

**Transition From
Primary School
To
Year 7
in a
Composite High School**

An investigation into the nature and effectiveness of transition programmes implemented to support students transferring from Year 6 (Primary School), to Year 7 in Composite High Schools

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INTRODUCTION

It is widely understood and acknowledged that the experiences associated with school transfer and the related transition and integration challenges can be stressful, and for some students traumatic. Elevated levels of anxiety, both prior to and post transfer are common, and shared to varying degrees by students, their parents, and the teachers of both contributing and receiving schools.

The continuity of student learning is also inevitably affected due to the process of school transfer, as a consequence of social anxiety and displacement and due to moving from secure to unknown learning environments, both these issues coinciding with the extended Christmas Holiday break.

The purpose of this study was to examine the processes that schools implement to transition students from Year 6 in Primary Schools, to Year 7 in composite (Year 7-13) high schools. The study focussed on identifying the nature and effectiveness of strategies implemented by composite schools to support students transferring to high school and transition programmes designed to integrate them with the least possible disruption to learning, and minimal social anxiety. The eight composite schools in Canterbury were included in this study which was undertaken during Term 2, 2009.

- Darfield High School (Darfield)
- Ellesmere College (Leeston)
- Geraldine High School (Geraldine)
- Mackenzie College (Fairlie)
- Mount Hutt College (Methven)
- Kaikoura High School (Kaikoura)
- Opihi College (Temuka)
- Waimate High School (Waimate)

Study Limitations

It was recognised that a study with such time-related and other resource constraints would inevitably be compromised. Some areas of significant compromise are acknowledged below, and clearly limit the value of this exercise to a marked degree. In spite of this, the investigation did identify a range of positive practices and some areas worthy of further consideration:

- The study did not seek the views of stakeholders other than composite school representatives, in most case the Year 7 Dean, or staff member with designated responsibility for managing the Year 6/7 transition programme. No attempt was made to obtain the views of students who had transferred, or the views of their parents or primary school teachers.
- The study was in many respects largely qualitative and subjective, although many schools were able to demonstrate that their transition programmes were effective on the basis of both formal and informal feedback from stakeholders. In some instances judgements relating

to the effectiveness of programmes were limited to the opinions of staff with vested interests: they were however in a position to make reliable professional judgements but also held a strong vested interest in addressing the social and learning issues associated with school transfer.

- No significant attempt was made to undertake any related literature search or reading. The study focus was entirely practical, aimed at identifying effective transition programmes and practices.

My personal interest in this critical area of education dates back to my undertaking an administrative project as part of study toward a Master in Education Administration, completed in 1991(!). That study involved an extensive report on 'Transition to a Form One to Seven High School', a composite school that at that stage had nine contributing schools, some of which were very small. Students transferring from such environments perceive composite high schools with their extended age range, greater size and (often) different location to be somewhat forbidding. My experiences both as the parent of two transferring students and in my role as Deputy Principal, reinforced my interest in this area and concern for minimising the social and learning-related costs relating to this form of school transfer.

COMPOSITE SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

Clearly there is a high degree of commonality among the eight composite schools in the survey. Among the most obvious of these is their predominantly rural setting and often unique settings in purpose-specific towns, together with the year levels catered for (7-10). All schools tend to have relatively large geographic catchments, a number of contributing schools, and a heavy reliance on school bus transport systems. These schools provide a coeducational learning environment and cater for seven years of schooling.

However, unique and different school factors do exist, making school comparison and generalisation difficult in some instances. School size is the variable of greatest difference. This in turn was a reflection of community size and support, size of contributing schools, range of programmes on offer, and a key factor in resourcing for transition coordinators. School roll sizes ranged from approximately 200 to over 700.

Composite schools had a variable number of contributing schools with the great majority of students coming from three schools (in three instances) to eight and nine in two cases. Most composite schools were receiving approximately or more than half of their students from a large primary school in their own immediate community: these schools often shared a common boundary or were within a short distance from the composite school.

Year 7 students were catered for in a variety of class settings and sizes. Discussion regarding class composition and type reflected a range of factors, including the number of transferring Year 6 students (ranging from 'high 20's' to approximately 120) and composite school learning preferences. Some schools favoured Year 7 and 8 composite classes for instruction, and class numbers varied from 23 to 30 or more.

While the design and characteristics of transition programmes to support Year 6 students transferring to composite schools did have a high degree of commonality, each programme reflected something of the uniqueness of each community, composite school and personnel involved.

