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Voices from Schools: Listening to Australian Students in Transition

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Abstract

Despite convincing literature to the contrary, the notions of 'transition shock' and the 'storm and stress' of adolescence persist in views on primary-secondary school transfer. This paper reports on the 'voices' of some Australian students as they have anticipated and experienced primary-secondary transfer. It sets these findings in a broader consideration of transition and reports the views of young adolescents. It suggests that although transfer is an important part of the transition process, the adaptation phase during which students are adjusting to secondary school, may be the more critical. The paper concludes with some reflections on the implications of this small-scale study.

Introduction

Despite considerable evidence to the contrary, the notion of 'transition shock' as a time of almost inevitable educational crisis persists in much of the accepted wisdom and mythology of primary-secondary schooling. It continues to underpin many programs concerned with primary-secondary transfer, ranging from individual and school cluster initiatives to wider research programs (cf. Schagen and Kerr, 1999; Keys, Harris and Fernandes, 1995). Transition continues to be portrayed as "a crucial event in young people's education" (Schagen and Kerr, 1999 p.1), a critical time for the emergence of alienation and disengagement tendencies (Cormack, 1996), a period when "children's conceptions of secondary schooling [are] greatly influenced by the horror stories and myths communicated to them by their peers" (Lucey and Reay, 2000, p.192).

The research underpinning this paper sought to examine the issue of primary-secondary transfer and to consider aspects of it through the 'voices' of Australian students.

Primary-Secondary School Transition

Rather than regarding primary-secondary transition as a discrete event, we see it as a two-phase process. Transfer spans the end of primary schooling and the beginning of secondary schooling. It includes the period of student preparation for the change of schools and the period of orientation immediately after transfer. Traditionally, this phase provides the arena for 'transition shock'. Adaptation is the critical phase of student enculturation into the secondary school. It encompasses the early years of secondary schooling when student adjustment to the new school establishes the foundation for future performance.

Australian teachers and schools have an established record of concern for the welfare and progress of students during primary-secondary transfer. However, there is convincing evidence that the adaptation phase is deserving of increased attention since this is when disengagement and alienation are much more likely to threaten the welfare of students (Cormack, Johnson, Peters & Williams, 1998; Cumming, 1998; Cumming and Cormack, 1996; Schools Council, 1993; Eysers, Cormack & Barratt, 1992). Support for students needs to be allocated appropriately during the different transition phases.

Transition and Change

Primary-secondary transition necessitates student adjustment to significant changes (Speering and Rennie, 1996; Hatton, 1995; Hargreaves and Earl, 1994; Harter, Whitesell and Kowalski, 1992; Wigfield, Eccles, Maciver, Reuman and Midgley, 1991). For some, transfer can be "an abrupt disjuncture" (Dauber, Alexander & Entwistle, 1996, p. 291) while, for others, problems are "short-lived and they are quickly integrated into the secondary school" (Huggins and Knight, 1997, p. 333).

Two major sets of changes - structural and individual - are prominent. Structural changes are largely to do with the context of schooling and occur in aspects such as organisational procedures, curriculum, methodology, and school culture. Individual changes during early adolescence encompass intellectual, physiological, emotional and social dimensions.

Structural Changes

Although a generalisation, the ethos and learning environments of the primary and secondary sectors have traditionally reflected marked contrasts in structural and contextual flexibility. Despite the impact of school reform, there are some sector comparisons that usefully illustrate the confrontations experienced by students during transfer. These include:

- 1) Scale. The larger physical size and complexity of secondary schools can exacerbate the organisational and social network challenges that students encounter and have to manage.
- 2) Teacher affiliation. Most Australian students spend the majority of their primary school learning time working with the same teacher, in the same classroom, across most curriculum areas. In secondary schools they work with several different teachers in a number of classrooms and they are less likely to have a physical 'home base'.
- 3) School ethos. Typically, students find that the more personalised and individualised caring, cooperative ethos of their primary school experiences is replaced increasingly by a relatively less personal, more competitive, subject-focused secondary school environment that demands and promotes increased individual independence and responsibility (Eyers, 1992).
- 4) Curriculum. Typically, there is a more integrated curriculum in primary school with the educational focus on students' learning and their involvement in the learning process (Harter et al., 1992; Speering and Rennie, 1996). In contrast, as students progress through the secondary school, they are likely to experience curricular arrangements that permit less flexibility. There are more discrete subject areas, specialised teachers, a more regulated timetable and, increasingly, externally determined requirements of syllabus and assessment.
- 5) Methodology. Generally, primary school students experience collaborative methodologies. Secondary classrooms focus increasingly on individual performance graded in comparison to others (Harter et al., 1992). Commonly, there is a distinct shift from activity-based work towards learning approaches where students are engaged in homogenous academic tasks undertaken on an individual basis (Hargreaves and Earl, 1994).

