

Mike Farrelly - 2016 Primary Principals' Sabbatical

Professional Learning Activity: Term 2

During my sabbatical, my focus was to carry out an investigation into the Transition of Year 8 students into Secondary Schools with a particular emphasis on transition from larger schools as this is the structure I currently find myself involved with.

Emphasis was placed on what schools are doing to transition students, programmes prior to starting and how prior relationships between the secondary and primary schools assisted.

Sabbatical Purpose

My area of focus would therefore be:

What is effective transition, how is it structured and supported? What practices help to prepare our Year 8 students for the move to Year 9 and how can we better support them?

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Raumati Beach Board for supporting my sabbatical application and allowing me the time to engage, refresh and relax in Term 2. I also would like to thank the schools who gave their time to me so freely, especially my Principal colleagues who found time in their busy days to sit and talk to me.

Sabbaticals are a wonderful opportunity and the support of the MOE, NZSTA and NZEI in having these continue is very much appreciated.

Background.

The Ministry of Education project *A Study of Students' Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling* resulted in three reports between 2008 and 2010, which identified areas of focus during the transition. The reports also make some recommendations that may be helpful for groups involved in transitioning students.

From my reading and discussion, it is clear that having a well-developed transition between primary school and secondary school is extremely important, especially when looking at achievement, student voice and relationships.

Starting any new school involves a period of adjustment. The time it takes is never the same and continues until the student is able to show they are able to manage their responses and behaviours in their new school.

There is a huge amount of anecdotal evidence that the use of orientation programmes can play a key role in the successful transition of students. It is also very clear that a well-developed liaison between primary schools and secondary schools is vital.

We know from research in the area of neuroscience and learning that any student who feels that they are not safe or is under stress moves into the area of “fight, flight and freeze.” While in this state of mind, learning cannot take place.

When schools work together, it provides continuity of learning and decreases the anxiety of the new students and therefore learning can take place more quickly and effectively.

Students at New Zealand schools experience transition in many forms over their years: moving from Preschool to Primary School, movement between schools, the transition to Secondary and, ultimately, Tertiary or work force.

The experience that each person has will be very different depending on the supports which are put in place at each stage. ERO noted in a 2012 report that students who are not supported during the transition to secondary school are at greater risk of disengaging from learning.

From observation and reading it appears that transition to college involves more than just developing an orientation programme.

Dockett and Perry (2001) http://www.himh.org.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/2771/7-Transitions-to-School.pdf identify the difference between orientation to school and transition to school.

They say orientation focuses on procedures whereas transition involves pastoral and academic focus.

The main purpose for the transition *process* between Year 8 and Year 9 is to assist students with adjusting to their “new place.”

Relationships between students and staff during any transition are very important, as is the communication with the families. During this time, transition from primary to secondary school includes moving from what they know to what they will see as unknown.

Students say what helps them to transition are things like; looking forward to going to secondary school, the friendliness of other kids, meeting up with past classmates, meeting new friends, brothers and sisters there for support, knowing some of the teachers.

Transition Trends

Visiting a number of schools, it was interesting to see how both secondary and primary approach the area of transition. One aspect that has become clear to me during this process is that there does not appear to be any agreed method. In my view Year eight to Year nine transition depends very much on the relationship between the local secondary and the school from which students are transitioning.

Anecdotally it seems that the better the relationship between schools, the better the transition appears to be.

Summary of Visits

School A: No fixed process of transition to local college by the primary school. The college organises visits for all students. There is a specialist transition programme for those who are deemed to be, "at risk." Particular attention paid to those with social, emotional and academic needs.

School B: Have developed a programme of interaction with local college which takes place throughout the year. The focus tends to be around students running kiwi sport style activities for younger students as well as some interaction between Year 9 teachers and students in their own classes. For example, a Year 9 teacher taking mathematics at the primary.

This allows for primary school students to meet with college students and some staff who will be at the local college the following year. The college runs an induction programme for the primary, this includes visits and interviews by the Year 9 Dean, Secondary Principal visit which usually includes some student leaders. A one-day orientation visit follows this process. The Primary noted that 85% of students go on to attend the college and that students report that interaction prior to and post the one-day visit helps take the fear away.