TRANSITION PROGRAMME RESPONSIBILITY

In the majority of the surveyed composite schools, responsibility for the coordination and implementation of transition programmes was delegated by principals to a member of staff designated as the Year 7, or Year 7/8, or Junior Dean. In these situations the Deans also had a significant degree of responsibility for student welfare and/or Year 7/8 curriculum delivery. The guidance counsellor was the key coordinator in one school working in close association with the Year 7 Dean, and in one instance a qualified teacher was employed as the transition coordinator; this school had targeted (non-school) funding for an expanded health-related role that included oversight for all transition arrangements in this school's wider community.

Most coordinators had job descriptions appropriate to their title and key roles, reflecting something of their responsibilities, though few job descriptions specified in any detail the nature of transition-related expectations. One coordinator summed up this common situation by indicating that her job description was 'self imposed': coordinators generally appeared satisfied to be working in a situation where transition programme responsibilities were identified and implemented by them and to their own standards. With one exception, no schools had any documentation described as policy documentation in relation to Year 6/7 transition and any formal requirements to be met or procedures to follow: the exception to this was the school with external funding for a role including Year 6/7 transition.

While all schools had a clearly designated transition coordinator, a range of their personnel with specific roles and responsibilities were invariably, and variously involved in transition programmes. The Principal (or senior member of staff) and Learning Support / Special Needs Coordinator were actively involved in most situations: principals had a profile on visits to contributing schools and at 'open' events at the high schools, while staff with learning support responsibilities were often involved in supporting specific students with unique needs to transition with extra support. In many situations, the RTLB was actively involved, often informing and advising the transition coordinator and/or learning supporting coordinator with respect to students with unique social and/or learning needs. In some situations, the guidance counsellor had a significant role in such areas as supporting students with special needs, class placement, and student testing.

Transition coordinators usually had an allocation of two hours non contact time and a unit of responsibility to fulfil this and their wider Deans role and responsibilities. One large composite school dean had four hours per week non contact time, while the independently funded transition coordinator had five hours for this role.

LINKAGES BETWEEN CONTRIBUTING AND COMPOSITE SCHOOLS

The quality of the relationship between contributing and composite schools is a critical factor in determining the effectiveness of transition programmes for transferring students. Key relationships operating on a number of levels have both a direct and indirect influence on the social/emotional security of transferring students, and in minimising the disruption to their learning due to the transfer and integration process.

Recognition of the critical role played by the teachers of Year 6 transferring students is crucial, not only due to their intimate knowledge of their students, but also due to the relationship they have built with parents, many of whom (particularly for their initial child) have high levels of anxiety in relation to school transfer and integration. Recognition and appropriate use, on the part of composite school personnel, of such relationships is critical and can help pre-empt or minimise student and parental anxiety.

Composite school personnel, including principals, guidance counsellors, deans and heads of learning areas often have working and and/or social relationships with contributing school teachers, but in most instances those interviewed in conjunction with this study indicated that contact was sporadic and often informal: while sound relationships existed, most principals and deans indicated that 'more could be done' with respect to building more formal networks between contribution and composite schools.

As has been previously stated, contribution/composite school relationships are significantly affected by a range of variables including location, school sizes, transport networks, and the number of contributing schools in a community. In many rural centres the location of the composite school is in close proximity to the largest contributing school: such circumstances clearly offer greater potential for building and maintaining strong school linkages.

Limited formal communications networks exist between composite and contributing schools, and few composite schools have a significant degree of interactive contact with contributing schools on a curriculum-related or co-curricular basis. Little joint collective pedagogical learning appears to be shared with primary and composite teaching colleagues. One larger community with a significant number of contributing schools maintains a formal communication network with regular meetings: other forms consultation and association exist, often less formally. Some schools did have shared social activities, sometimes hosted by composite schools.

Other than facility sharing and specific Year 6/7 transition activities, a number of activities were identified where schools shared expertise and/or resources to the mutual benefit of both contributing and composite schools. Examples included:

- ANZAC Day commemorations,
- Technology days/shows,
- Science Fairs, displays, and
- Music exchanges/festivals

Transition coordinators regularly remarked in common on the potential to build on such activities and to extend both formal and informal communication networks. It was noteworthy that interschool visits for the purpose of observing teaching practice and learning programmes was not but should be.

TRANSFER ANXIETY AND SCHOOL AWARENESS

The exact nature of school transfer-related anxiety is clearly a very individual thing, particularly from the perspective of transferring students and their parents. It was clear from school-based discussions that teachers with transition-related responsibilities were keenly aware of the nature of individual needs, and in many cases, had implemented sound practices designed to identify, anticipate and pre-empt anxieties.

