/intermediate school teachers.

At the same time, students showed an increased tendency between Year 8 and Year 10 to compare and contrast their experiences of teachers, including specifying their reactions to the ways in which different teachers conducted teaching and learning in class.

The nature of students' relationships with teachers and their views about different approaches to

Showing a sense of humour and making learning fun and interesting were teacher qualities students especially valued.

teaching impacted on their expressed attitudes towards some subjects, as well as colouring their views about school generally.

Students on Teachers

Responses from the students overall revealed a great deal of consistency in what students most and least liked to see in

teachers, with a sense of humour and ability to make learning interesting and fun being top of the list of the most desirable characteristics, together with teachers showing they enjoyed and understood teenagers.

At the other end of the spectrum, a teacher 'growling a lot' was the most frequently mentioned 'least liked' behaviour.

Other of our data revealed that, once at secondary school, students rated teachers as less likely than their teachers in Year 8 to ask for their opinions or to listen to their ideas and felt that, overall, teachers were a little less likely than teachers at their primary schools to make sure that everyone understood the work. However, in general, before and after transition, students found teachers to be approachable.

Many found too that while teachers post-transition often did not have as much time available to spend

with them as perhaps their primary school teachers had, they were generally very helpful when requested to assist with schoolwork.

But students also emphasised that there were times when they would like teachers to clarify work goals and be clearer about what they expected of students in class and when undertaking homework or other assignments. This view was particularly expressed when the students were still adjusting to all that was new or different at secondary school.

Teachers on Students

Corresponding with what students said about them, teachers often said they most liked teaching students who exhibited a sense of humour. They also often found it easiest to relate to more outgoing students, sometimes admitting that quiet, shy students could be a particular challenge for them. This suggests that compatible 'matching' of teachers and students can be an important consideration at times.

Teachers also valued a sense of humour and students being 'willing to have a go'.

Being willing to have a go, and taking an interest in their subject, not simply just being 'really good' at it, were other qualities teachers valued in their students.

Understanding and Liking Adolescents

Results from our study showed that students value teachers who understand 'where they are coming from as teenagers'. In particular, they appreciate it when teachers 'get' what they are trying to say, especially when they don't have the words at their disposal to express themselves well, and are able to connect with their (adolescent) humour.

"The students are at a critical stage of adolescence. They are confused. It was actually quite funny the other day: I had asked my Year 9 class who had watched the 'Human Mind' programme on TV the night before. And two students put their hands up. One was a quiet [studious] boy, which was not surprising, and the other was an outgoing girl. She said 'I did, I did, I did, I did' and then she looked around and realised that she was the only one shouting out. It suddenly went very quiet. She was wanting to impress the teacher but kind of realised that it wasn't cool to shout out like that. They hate to stand out at high school, especially here with a lot of the Pacific Island kids, they really hate standing out from their peers."

"The thing I hate in the classroom is the shame, shame, if kids get it wrong. Often mocking [from the other students] comes with it. So kids stop trying if they try and fail, and get mocked. So that is a big issue that we are not really aware of enough. I have no idea how you change that one. It is ingrained. But they need to feel that it is OK to try and maybe not get it right."

"They are starting to develop individually, [beginning to learn] that you don't have to be the same as everyone else. They are starting to break away from home, find the opposite sex in many cases. And you see a sudden change in most of the kids, from Year 9 to Year 10. They just often start being really silly, purely to impress other people. It is often quite entertaining!"

"So I think they are often quite a bit more insecure about the need to be included and feeling worthwhile."

Year 9 teacher

Understanding each Other: Experiences, Perceptions and World Views

From their review of the research literature, McGee et al stated:

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.

There are very many examples of how people may misunderstand each other and draw the wrong conclusions as a result. This is inherently human nature, but learning some 'facts' about others' ways of being can help to reach better shared

understandings, and improve relationships and practice in relation to teaching and learning.

For example, some teachers observed a Pasifika cultural preference for 'blending into the group'. While this may be a reality for some or many Pasifika students, it does not also mean, as some participants perceived it, that these students

"We need to be aware of all the different philosophies of the different groups."