Initially, students experiencing such changes can feel a great sense of personal loss compounded by what might loom as overwhelming demands and requirements of a more rigidly structured learning environment.

Individual Changes

Individual changes can compound the effects of the structural changes. Early adolescence is a time of significant and erratic physiological, intellectual, emotional and social change. This metamorphosis usually overlaps primary-secondary transition and interacts with school life.

1) Developmental changes. These, including sexual maturation with all its associated emotional and social baggage (McInerney and McInerney, 1994), impact considerably upon students' self-perception, self-esteem, and identity. The rapidity of fluctuation of these changes prompts a continual reassessment and restructuring of adolescent image which, at this time, is critical to perceptions and actualities of social standing (Groenman, Slavin and Buchenham, 1992).

2) Social networks. These often change or are disrupted during transfer (Wigfield et al, 1991). Many lose contact with primary school peer groups and new social networks emerge. Students who have worked and socialised closely in primary school are diffused into new social and learning networks. Relationships and affiliations change.

'Storm and Stress'

Popular theory portrays this early adolescent period as one of 'storm and stress', with vulnerability to some psychological disturbance (see Atwater, 1996; Steinberg, 1993; Cormack, 1991; Montemayor, Adams and Gullotta, 1990; Dusek and Flaherty, 1981). 'Storm and stress' is more likely to occur during adolescence (Arnett, 1999) when "the emotional burden on children in relation to secondary transfer can be great" (Lucey and Reay, 2000, p. 191). . Students are vulnerable to turbulence as biological and cultural factors influence the three key aspects of this period - mood disruptions, risk behaviour and limit-testing, and conflict with parents and authority.

However, it is not necessarily experienced by all adolescents. There has long been evidence of positive experiences occurring during this period (Eyers et al, 1993; Nottelman, 1987; O'Maley and Bachman, 1983; Dusek and Flaherty, 1981; Power and Cotterel, 1980). Indeed, for many students with high levels of emotional, social, and financial support, early adolescence can be a most positive developmental experience. Despite the challenges of transition and contrary to popular theory, the dominant research conclusion is that "the majority cope successfully and settle in without too much difficulty" (Schagen and Kerr, 1999 p. 2).

Yet the caricature of the confused, disturbed adolescent persists as the norm and is continually promoted in populist media, youth culture, and in some educational literature. Portrayals of adolescence continue to elaborate the 1950s theme of the confused and tormented 'rebel without a cause'. It is from this dichotomy that the focus of this paper emerges: what do the students have to say?

Design of the Studies

The Australian 'student voice' reported here emanated from two associated pilot research projects concerned with student anticipation and initial impressions of secondary school. It was expected that the variations in research sites, timing and methodological approaches would provide rich insights into the perceptions and experiences of students in primary-secondary transfer.

The first project employed a 'free writing' technique to consider transfer from a predictive perspective. During the final week of their penultimate term in primary school, 24 final year students from a metropolitan Adelaide primary school were asked by their teacher on behalf of the research project to write a half to one page recording their perceptions and predictions about secondary school. The responses were analysed and coded for positive, negative, and neutral statements. It was hoped that student views on the primary-secondary transfer would help inform the second study.

The second project involved two groups of students who were interviewed early in the first term of their first year in secondary school. One group consisted of 30 students from a South Australian Area School (R-12) in a rural town. The other was a group of 36 students from a secondary school in a New South Wales regional centre. Dialogue was effected in groups of 4-6 students using a semi-structured interview. The questions guided the students to reflect upon what they had anticipated secondary school would be like, and what it actually turned out to be like. The interviewer was in the role of 'trusted outsider', having been involved previously in the schools in various aspects of middle schooling projects. Response coding and analysis were used to categorise responses.

Study 1

Overwhelmingly, in Study 1, the transfer to secondary school was anticipated positively, with no major difference evident in the coding of male/female responses. This "free writing" student sample made 96 positive statements and 39 negative statements. On average there were 4 positive statements per student compared with 1.5 negative statements. Eight of the students (33.3%) made 6 or more positive statements while only 2 (8.3%) made 6 or more negative statements. Eight students (33.3%) had no negative anticipation whatsoever, while only 1 student (4.16%) had no positive anticipation.

Recurring positive predictions were:

- 1) having different teachers for each class rather than the same one all day;
- 2) extended subject choice;
- 3) meeting new friends; and
- 4) having more physical space available.

Recurring negative predictions embraced academic, social and structural circumstances and included:

- 1) concerns about homework;
- 2) apprehension about increased performance requirements;
- 3) anxiety about "getting lost";
- 4) the prospect of larger and unfamiliar school populations; and
- 5) the possibility of bullying and intimidation by older students.

Study 2

In general, students in Study 2 shared the above positive and negative predictions of the students in Study 1. The understandable exceptions, in the case of the South Australian Area School sample, were "meeting new friends" and "the prospect of larger and unfamiliar school populations".