This study attempted to draw a distinction between two broad categories of anxiety loosely labelled social/emotional anxiety, and learning-related anxiety. While it is clear that addressing student (and other stakeholder) anxiety in any form or type is necessary, rapid social adjustment to the realities associated with school transfer is the critical factor in preparedness for learning: indeed, addressing social-related anxieties is the most effective strategy to minimise losses that will inevitably occur as a result of school transfer. Issues that can be identified as having a significant component of social anxiety must be prioritised for attention and be a key focus of any transition programme. Some factors are difficult to categorise as either 'social' or 'learning', however such a distinction is largely unimportant given that a degree of social security is an obvious precursor to preparedness for formal learning.

Without exception, all transfer coordinators and the additional teachers and principals who were interviewed, demonstrated a high level of awareness of the anxiety issues that accompany school transfer, and in particular, showed a great deal of empathy in relation to the social aspects of transfer, and the associated negative factors that impact on students. Invariably coordinators stated strongly held views relating to the critical importance of addressing social-related anxieties as a priority, before addressing learning issues, (where it is possible to separately identify student anxieties). Many schools had developed a range of strategies to identify student (and parental) concerns, particularly prior to transfer.

Composite school teachers interviewed for this project identified five broad areas of dominant student anxiety evident in the pre-transfer phase. Again, elements of both social/emotional and learning are evident in each category. No attempt was made to quantify responses in any way, nor is there any significance in the order in which these are presented: the list represents a collective response and summary.

- Composite school factors issues such as:
 - new school location;
 - possible transport changes;
 - school size;
 - site and building complexity; and
 - 'getting lost'.
- Bullying:
 - fear of 'bigger kids';
 - negative myths (often from older siblings);
 - bus-related intimidation; and

- primary peers transferring with existing negative relationships with peers.
- New teachers issues:
 - Who will my teacher be?
 - Will I like them?
 - Will they like me?
 - Comparisons with primary teachers;
 - male/female teacher issues; and
 - Will help be available?
- Curriculum concerns:
 - work being too hard;
 - amount of homework;
 - detentions/punishments;
 - organisational (what do I do if/when ...?; what books do I need ...?);
 - new programmes;
 - subjects;
 - 'hard' tests; and
 - fear of failure.
- Friendship issues:
 - separation from primary peers;
 - making new friends;
 - class allocation;
 - seating plans; and
 - potential loneliness.

'Fear of the unknown' is perhaps an adequate summary of the above, and a useful if somewhat simplistic indication of the focus of any pre-transfer transition activities that inform, demystify and pre-empt concerns.

Other Stakeholder Anxiety

Transition coordinators collectively shared the view that the parents, particularly mothers and teachers of transferring students were unintentionally responsible for heightening levels of student anxiety.

While this issue was not a major focus of this project, acknowledgement of this reality is important, particularly as students are only one of the four groups stakeholders with a vested interest in managing concerns relating to transfer.

Coordinators offered anecdotal evidence of unintentional anxiety raising by primary teachers, particularly in relation to homework quantity, behavioural expectations and work standards/expectations.

Parents also unintentionally elevate levels of concern, particularly in raising issues with children such as 'getting lost' in the new school, who might be a child's teacher, or whether they will have friends (or undesirable primary colleagues) in their class.

Clearly, addressing the unknown and correcting any misinformation with an effective pre-transfer programme is pivotal to minimising such concerns.

PRE-TRANSFER TRANSITION PRACTICES

All schools had a well defined and structured Year 6/7 transition programme, and all programmes included formal pre and post transfer components. In most cases, programmes were well established in terms of timelines, routines, personnel involved and activities undertaken. Composite schools clearly made a committed and extensive effort to implement often progressive programmes in as seamless a manner as possible for the benefit of transferring students.

Pre-transfer programmes essentially focused on three major categories of activities: the form, function and scale of these varied considerably in the various composite school environments. The three categories can be summarised as:

- Initial contact procedures,
- Visits to contributing schools (composite school personnel to primary schools), and
- Visits to composite schools (for parents and students in the form of open days/evenings; orientation visits).

Some composite schools had enrolment schemes, necessitating some additional administrative work in association with Year 7 enrolments. A small number of composite schools also catered for significant enrolment for Year 9 students in communities with Year 5-8 primary schools.

Initial Contact Procedures:

- Timeframe: ranged from late Term 2 to mid Term 3.
- Prospectuses usually issued at this point, often facilitated through the contributing schools to Year 6 parents.
- Letters to parents usually accompanied the issue of prospectuses, outlining details of the transition programme (see examples).
- Programme of visits for liaison, testing etc, to contributing schools established.
- Composite school newsletters also issued in some situations.