Year 9 teacher

did not 'want to take any responsibility for their own learning'. But it does nevertheless have implications for how to manage teaching and learning opportunities for the students.

Tale's story (Case Study 13) demonstrates how a particular misunderstanding can lead to more

serious consequences for a student both in the short- and longer-term.

Case Study 13: Understanding each other

Despite saying they had 'settled' quite quickly when they first arrived, some students, rather than assimilating into their secondary school, for various reasons became increasingly distanced from some or most aspects of school life.

Tale was a student who had been well liked by all of the teachers and students in his primary school: his Year 8 teacher described him as "*sweet, dreamy and shy*", adding that everyone loved these qualities in him. While Tale had been very anxious about the move to secondary school, feeling he would be out of his depth in a big place with lots of strangers, he found to his pleasure and surprise that he got on well initially, and even enjoyed much of his time there. He attributed this in large part to "*being introduced around*" by older siblings and cousins so that he got to know and be known by people and was able to play sports with them during lunch hours which he really enjoyed.

Family meant a great deal to Tale and he spoke often during interviews for the transition study about how he enjoyed spending time with his siblings (usually playing various outdoor games), helping out his parents and grandparents, and just generally being with members of his extended family. Tale had friends at school and in his neighbourhood whom he valued but he seldom saw them in the weekends, choosing to put his family commitments first.

However, as his first year at secondary school progressed, Tale began to get 'off side' with teachers; he was eventually suspended for a few days for surly behaviour and answering back. He felt that he and two of his friends had been unfairly picked on 'because they were Pacific Islanders', accused of something they hadn't done and not given the chance to explain.

The downward spiral for Tale had begun over homework: he refused to do it (ie, by simply abstaining rather than outwardly protesting) because he did not believe in the need for homework, feeling strongly that spending time with family was more important and that formal learning should be kept within the school day and not take up out-of-school time as well. (Tale was making reasonable progress at school, although he did not always find it easy to stay sufficiently focused on his work in class, mainly because of his tendency to day-dream. He was well aware that his parents valued education highly and he generally wished to please them.)

It was evident that although Tale had strong, genuine reasons for his beliefs about the homework situation, he was not able to convey this and his behaviour was seen by his teachers as deliberately uncooperative and disobedient. The result was a lack of understanding and effective communication between Tale and his teachers, leading to an impasse, and no acceptable compromise. Tale was at risk of becoming seriously alienated from school, including disengaging from his learning in class.

Fostering Communication and Relationships among Teachers in the Same School

Teachers in the same school may often have different views about aspects of policy and practice

Different views on a policy or practice can affect how students and their teachers experience school.

(in relation to homework, for example). The extent to which differences in views and perspectives can successfully be either accommodated or resolved can affect how students — and the teachers themselves — experience school.

Our study findings showed that different teachers within the same school, as well as teachers across schools and sectors, also frequently have different perspectives of the same student, suggesting that any one teacher may not always have a well balanced view of (certain) students. While at times this could conceivably work in a student's favour, even more likely, it may have the opposite effect.

There is much said about the need for transfer of information about students across or between schools at transition points. It is equally important

"We need teachers in the school working more collaboratively ... pulling in teams out of English, social studies, science [etc]. ... Teaching could become a lot more imaginative if people got together to share ideas."

RTL B

to consider the need for effective transfer or sharing of student information from year to year within the same school, especially among teachers who take the same students for different classes within the same year.

A more complete picture of students could be achieved by schools having recognised systems in place for doing this (eg, databases set up for the purpose, regular staff meetings, staff members being tasked

with the responsibility of ensuring that relevant information is passed on at the appropriate time). But often it may simply be a case of teachers being happy to talk with one another, sharing issues and concerns or favourable observations, as well as specific data on student progress.

Some participants also talked about the value of teachers from different subject areas, departments, or year levels within the school getting together in a more structured way to share ideas and practices about teaching and learning and other matters.

Relationships between Schools and Parents

Findings from our transition study:

- Some parents felt their children were achieving well or very well in particular subjects and doing well at school generally when in reality they were among the lowest achieving students.
- Around a third of teachers at both primary and secondary school indicated having almost no contact during the year with the parents of participating students. Teachers were more likely to have had infrequent contact with the parents of low achieving students.
- [While] teachers considered the majority of parents to be generally 'supportive' or 'very supportive' of their child, they were more likely to rate the parents of the high achievers as 'very supportive' than the parents of the low achievers.