A recurring theme in Study 2 discourse was that students had felt 'ready' for the transfer. There was a sense of excitement based on something of a weariness and jadedness with primary school life. The strongest negative common to both research

cohorts in Study 2 was their perception of being 'babied' by their primary school teachers. This was particularly so among students who had been in a class-tracking system where the class was allocated to the same teacher for the last two or three consecutive primary school years. Despite the fact that this arrangement represented a school effort to smooth the path to transfer, secondary school had appealed to students as a welcome opportunity to work with a range of teachers in a variety of 'new' subjects utilising a wider range of physical resources.

It was noticeable that this sense of 'a fresh start' was evident in both the South Australian and the New South Wales groups, despite the fact that structural difference between the two schools might reasonably have been expected to prompt different responses. The South Australian Area School had primary and secondary students attending the same campus and sharing many resources and activities in a common space. The New South Wales school was a stand-alone secondary School with first year intakes from a number of feeder primary schools. Consequently, the potential for 'new situation shock' was much higher in the New South Wales school. Yet the students in both locations showed little variation in secondary school anticipation and experiences. Secondary school was seen by both groups as being more 'grown up', more of a 'real school', more befitting their perceptions of their maturational development.

Study 2 also examined some of the students' initial impressions of the actualities of secondary school life. Overall, students were positive about their transfer to secondary school. Although there were individual differences in preferences for subjects and working relationships with teachers, there was strong satisfaction with 'new' experiences, especially as regards 'hands-on' equipment and learning. Re-organised social and learning networks were regarded favourably by almost all students, although students with lower cognitive capabilities reported more insecurity in this regard. Fears about academic challenge had subsided; in fact some students recorded disappointment about the reduced demands and expectations of them in this area.

There were no dominant negatives in terms of frequency or significance, but organisational negatives were the most common. These concerned the intrusion by homework into non-school time and activities; the absence of a 'home base' classroom for materials location; and having the same teacher for a number of subjects. Paradoxically, the latter strategy had been introduced deliberately by the schools to provide a positive, anti-alienation pastoral care structure.

Social and affective concerns were accorded high status in responses from both groups. Students indicated that these dimensions of their schooling were at least as important as academic pursuits. Interpersonal and peer group relationships were emerging as major concerns for the respondents. Some resistance was evident to the perceived intrusive and unreasonable demands of school on social time. However, none of the negative predictions about secondary school life had eventuated as being significant in actuality.

Interestingly, the most prominent example of the mythology of transfer that had emerged was that of first year students having their heads forced into a flushing toilet bowl by senior students. All students had been familiar with this threat, but not one knew of any occasion of its actual occurrence! However, apprehension about being intimidated or bullied by older students was common before the transfer and remained at the time of the interview.

Concluding Comments

The 'student voice' in this research questions some of the accepted wisdom and established assumptions that underpin much of the formal and informal structure and rationale of primary-secondary schooling. The research findings question the assertion that primary-secondary transfer is a dislocating trauma. It is clear that most students in these samples anticipated and experienced transfer positively and eagerly.

The findings also challenge the inevitability of the 'storm and stress' scenario. They do not deny the fact that, for some students, transfer 'shock' can be very real and that 'storm and stress' can be a most potent disruptive influence. However, the evidence suggests that, for the vast majority, such is not the case. Obviously, any strategies and procedures that facilitate transfer must be encouraged. However, the findings of this study challenge the practice of students in late primary years and early secondary years being allocated to one or two core teachers.

Similarly, there is a very clear message from the students that they wish to be regarded and treated as being more "grown-up". This requires reconsideration of learning content and methodology, social relationships and the role and nature of homework. At the same time, the study suggests that students who have already experienced under-achievement in primary schools might feel less confident about the prospects and experiences of transfer.

The impact of structural changes on students during transfer must not be underestimated, even when feeder and receiver schools are in close proximity. However, the findings of this study suggest that they are neither significant nor enduring. Consistent with the findings of the *From Alienation to Engagement* report (Cumming and Cormack, 1996), it appears that adaptation, rather than transfer, looms as a more critical phase of transition.

The findings of these studies suggest some implications for the curricular approaches, methodologies and assessment practices in both upper primary and lower secondary sectors. These must retain the interest and engagement of young adolescents. A middle schooling approach might provide a way forward. However, the current structural assumptions underpinning the organisation of schooling and teacher education in Australia render such a proposition somewhat problematic (Williams, 1998). There is also the reminder that Australian educators can usefully draw upon the experiences of colleagues in other countries, such as the USA and Canada, with longer research and practice histories in primary-secondary transition.

The research reveals that the raw material for secondary school success exists during the transfer period. In contesting some of the mythology that rationalises the drift towards disengagement, the outcomes of this study reassert that the challenge for educators lies in developing and implementing structures and practices that capitalise on the potential that clearly exists during primary-secondary transfer.

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