School C: Interaction with the college tends to take place towards the end of the year. This involves meeting with the Year 9 Deans who then follow up by meeting with individual Year 8 teachers at the school. These meetings involve focusing on student behaviour, academic needs etc. There is a different process in place for those students who are identified as having special learning needs. For these students the process starts much earlier and often involves the RTLB service.

The college arranges a one day visit for the majority of the students. The primary school does have a desire to build a closer relationship with the college, including having ex pupils speak to students about life at college, making use of facilities such as the hall to hold their prize giving.

School D: Visit by Deans, followed up by a one-day orientation at the college.

School E: Liaison with local primary schools, usually by the Year 9 Deans. Meet teachers for a meeting to discuss year cohort, potential problems and concerns. Sharing of data between schools. Identify students who require extra support and start to arrange these before the new year.

School F: The process starts with an interview for every Year 8 student. This is conducted with the College Principal. The parents also attend this. The focus during the interview is on the student first. Information from this interview is transcribed onto a "Google" form. This is then shared among key people throughout the college. After the interview a one-day orientation of new students is held. Once the students start they are welcomed to the school community by way of a Powhiri. After this a second orientation occurs.

Conclusion

For transition to secondary school to be successful, it needs to be adapted to meet the needs of each school the students who are transitioning. One-size fits all does not work and what works for a large urban primary school such as my own will almost certainly not work for smaller schools within the catchment. Yes, there will be similarities, but there will also be many differences that will need to be considered.

Teachers who have a good understanding on how effective transition works, help with the positive adjustment to the secondary school.

Secondary schools need to be thinking about both the learning needs and the well-being of students, as well as the physical and emotional changes which also take place at this time.

ERO identified 12 successful indicators for students transitioning to Secondary School. These are:

1. Have a sense of belonging in their new environment and feel included in the activities and programmes that are on offer
2. Have created positive connections with peers and staff
3. Feel that their teachers know them and show a genuine interest in them which includes knowledge of strengths, interests and learning needs
4. Feel that their language, culture and identity is valued and understood by the school
5. Have a sense of belonging and purpose at the new school
6. Take responsibility for their learning journey
7. Make progress
8. Understand that their new learning has connections with previous learning and is set at a level that provides them with some challenge
9. Feel that their learning journey is interesting, relevant and above all fun
10. Feel that their whānau have been included in decisions about their learning journey
11. Have a sense of being both physically and emotionally safe in their new environment
12. Opportunities are provided for them to experience new activities and extend their interests and skills.

The strengths and weaknesses of transition are due to a number of factors; personnel, school structures, the importance placed on transition and the relationship culture within the school(s).

It appears that success is determined by who is running it. Schools where Team Leaders and Year 7 & 8 Teachers discuss students social, emotional and learning needs with Year 9 Deans, as well as provide opportunities for Year 8 students to visit the college at different times and meet and work with secondary school Teachers (not just on a “transition day”), are more successful.

These opportunities provide students with a reference point when starting the next year. They have been on campus, they have met some of their teachers, visited some of their rooms and interacted with other students. These types of opportunities appear to be more successful than just relying on information in a “Profile Form.”

The more importance put on transition by a secondary school, the better the chance a student has in settling into their new environment. There are implications around funding and staffing for this process with many schools also facing the challenge of the distance between them and their local secondary school. However, it is my view investing in transition benefits the students in our care in the long term.

ERO found transitions that are of the greatest benefit to students occur when there is a “school-wide culture that progressively supports students to adapt to the ongoing educational and social changes at secondary school” (2012, p.5).

References

Dockett and Perry (2001) http://www.himh.org.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/2771/7-Transitions-to-School.pdf identify the difference between orientation to school and transition to school.

<file:///Users/teacher/Downloads/Evaluation%20at%20a%20Glance%20Transitions%20National%20Report%20Summary.pdf>

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