The importance of school/home contact was emphasised by teachers and principals across both primary and secondary sectors.

It was felt that it was important for parents to:

- take an active interest in what was happening for their child at school;
- communicate with teachers about their child's progress;
- be informed by the school of their child's positive achievements as well as any learning or discipline issues that arose.

However, it was recognised that not all parents feel comfortable about contacting or coming to a school

Not all parents feel comfortable about contacting or coming to a school.

and that it is necessary for schools and teachers to try and overcome this diffidence.

Successfully encouraging all parents to be part of the school is often not straightforward,

however. Problems encountered in communicating effectively with parents included language barriers, and perceived 'non-engagement' with the school, particularly among parents in lower socio-economic communities. Teachers' explanations for parental non-engagement included lack of time, fear of the school, or a cultural belief that a young person's education was the sole responsibility of the school, as this is what a school is set up to do.

It was suggested that when schools work as much as possible with community leaders this is a valuable way to increase parental involvement.

"I think you have to bring the leaders of the different community groups into the school and get them to bring the parents along with them."
Year 9 teacher

In terms of effective relationships between schools and parents there are also such issues to consider as the extent to which teachers may need more support or knowledge about how best to convey potentially difficult messages to parents regarding their children's progress, understand

the diverse realities for students beyond the school, and about how and to what extent they may assist parents to help their children more effectively.

"While we hope that parents will actively encourage their children to see the reasons for working hard at school and doing their homework, and hopefully provide the resources and support to do it, teachers should be aware of the student's circumstances as there is a huge variation in the living circumstances of some students here. It can be very difficult for some families to help their child with schoolwork. And we are limited in how much advice we can give the families. For some of them it is not possible. For example, one mother is away at work when the children get home from school. She gets home at 1am, then gets up at 5am to get her husband off to work, and then goes back to bed. The children have to get themselves up and off to school."

Principal, primary school

"Running more parent nights has been good. We have meetings where teachers and parents can meet each other but also information evenings [eg], the maths department invites all the parents to come and find out about the maths programme and discuss ability and assessment issues."
Year 9 teacher

Meeting with Parents/Families

Maintaining effective communication with students' parents or families was widely agreed to be as challenging as it was important. There was also agreement that it often means having to think 'outside the box' in order to ensure that parents and families feel welcome in the school and confident enough to come along to school-based activities where they can learn more about their child's progress and about the school and wider education matters.

There was recognition too of the need to keep in mind — and overcome where possible: by

It often means thinking 'outside the box' so parents feel welcome and can come along to meetings to learn about their child's progress at school.

providing childcare at school while meetings take place, for instance — the practical barriers and competing responsibilities that can make it difficult for parents/families to attend meetings and activities during the school year and help their children with schoolwork.

Secondary teachers also particularly referred to the

logistical difficulties that large secondary schools tend to experience in ensuring that teachers and parents have sufficient time together in order to discuss individual students' progress, successes and difficulties. As is typical in most if not all secondary schools, the secondary schools in our study ran parent–teacher interview nights. These elicited mixed feelings among all parties. While they were considered necessary, there was also a feeling that they were often hurried, making the possibility of

more in-depth discussion impossible. There was concern too that many parents did not attend.

However, innovative approaches to bringing about more effective parent–teacher meetings have been accomplished in some schools. McKinley et al (2009, p.30), for example, describe what they refer to as 'restructured' parent–teacher meetings, in which parents/caregivers, along with their child, meet with their child's form teacher only, for an in-depth overview of the child's progress. (The meetings were established in this form as part of a wider programme of 'academic counselling' for students, in which each student met on a one-to-one basis with the dean two or three times a year to discuss academic progress, aims and aspirations, and how they were going to achieve them.) For the meeting, the form teacher comes prepared with a comprehensive academic profile of each student to discuss with the parent(s)/caregiver(s). McKinley et al report that these meetings, albeit involving a lot of planning, were well received by all involved parties: parents, teachers and students. More detail about the meetings and participants' responses to them are given in the insert box on the next page.