Visits to Contributing Schools:

- Timeframe: while the majority of visits occur in Term 4, it is difficult to generalise due to factors such as the number of contributing schools (up to 9), number of students enrolling from a primary school etc.
- Arrangements made regarding the issue and collection of parent and student surveys, student information provided by teachers. (see examples).
- Testing: most composite schools undertake some testing in the contributing school environment, usually late in Term 4. The nature of composite school initiated testing varied considerably: some testing did occur in primary schools.
- Supplementary visits: for example, Learning Support/Special Needs teachers may visit specific students and meet with parents where difficulty with transition and integration is anticipated for any reason.
- Composite school staff, and in particular Transition Coordinators, often spend time with Year 6 students, introducing themselves and the composite school providing information and answering questions. Principals and ex-pupils from composite schools may participate in such visits.
- Enrolments are either taken on visits to contributing schools, or collated by them and forwarded to composite schools, or done independently by parents.

Visit to Composite Schools

- Open Evenings: For either parents separately, or with Year 6 students. Pre and post transition information is provided; school tours, classroom visits/meetings (sometimes in class groups with a Year 7 teacher); course information, uniform details outlined.
- Open Days: as for open evenings, but with strong focus on Year 6 students; 'sample' lessons/a secondary school timetable experience; sometimes being with Year 7 teacher; current Year 7 (or older) students often included as guides, mentors etc. (some have written to younger primary school colleagues). One school has a sports day to integrate students from all contributing schools. These activities were often repeated two or three times to cope with numbers and ensure personal attention. (see examples).

POST TRANSFER PRACTICES

Schools also shared a broad commonality of approach regarding activities undertaken to support newly enrolled Year 7 students: again there was also considerable variation in the nature of these practices in the eight composite schools.

Seven broad categories were identified as being central components of post transfer programmes, including:

- Letters to students and parents (prior to Day 1 for Year 7);
- Induction programmes (for Day 1-2, Week 1 Year 7);
- Parent/Student interviews;
- Class/Year Level meetings;
- Year 7 Camps;
- Surveys (student, parent and other feedback); and
- Peer Support programmes.

Post transfer testing could also be included as an essential part of post transfer transition programmes:

1. **Written Communication**

Many schools communicate with the parents of incoming students in the days/weeks immediately prior to the commencement of the school year. For most schools, such contact is at least the second formal written communication, the first outlining something of the overall transition programme, and includes (or separately) information regarding student pre-transfer testing, arrangements for visits to composite schools, open meetings etc. In some instances, such letters confirm details re student class placement, Homeroom/Form Teacher introductions and allocations, and Day 1 / Week 1 details. Some schools include details for parental visit/interviews, and arrangements for Term 1 activities such as class meetings, camps etc. In some cases letters were highly personalised and very student specific, as distinct to generic letters only.

2. **Day 1 Programmes**

The first day for incoming Year 7 students was invariably a day without other students present. Programmes specifically designed for students are implemented, usually based around the Homeroom/Form Teacher. Most schools delay the arrival of all Year 7 students, choosing to meet students and their parents in an interview situation, helping to address social and learning issues on an individual basis. Many schools hold barbeques at this time to build parental networks, and encourage new parents to visit the composite school. Many schools have senior students present to support incoming students; many have been trained in Peer Support Programmes and many have been involved with Year 7 students prior to transfer.

3. **Parent / Student Interviews**

Many schools used some form of personalised parent interview within the transition programme, usually opting for interviews either prior to, or post transfer. Two schools used senior staff and the Transition Coordinator in pre-transfer interviews at the point of enrolment, while other schools

focussed on a Homeroom / Form Teacher and class approach, where parents and students conferenced immediately prior to, or at the start of Term 1. Generally teachers with Learning Support or specialist pastoral care responsibilities were involved on a case specific bases, on referral from the transition Coordinator or RTLB.

4. Class/Level Meetings

All schools were offering class and/or year level parent meetings in some form during Term 1. Such situations were usually designed to communicate with parents collectively and focussed in a general sense on both post transfer social integration of students, and clarified learning expectations. Arrangements for upcoming camps were also often discussed. Opportunities for formal feedback from parents and students was primarily catered for by surveys in some schools.

5. Year 7 Camps

Some schools run a camp for Year 7 students; these all occur at some point in Term 1 and range from very early, to very late in the term. These multi-night camps, often supported by parents and for senior students, are held in specialist camp environments, and range from two to four nights. Camps are either class based, or multi-class (and up to whole Year 7 level) in scale, dependant on school preference, resourcing and social issues.

