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**TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY TO SECONDARY SCHOOL:
POSSIBILITIES AND PARADOXES**

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the findings of a qualitative research project carried out in New South Wales, Australia. The research participants were 'resilient' final year primary school and first year high school students who, through semi-structured interviews, discussed either their expectations or experiences of transition from primary to secondary school. Some important findings regarding transition challenges are presented and the children's (and their parents') responses to these issues are discussed. The question is posed: how ethical and feasible is it to introduce radical school reform in the early years of high school when the voices of those who stand to be most affected by it are strongly in favour of the *status quo*?

INTRODUCTION

In the literature on students' transition between primary and high school (e.g. Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan 1996; Eysers, Cormack and Barratt 1992; Measor and Woods 1984; Blyth, Simmons and Carlton-Ford 1983; Power and Cotterell 1981) it is suggested that problems of truancy, school failure, non-compliance and inappropriate behaviour in the early years of high school can often be attributed to the radical changes that occur in students' day to day lives as they make the move from one school to the next. It is argued that, in addition to the obvious changes that children experience in relation to such things as school size, the number of teachers and the range of new subjects, the move from primary to secondary school also involves a transition between two radically different cultures of schooling (Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan 1996; Cullingford 1999). On the one hand, the primary school culture emphasises care and nurturance of students and offers a sense of belonging to a human-sized group. On the other, the culture of the secondary school is oriented towards teaching academic subjects, it emphasises differentiation of students according to achievement and produces experiences of fragmentation and isolation rather than cohesion and bonding. The effects of changes such as these for individual students can be anxiety, confusion, lack of stability and subsequently alienation and disengagement.

For some time, the middle schooling and other school reform movements have suggested that the solution to these problems lies in fundamental change in the way the early years of high school are organized and managed (Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan 1996). These changes include the creation of more human-sized, hospitable and sensitive secondary school environments and the development of a set of practices for better managing the learning, social and emotional needs of early adolescents.

In this paper, we report some of the findings of a qualitative research project which investigated some Year 6 and 7 students' anticipated or actual transition experiences. In New South Wales, where the study was conducted, Year 6 is the last year of primary school and Year 7 is the first year of secondary school. The study was motivated by worrying statistics regarding school suspensions, exclusions and absenteeism among students in Year 7 in two separate localities. We shall present some of the data relating to transition challenges that the students reported

anticipating or having experienced. We will then speculate about why children and parents have responded in the ways they have to these experiences. Finally, we will explore the dilemma surrounding the ethics and feasibility of school reform in the early years of high school when the voices of those who stand to be most affected by any reform indicate a strong preference for the *status quo*.

THE STUDY

The study was carried out at two sites. The first is an outer suburb of a large city with a significant public-housing base and many social problems. The second, is a rural town where employment opportunities and public services are rapidly diminishing as a result of a national thrust towards centralisation of industries and services. Significant numbers of this town's citizens are Indigenous Australians.

Our approach to the study was shaped by two strong theoretical commitments. The first was to a 'resilience' perspective, that is, a perspective that seeks to identify the sources of support and the complex social contexts that enable children who are experiencing 'tough lives' to survive, cope and be successful (see Howard and Johnson 2000a, 2000b, 1999a, 1999b). In terms of the present study, our approach was not to focus on what was going wrong for those 'at risk' students who were among the Year 7 casualties but rather to find out what was going right for those 'at risk' students who were not causing concern.

Our second theoretical commitment was to make space for students' voices to be heard. In other words, we prefer to do research with students rather than on them and we are keen to hear what they have to say about their lives and about things that affect them. In this we join a range of educational researchers who have coined the term 'the authentic student voice' to represent this perspective (*inter alia* Rudduck, Chaplain and Wallace 1996; Mayall 2000; Kordalewski 1999).

Using a screening device adapted from our previous work (Howard and Johnson 2000b, 1999a) we asked teachers, deputy principals and school counsellors in 5 primary schools and 3 high schools across both sites to identify 'resilient' students - or those students who were experiencing 'tough lives' but who were 'doing O.K.' at the time. In this way, we were able to recruit 25 'resilient' students in Year 6 and 68 'resilient' Year 7 students. Sixteen of the participating students were Aboriginal. In addition, we were able to include 10 Year 6/7 teachers and 21 parents of 'resilient' students in the study.