Questions to consider

- Parents sometimes perceive secondary schools as intimidating places to be. What (more) might we in this school do to help all parents feel welcome?
- Not all parents feel confident about supporting their children at school, and especially through the transition to secondary schooling and beyond. What kind of information or support could we make available for our parents to help them better understand the process of transition, their child's achievement and progress, and what occurs in schools generally?
- How can we as a school, and as individual teachers, best assist parents to provide effective support for their children's education?

'The Restructured Parent-Student-Teacher Meeting'

Mckinley et al (2009, pp.46–50) stated that 'The success of the restructured meeting was dependent on the strong organisational processes that occurred before, during and after the event (with subsequent follow-up by form teachers being an important element in the whole process).'

'One of the most significant results of the restructured parent–student–teacher meetings was the enormous increase in participation by parents/caregivers. ... [from] between 9% and 13% [in previous years] to 76%. This meant that most of the teachers were meeting many of the parents/caregivers for the first time and finding them more interested in their children's schooling than they had expected ...the large parental turnout had a significant impact on staff, particularly on their perceptions of the parents/caregivers and the relationships they could build with them.'

'The teachers' overwhelming perception was that the parent–student–teacher meeting provided a means for cementing stronger and improved relationships between all parties.'

'In most cases teachers reported connecting with parents/caregivers in a way that was very different from their previous experiences of "cold hall", "five minute", "merry-go-round" parent/caregiver meetings with subject teachers. There is no doubt that this was helped considerably by the environment the school created, with refreshments, easy parking, child-care facilities, and information available in the hall — all of which was seen as positive. The meeting provided the opportunity for parents/caregivers to develop a tangible and identifiable partnership with their children's form teachers. Together, they were able to increase their understanding of the student.'

'The parent–student–teacher meeting, which began with parents/caregivers and teachers engaging together with the student's record of learning, provided a sound basis on which to change the nature of the relationship between school and home. Individual student portfolios the form teachers created from information given to them by the students' subject teachers, deans and other staff, provided a strong framework for the conversation with parents/caregivers and a clear overview of the student's academic progress and patterns that emerged from different classes.'

'...Almost all staff interviewed commented on the strengthened triadic relationship of parent/caregiver, teacher and student, and the open and honest discussions that were able to occur.'

'The discussion between the three parties also enabled teachers to see how the student interacted with his/her parent/caregiver, which provided additional insight for teachers.'

'Some form teachers commented that the length of the meeting allowed for meaningful engagement, with parents/caregivers asking more questions than at previous parent–teacher interviews. As these meetings were considerably longer than the previous five minute ones, it is not surprising that a degree of rapport was able to develop. Some teachers commented on the insights they gained about parents'/caregivers' involvement with and concerns about their children, and spoke of the genuine pleasure they experienced spending time with parents/caregivers, coming together with a mutual interest in their children.'

continued ...

... continued

'Teachers perceived that some parents/caregivers found the school less formidable because of the initial teacher contact. ... One form teacher described the meeting as a process of breaking down misunderstandings between parents/caregivers and teachers. [Another] form teacher, pleased that most of his predominantly Pacific Island parents/caregivers came to the meeting, felt that giving parents/caregivers an appointment removed a barrier to their attendance.'

'The length of conversation also enabled the teachers to ascertain what information and understanding parents/caregivers had about the school. Deans and teachers both commented on what they saw as a lack of parental insight into school information systems, particularly around assessment deadlines, homework expectations and gaining credits.'

'Overall, the main impact of the parent–student–teacher meetings was the trust and rapport developed between the school and the students and their families, and the sense of enjoyment many of the teachers felt as the result.'

'While there was a general consensus that the parent–student–teacher meeting was a worthwhile process, teachers also alluded to the increased workload involved in the organisation and running of the event. Some teachers expressed reservations about the amount of work that would be involved, but in hindsight, most thought that the extra work was probably worth while. Some staff felt that the work leading up to the event could be streamlined and refined in the following year, such as by looking at time management and paperwork, but it was clear that these issues were not seen as insurmountable.'

Relationships between Students and Parents/Caregivers

Along with changes in relationships with peers and teachers at the time of transition, students' relationships with parents and family are also often undergoing changes.

A number of students in our study referred to the higher expectations or greater responsibilities being

An important message for parents is that students in Years 9 & 10 continue to need their ongoing support.

placed on them by families, because they were now perceived by them as much more grown up. For some students, this was an added burden: at a time when they continued to need their parents/family to provide

support and show an interest in how they were

getting on at school, they were finding that this was tending to reduce.

The transition to secondary school also quite often coincides with (adolescent) communication patterns that are less open and relaxed than previously, making it seem, perhaps, that they no longer value or need parental/family support and interest in the way they did when they were younger. It was evident from the student feedback in interviews that this was not the case. It may be especially important for schools to convey this message to parents/caregivers and families.

Many participating teachers also emphasised the importance of a stable, supportive family environment for students. They stressed that parents' attitudes to secondary school could be a key factor in how their child approaches, and

responds to, transition, and how they progress following transition, another key message to pass on to parents.³⁷

Findings from our transition study:

- The low achieving students in mathematics, reading and writing were more likely to have fewer books in their homes and less likely to say they enjoyed reading in their spare time.
- The low achievers in reading and writing were more likely to indicate watching television as a favourite spare time activity and, on average, watched more hours of television than the high achievers.
- The parents of the high achievers were more likely than the parents of the low achievers to say they talked to their child often about what they did at school.

Summary Comments

Students' attitudes to school, learning and achieving well are significantly influenced by their relationships with teachers and other students at school, their experiences of teaching, learning and achievement within the classroom, and by the level of interest, support and encouragement for their schoolwork provided by parents/family.

Social aspects of the transition can require a considerable adjustment for many students, in that they need to accommodate the different personalities, expectations, and teaching methods or approaches of their new teachers, get along with

many other previously unknown students within an often more diverse student population than they have been used to, balance established friendships with new ones, and, at times, adjust to some changes in family relationships and expectations.

The process of establishing new friendships or consolidating others tends to be a significant rival, too, for the students' schoolwork, in terms of their time, energy and attention.

Other important relationships that can directly or indirectly impact on how students experience teaching and learning at school and school life generally include those between schools and sectors, between schools and families, and between teachers in the same school.

³⁷ It may be helpful for schools to refer parents/caregivers to the Ministry's website where helpful suggestions have been posted regarding supporting children's/young people's education, and helping them prepare for such changes as the transition from primary to secondary schooling:
www.minedu.govt.nz/Parents/YourChild.aspx

CHAPTER 8:

Concluding comments

8

The overarching goal of schools is to ensure that students make good progress throughout their schooling and achieve relevant qualifications. Achieving this goal for all students means equipping young people well for a positive future: for example, qualifications, or not, can very often mean the difference between having genuine choice about future pathways and having no other option but to take up low-paid employment with few if any longer-term prospects.

To be in the best position to succeed, students need to develop a clear sense of a pathway through their education early on, and maintain steady levels of progress and engagement at school at every level of their schooling. In particular, they need to be able to maintain equilibrium through more exceptional times, such as the transition from primary to secondary schooling.

Central Messages

In common with other recent research findings (eg, Evangelou et al, 2008; and the *Competent Learners @ 14* phase of Wylie et al's *Competent Children, Competent Learners* longitudinal study) we found that most students in our transition study generally coped well with the shorter-term aspects of the transition from primary to secondary schooling.

This was due in considerable part to the work put in by schools and many teachers. Students indicated, for instance, that it had been helpful when their

Year 8 teachers had encouraged them to make the most of the new opportunities that would be available to them at secondary school. Similarly, some of the particular steps and initiatives that their secondary schools, deans, and teachers put in place facilitated the settling-in process: peer support schemes were particularly well received by students new to Year 9.

However, alongside this positive picture of students' transition from primary to secondary schooling are findings (replicated in other research referred to throughout this publication) that highlight a number of issues and concerns.

These issues relate primarily to the achievement of some students in particular and to an overall decline in student attitudes towards subjects and learning generally, which has implications for student achievement and progress over the longer-term.