We asked all participants about their expectations and/or their experiences of transition; what they saw as the problems and difficulties and what they thought might be better ways of doing things in this regard. The following are the core questions that formed our semi-structured interview schedule. Questions were modified according to whether the participant was a Year 6 or 7 student, a teacher or a parent. Here are the questions for Year 7 students:

- When you were in Year 6 what did you know about [their present High School]? How did you know these things ?
- Did you visit the school or did anyone from the school come here to talk to you when you were in Year 6?
- What were the main differences that you found between primary and high school? How did you feel about those differences?
- Do you know any kids in Year 7 who are not doing OK? How do you know they are not doing OK? What do you think is the reason for them not doing OK? What helps you to do OK?
- What was the best thing about starting high school?

- What did you find was the hardest thing to cope with when you began high school? How did you manage that?
- What do you think could be done to make it easier for kids when they are just starting high school?

All interviews were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed for analysis using NUD•IST, the software for managing qualitative data. In the next section, representative excerpts from the transcripts have been used to illustrate broad themes and categories that emerged in the participants' talk.

TRANSITION CHALLENGES

As far as all the participants were concerned, the key transition challenges for students were social in nature – a theme that emerged strongly in other work that we have done with young adolescents (Howard and Johnson 2000a). Indeed, many of the participants in that study saw school principally as a social centre rather than a learning centre (see also Cullingford 1999; Davies 1982). The first three challenges are concerned with managing social issues:

- Making Friends

The ability to make and keep friends in the new setting of high school was a source of real apprehension among Year 6 students and reported real anxiety among the Year 7s. In fact, according to the Year 7s, a major factor between 'doing O.K.' and 'not doing O.K.' in high school revolved around this theme.

Students who came to high school with a group of students from their old primary school were seen by our participants as greatly advantaged. Even though these students may not have been friends at primary school, they provided safe sources of social support in the early weeks at high school. Being an isolate was considered an undesirable, fearful state because it attracted victimisation:

Kids on their own, they get teased a lot. Other people aren't very nice to them. (Year 7 Boy)

Finding a social group into which you can fit, however was also a cause for anxiety because it is not necessarily an easy task. Social groups are self-policing, setting rules of membership and standards of what's 'cool' and what's not. Several students pointed out that you've got to be quite skilled at reading social signs and codes if you are to escape ridicule and rejection:

You're afraid if you do something that's not popular or if you're not doing the trend you'll be treated like a real nerd. (Year 7 Girl)

- Fitting in

Anxieties about being able to fit in to the broader social context of the high school were also expressed by Year 7s, many of whom offered advice to Year 6s of the kind seen in the quotes here:

Don't do anything silly and don't talk to the big kids – you know – say bad things to them or anything like that because you'll get into trouble. (Year 7 Girl)

Stick with your own group and don't pick on kids bigger than you. Blend in. (Year 7 Boy)

My brother told me, when you go to high school don't be a dick-head and just don't be stupid. (Year 7 Boy)

Get along with the teachers. Don't argue. Don't do anything silly and stuff. (Year 7 Girl)

Our participants' advice is to blend in, don't draw attention to yourself, keep your head down, know your place in the hierarchy. This amounts to a kind of social 'nous' of the kind often associated with repressive, closed institutions such as prisons or the army. Cullingford (1999: 117) points out that schools have often been likened to prisons because of the sense of being incarcerated in a closed society: 'Once within the confines of the school, the pupils are supposed to stay there, to be told what to do and where to go.' What our respondents are implying here however is that anxieties about 'fitting in' are less to do with loss of freedom than they are about staying safe - it is dangerous for those with no power to be noticed by those who have either licit or illicit power in schools for the former's behaviour may be considered a challenge.

- Dealing with bullying

The third related issue concerns the exercise of illicit power in the form of bullying. All three high schools in which we worked had anti-bullying policies but as the following two Year 7 boys indicate, having a policy doesn't necessarily translate into a safer school for children.

Brian: The [anti-bullying] campaign, it's not really working.
It's just they're making a joke out of it - everybody is.