And an important concept inherent in considering transition points, including the primary to secondary transition, is that transition is more than simply an event. It is an ongoing process, involving a range of key players. One major aspect of transition as process is the importance of effective links between the primary and secondary sectors regarding transitioning students, and also between schools and students' homes and communities. While regarding it as challenging to accomplish, all teacher and principal participants in our transition

study agreed that forging stronger links of this kind would be beneficial to all concerned: teachers, students, parents and communities.

The research literature reports similar conclusions (eg, the Scottish Executive Education Department 2007; Hughes et al, 2008). More specifically, Hughes et al emphasised that:

‘Children, parents, primary and secondary school teachers each have extensive ‘funds of knowledge’ which are relevant to primary–secondary transfer. Our research shows that sharing this knowledge can address [any] dip[s] in attainment [following] transfer, and help children adjust more easily to their new school. Primary–secondary transfer is a long-term process. Planning for transfer needs to start [before] Year [8] and continue through into Year [10].’

Another aspect of transition as process rather than event is that students — and parents — often anticipate the move to secondary school with a certain amount of concern. And, as well, in respect of some students at least, there is evidence that the cumulative effect of the changes they encounter can mean that much of their first year at secondary school, and not just the early days and weeks, is an ongoing challenge of adjustment. This is despite early claims of having settled well at secondary school.

Achievement Concerns

Our previous report, *Students’ Achievement as they Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling*, shows that the assessment data gathered at four different points revealed good achievement gains for most students over the course of the study. In particular, students who had been achieving highly at the end of Year 8, were most likely to continue to be achieving in the top quartile in mathematics, reading, and writing in Year 10. In contrast, however, the ongoing learning and achievement of

students in the lowest achievement quartile was of concern³⁸.

Specifically, it was found that:

- Between the end of Year 9 and early in Year 10 students in the bottom achievement quartile for mathematics had the lowest rate of progress.
- The gap between the high and low achieving students in mathematics widened at secondary school.
- Although students’ achievement scores fluctuated over the four phases of the study, around half of the students who were in the bottom quartile in one or more of mathematics, reading or writing in Year 10 had also been achieving in the bottom quartile in Year 8.
- Some groups (eg, Pasifika students) were over represented in the bottom quartile for reading. They were slightly more likely to be in the bottom quartile for mathematics than students from other ethnic groups and were not present at all in the top quartile for this subject.

Students Attitudes to Subjects and Engagement in Learning

Our transition study data — again confirmed by similar findings in other national and international studies — further showed an increasing trend for students to express less positive attitudes to their subjects over time and an increased tendency to disengage from aspects of their learning at school.

³⁸ The proportion of students in our transition study consistently achieving in the bottom quartile in one or more of reading, writing and mathematics across all phases of the study was typically between at least eight and 11 percent of the total group of participating students.

There is a range of reasons for students' decline in positive attitudes to their subjects and lowered levels of engagement in their learning.

These include when students find their schoolwork either too difficult or not challenging enough, do not find subject content interesting or relevant, and when they experience teaching and learning approaches that are not best suited to their particular needs. As well, the nature of relationships with teachers and classmates is fundamental.

The 'age and stage' of the students is a further factor in that the middle years is a period during which young people begin to encounter many different social distractions and challenges, and become increasingly more likely to challenge things they may previously not have questioned.

However, Cole (2005), concluding a discussion about young adolescents and schooling, stressed that...

'... whilst adolescence is a difficult stage of development, it is not the reason for declining attitudes to schooling and learning. The key factor in determining whether or not adolescent students are engaged learners is the quality of schooling they experience.'

The evidence of increasing student disengagement underlines how important it is to 'capture' the imagination and interest of students in their early years at secondary school, and of course in the months and years preceding the transition to secondary school, in order to show them that learning at school can (continue to) be both intrinsically and extrinsically rewarding.

Increasingly, research evidence (eg, Kane and Maw, 2005) shows that this process can be considerably facilitated by feedback from the students themselves. Kane and Maw sought the views of secondary students regarding their learning needs in order for 'teachers and researchers to be able to understand and improve learning and teaching'. In

a 2009 interview with Kane, in which she reflected on this earlier work, she stated: *'We should be asking students more; my research shows they are capable of articulating quite clearly how they learn and their agency in their learning. We don't ask students enough to be involved.'*³⁹

Student Adjustment to Changes Generally

Towards the end of Year 9, students looking back over their first year at secondary school could identify a range of matters or experiences that had been difficult (even when interesting or exciting) for them to a greater or lesser degree. These included: getting used to many other, and more diverse, people; forming new friendships; adjusting to different teacher expectations and pedagogies; taking tests; physical differences in the school environment compared to primary school; the different rules and regulations; losing their former status of being the most senior students at their school; overcoming fear of bullying; juggling timelines and responsibilities; and, simply feeling more fatigued than previously.

A particularly important factor during times of change, and also in terms of supporting student achievement, engagement and well-being is that students are able to experience positive, supportive relationships with parents/families, with teachers, classmates and others. For example, a constant theme in students' responses concerned the deleterious impact on their learning and well-being when they were in a disruptive or tense classroom environment.

³⁹ The interview referred to was between Judith Loveridge and Ruth Kane (Director of Teacher Education, University of Ottawa; formerly Professor of Teacher Education, Massey University). It was reported by Loveridge (2010) as part of the secondary school multi-methods action research exemplar in Chapter 5 of the report, *Involving Children and Young People in Research in Educational Settings*.

How Can Schools Support Transition to Secondary Schooling?

In light of the central messages presented above, and the suggestions and ideas presented throughout this document, for effective transition to occur amongst other things there needs to be:

- meaningful cross-sector communication between schools and teachers regarding student achievement and well-being, and about curriculum continuity and effective pedagogies;
- common understanding and agreement within and across teachers and schools regarding key assessment tools, including how results are interpreted and used. Parameters for student data sharing across school sectors also need to be clearly expressed to ensure that the data compiled or received is such that it can and will be used to better inform teachers' work with students;
- opportunities for teacher exchange visits across schools/classrooms;
- meaningful communication about students' progress and well-being between schools and parents/caregivers, and wider community members as appropriate;
- creative and flexible approaches to helping parents feel welcome and supported by schools, and to attend meetings with teachers where they can have meaningful exchanges about the progress and needs of their children;
- dedicated people and time allowances within schools for effective communication to occur across sectors and between schools, parents, and wider community members;
- careful selection and appropriate training and support for key people involved in transition processes in schools (Year 9 deans and form teachers for instance);
- as many organised opportunities as possible for students to visit their intended secondary school prior to transition and to hear about the positive things that happen at secondary school from senior students;
- well planned and implemented orientation activities for new Year 9 students to assist them to get to know the new systems and requirements, meet their new teachers and classmates, and generally feel welcome in the school;
- consideration given to extending orientation-type activities into a year-long programme of support for Year 9 students and/or re-organising aspects of school systems and structures to allow for nominated teachers to dedicate more intensive periods of time specifically to Year 9 students;
- an understanding of, and liking for, young adolescents among those who work with middle years students;
- planned ways of getting to know students well, and for listening to and taking into account their feedback about how they are finding their subjects and approaches to teaching and learning;
- appropriate training and support for all teachers so that they are equipped to effectively assess student achievement and establish appropriate levels of difficulty for different students of the work being studied, as well as to monitor and track both individual and overall student progress;
- greater knowledge and understanding of how to deliver the curriculum in ways that middle years students find engaging and relevant.

Some Last Comments

There are many potential matters to consider in order to effect improved outcomes for all students throughout the transition from primary to secondary schooling, in all likelihood too many to effectively, or realistically, tackle all at once.

It is anticipated, however, that the information presented in this document will be helpful for schools and teachers when making decisions about areas to focus on in the first instance, taking into

account the particular context within their own school and community, and the characteristics of the students — and teachers — involved.

All students can benefit from schools, teachers, and parents/families providing particular support and encouragement to ease the transition and beyond, but such input is especially important for students for whom the transition process is likely to be more than usually difficult.

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this programme can be found on the Te Kete Ipurangi (TKI) Online Learning Centre website (<http://www.tki.org.nz/>) under the New Zealand Curriculum:

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