Int: What the kids are?

Brian: Yep, they just keep laughing.

Int: So what is this campaign?

Rick: Yeah, like 'walk away from it' or something but it's always impossible to walk away from.

Brian: Yeah, most of the times you've got to stand there because if you walk away they'll follow you - so you got to stand there.

Rick: It just makes it worse.

Brian: Yep, and if you have a punch-up with them, they're happy.

Rick: Ignoring them doesn't work either.

Int: So how do you stay safe?

Rick: You can't.

Brian: You've got to watch yourself the whole time.

Int: So bullying is a big issue for Year 7 boys?

Brian: Well, our whole school really.

Int: Do you seek help from the teachers?

Brian: Yeah, I told the teachers but they didn't help me much, they just said stick close to a teacher. But the teachers are always bugging off somewhere else.

Bullying was frequently raised as an issue among the participants. Year 6 students had little experience of it in primary school but were anxiously aware, usually through older brothers and sisters, that it was something they would encounter in high school. This echoes a study in Western Australia where more than 60% of students in the last year of primary school reported that they expected high school students to 'bully you, be bossy and act superior' (Garton 1987: 14). The Year 7s in the present study could name bullies in their own year but were more fearful of older boys who were notorious in their schools for physically and verbally harassing younger students (see also Collins 1996). To avoid being bullied most participants, like the two quoted above, remained ever vigilant and adopted the 'fitting in' strategies recommended in the previous section.

- Keeping Up

Another factor that emerged from our respondents' talk was the fact that they had long ago figured out that the purpose of school was learning and thus their success or failure would be judged by how well they did this. Moreover, they had worked out how to learn things in high school (which was in many ways different from the way you did it in primary school) and, because they generally liked learning things, they were disciplined enough to maintain these good study habits.

Many Year 6 students anticipated that work in high school would be a lot harder and Year 7 students generally perceived that this was indeed the case. Some students found their last year at primary school quite boring and unchallenging, others however had teachers who actively prepared them for high school. According to the students' accounts, either approach could end up being counter-productive. The students who had 'a bludge year' in Year 6 found Year 7 such a shock that some never quite recovered and went downhill from then on.

In primary school, the teachers are a lot easier on you and if you can't do the work then they help you get up to the level that most of the other kids are doing - they kind of push you to the level. But with high school because you're in like A, B, C, D class it's just all up to one level and all of a sudden you've got like projects and everything like that and all of a sudden you're being pushed and before you were just going at your own pace [...] If you end up in D class, you might feel like all the work you did in primary school wasn't good enough and the teacher had made you feel like you were doing it so well and now you're just hopeless. And they kind of give up and they think 'Why should I try?' (Year 7 Boy)

On the other hand, students who had been prepared diligently for high school by their primary teachers by, for example, doing Year 7 maths only found they were bored to death when they did it all again in their first year of high school. Students whose primary school teachers had prepared them by teaching them more generic skills (e.g. how to do tests, how to do homework, how to study) felt rather better able to handle the new demands of high school.

Strategies for survival in Year 7 largely revolved around 'keeping up'. In order to do this, our respondents told us you need to listen to teachers and obey their instructions and you need to do your homework on time.

You just ignore everyone and just get on with your work and listen to the teacher and follow instructions and it works. (Year 7 Girl)

If you don't understand something you just ask and if you still don't understand it keep on asking until you know. It's up to the teachers to make sure we learn and if you don't know, you can get help like after school tutoring. (Year 7 Girl)

Just being sensible and everything gets you somewhere and just wanting to learn gets you somewhere in life as well. (Year 7 Girl)

According to our respondents' accounts, students who aren't 'doing OK' are not keeping up. They typically don't do their homework and make up silly excuses; they get yelled at by teachers; they cheat by copying other people's work; they don't obey rules; they don't listen to instructions; they get detentions, backchat the teacher and take days off school. As the two girls below point out, the reason they do these things is probably because they are not coping with the work in the first place:

They're having trouble with the homework and they're always having days off school. I think they thought everything would be easy and they thought they could handle it all when they got to high school but it was all too much. (Year 7 Girl)

People that I know stay home from school and they say they're sick. They don't want to come to school and they don't want to tell their parents that they're not doing well. They get behind and they don't get all their school-work done. (Year 7 Girl)

Several studies agree that truanting often derives from such causes as a sense of personal inadequacy, not being able to keep up with school work, feeling humiliated either by academic failure or by teasing and bullying (Chaplain 1996; Irving and Parker-Jenkins 1995; Carlen et al. 1992).

- Practical Issues

A third set of transition challenges was very practical in nature. The first involved the size of the school. Most Year 7 students found the sheer size and complexity of high school a cause of major anxiety in their first few weeks. They talked of panicking about getting lost, of being scared when they got to classes late (or not at all) and of being embarrassed at having to ask directions of older students or staff. They found the frequent moving between classes a major source of confusion and many students complained of aching legs and backs because of the stairs and/or distances they had to negotiate and the fact they had to carry their heavy school bags everywhere.

Another practical issue concerned the use of maps and timetables. In order to help them find their way around the school, students were supplied with maps which they often found mystifying, particularly if two-storied buildings were represented in plan-form. The same complaint was made about timetables that the students were given to help them follow the often quite complicated structure of their day and week. Young students are not skilled map or timetable readers because the ability to think abstractly and symbolically is not highly developed in 11/12 year old children. Many of the students we talked to indicated that they had been confused and worried by their inability to make sense of these documents. In many ways, this is a concrete aspect of larger worries associated with 'doing school' differently in high school from primary school.

TRANSITION POSITIVES

While the challenges of transition were acknowledged, the overwhelming response from children and parents alike was that the problems and difficulties that they either anticipated or had experienced during the transition period were considered things to be mastered; a welcome *rite de passage*; a maturity benchmark.

The 'resilient' students' explanation for those students who were not flourishing in Year 7 (i.e. those who were truanting and those who were already demonstrating chronic behaviour problems) pointed to individual causes (i.e. 'they're not very bright'; they 'were losers in Year 6 and they're losers in Year 7'; they come from 'bad homes'; 'they haven't got any friends'). In other words, reasons for 'failure' were being attributed to deficits in the individual or his/her family rather than in the schools and their systems of organization and management. In this, these students seem to have internalised the messages of school culture - if you're not experiencing success, it's your fault, not that of the school. Transition challenges seemed to be seen by our participants as part of the endless grading and sorting of human beings that inevitably leads to success and privilege for some and failure and low status for others.

Despite the fears and anxieties expressed about transition, the children and their parents generally came out strongly in terms of support for the *status quo* and they offered few suggestions for improvement or change. Like the children in Garton's study (1987), most students felt positive about the move from primary to high school and in many of the following excerpts there is a clear sense that high school is seen as 'more important' than primary school:

After the orientation visit I couldn't wait until the holidays and I just wanted to go back to school and - yeah - I really looked forward to high school. (Year 7 Boy)

Primary school's for little kids. It gets boring because you just do real easy stuff. Here's heaps better and the work's a lot harder. (Year 7 Girl)

Because we were getting few responses to the question that asked 'What could be done to make things easier for kids when they are starting high school?' we cued participants with some standard middle schooling ideas. We suggested that reduced numbers of teachers and subjects might make life easier but this was universally rejected (see also Garton 1987). Once again, the higher status of secondary school compared with primary school is evident in the following excerpts:

Having lots of teachers is heaps good because, like in primary school, you only have one teacher all the time and if you don't like them much it's not very good. (Year 7 Girl)

We've got electives and next year we've got to choose subjects and my sister chose employment skills and business studies and computers, all hoping to help her in the future. I'll choose business studies too, computing and something I want, like sports' science. You could choose art, design technology, woodwork, metalwork, electronics, cooking - anything! (Year 7 Boy)

At primary school you would get to do painting on paper but here you can use clay and sculpt and all different stuff. (Year 7 Boy)

The suggestion that orientation camps in the first weeks of high school and/or extended orientation experiences during the final year of primary school might be helpful in minimising transition problems received some support. But, the proposal that the early years of high school be organized to include home groups with home base teachers was much more enthusiastically received - again, a reflection we feel of the intense social needs of early adolescents:

Yeah! It would be good to be all together sometimes and to have our own teacher (if they were nice). We have roll call every morning but that's just for giving out notices and ticking off our names and we're only in that group because our name starts with 'S' or something. It's not like it's your own group - your friends. (Year 7 Boy)

Parents too, generally echoed the responses of the students commenting on transition experiences from their own perspectives. Like the students they were equally resistant to the middle schooling ideas we introduced as suggested means of improving the organization and management of Years 7 and 8. Indeed, they generally favoured a more vigorous examining, grading and sorting of students than the schools actually practised; they emphasised, for

example, the need for 'tougher discipline' in relation to such things as in- and out-of-classroom behaviour, modes of address and uniforms.

THE PARADOX

A study by Akerlind and Trevitt (1999) also reports that high school students (and their parents) demonstrated resistance to change away from traditional classroom practices in a low-income area school in the USA. The question that must be asked is: How can we explain the students' and their parents' support for practices that seem against the best interests of many young adolescents?

In relation to the students it must also be taken into account that they only know the *status quo* and, being 'resilient' students, they have handled the challenges successfully. Asking them to imagine how things might be managed differently is problematic because it is asking these students to put their present success at risk – the *status quo* represents the conditions under which they have been successful, they might not be as successful under different circumstances.

If children have a lot invested in their support of the *status quo*, so do their parents. Those to whom we spoke came from lower socio-economic backgrounds and were ambitious for their children who were mostly coping well and being successful in their first year of high school. The model of the rigidly streamed, strictly disciplinarian school that the parents' responses seemed to be urging their high schools to adopt is a model of education traditionally and historically associated with middle class success. Indeed, recently in Australia we have had television documentaries on elite private schools that reinforce these beliefs and now that private and public schools are being forced to compete with each other for students, academic results (code for exams, grading, sorting), behaviour and dress standards all feature in prospectuses. In the parents' view, then, it is this kind of educational experience that produces well-paid jobs, financial security, social mobility and social status – why then, one must ask, would these parents want anything different for their children?

This then is where data and theory collide. On the one hand, we've got the student voice (and that of his/her parents) telling us that the present situation is basically satisfactory. There are a few anomalies associated with transition that need to be addressed but otherwise no radical change is necessary or desired. On the other hand, theory (and increasingly, practice) suggests that radical school reform in the early years of high school is likely to improve the prospects and experiences of all students not just the resilient ones. Moreover, as Hargreaves et al. (1999: 53) suggest, tinkering around with transition issues will inevitably expose the need for more fundamental changes in the whole culture and structure of school:

Administrators looking for quick procedural solutions to the problems of transfer and transition are likely to be disappointed. Before very long, their change efforts will need to address the deep principles underlying the specific innovations that they are trying to implement. Administrators who thought they were faced with just a few changes in procedure have often later found themselves with the challenge of changing their whole school. If substantial and significant improvements to the education of early adolescents are to be secured, the underlying principles, deep structures and ingrained cultures of secondary schooling in particular, will ultimately need to be confronted.

THE SOLUTION?

Clearly, no school reform can be successful unless parents and students, as well as teachers and school leaders, are committed to change. The question is how to gain that commitment.

First, the education of parents regarding the benefits of proposed change and involving them in the process of change is absolutely essential. Parents must, above all, be reassured that what's being proposed is a way of helping all students realise their ambitions – not some kind of second-rate, watered-down education designed to keep low SES children where they are in the social order.

In addition, proposed changes need to be 'sold' to students too. The key selling point in our view revolves around social safety and support and should focus on:

- Human-sized social groupings such as home groups, 'schools-within-a-school'; 'houses' for art/sports activities; associations, clubs and societies in school time for sporting and non-sporting activities;
- Actively and visibly enforced whole-school anti-bullying strategies;
- Ice-breaking activities during orientation and immediately after starting high school. Such things as activity-based orientation camps enable students to experience an intensive period of social engagement early in their high school career. This is of benefit to all but especially those who have limited social skills and those who do not come to high school with a ready-made base of social supporters from their old primary school.

In our view, once the benefits of this form of social organization have been recognized, other middle schooling practices would seem a 'natural' and sensible way of organizing the teaching and learning side of the school experience too.

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