The school offering the earliest Year 7 camp experience, does this on a class by class basis in weeks 2, 3 and 4 of Term 1: they feel that the timing and nature of these camps is a critical factor in ensuring an effective social transition for Year 7 students. Some schools offer outdoor education activities that are day based, focussed on socially integrating new students.

As with most transition activities, identifying any effectiveness measure that camps have on the success of student integration is extremely difficult. Transition Coordinators all indicated that in their subjective judgement and based on the range of parental feedback received, that camps were a critical component in the post transfer programme.

6. Peer Support Programmes

Many composite schools effectively utilise both younger and older students within transition programmes. Younger students assist through visits to contributing schools they have attended, writing letters to known students in contributing schools, acting as guides for transition events hosted by composite schools, or in some 'buddy' type programmes.

Senior students, often having undertaken training in programmes such as Peer Support or, school-based variations on this, are involved as Year 7 Camp leaders and supporters, buddies (allocated to students on an individual, group or class basis), tutors to in reading and mathematics and in group-based integration programmes, often involving sports or recreation activities.

Feedback from Transition Coordinators again indicates that there is considerable variation in the nature and extent of other student involvement,

but Coordinators consistently spoke of the importance and success of their role within the wider transition programme.

7. Evaluation Surveys

Most schools undertake some form of formal evaluation of their transition programmes, but the extent and depth of this appears to be variable. Making a judgement based on the adequacy of the surveys generously provided by some Transition Coordinators is highly problematic given all the variables affecting transition programmes. However some excellent examples of both parent and student surveys were made available.

Consultation with primary schools regarding both the effectiveness of transition programmes and the progress of transferred students is minimal and rarely formal.

Feedback from parents is sought at variable points of the year; it would seem appropriate that feedback on a range of transition –related issues should be sought at both the end of Term 1, and the end of Year 7. While such feedback must by necessity often be qualitative and subjective, and difficult to process, it is essential to incorporate the views of the critical stakeholders in any evaluation of transition programmes.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Without exception, the eight composite schools that contributed to this study, demonstrated a high level of awareness of, and empathy for the concerns that students, and other stakeholders, held in relation to school transfer. While National Administration Guideline 5 (emotional and physical safety of students) was never specifically discussed, it was clear that the principals enshrined in this, were of prime importance to composite school staff involved in Year 6/7 transition programmes.

All schools had comprehensive transition programmes in place, particularly in the broad areas of the social aspects of transition. While there were clear areas where a high degree of programme commonality was evident, every school programme also had a degree of uniqueness attributable to a broad range of demographic, locational, community and educational factors.

Transition Coordinators invariably demonstrated that implementing an effective transition programme was of critical importance within the challenges of their wider job description; all coordinators were committed to creating a caring and supportive learning environment for transferring students.

All schools felt that they were effective in the provision of transition programmes that identified and addressed the concerns of Year 6 students and their parents, and that their programmes minimised student anxiety as much as possible: they clearly felt and stated that addressing 'social' related anxieties was their highest priority. Successfully addressing this priority was necessary to create the desired learning environment for Year 7 students.

A significant number of Transition Coordinators and principals acknowledged that considerably more could be done in terms of liaison with contributing schools in the broad area of student learning, that would minimise and further reduce the disruption to student learning caused by school transfer. Clearly measurement in any form of the impact of learning disruption or discontinuity is highly problematic. Student learning is clearly affected to some degree by normal year level progression to new teachers and curriculum demands within either primary or composite schools. Identifying the added impact of school transfer to this relies heavily on anecdotal information and the subjective views of all stakeholders.

Few schools had established formal networks inclusive of the contributing and composite schools. When these did exist, all parties expressed some reservations as to the effectiveness of their association. Regular (once a term?) meetings, with agenda programmes covering such issues as student transfer and transition, treatment of the new New Zealand Curriculum, (and the Key Competencies in particular), professional development commitments, pedagogical priorities, pastoral care initiatives, study and homework strategies, and parent reporting and communication strategies are among obvious areas where school coordination would benefit all stakeholders. Communities typified by the surveyed schools are sufficiently small enough to expect that there would be a high degree of consultation,

commonality and agreement around educational programmes to the benefit of all stakeholders.

Interschool visits also offer the potential to minimise learning disruption through visits to the classes and teachers of the composite school (and vice versa): this would invariably result in a better appreciation of the learning environment for students and the related preparatory and continuity needs. It was clear from discussions that very few such visits are made. Primary teachers in particular undertaking such visits would be in a strong position to better complement transition programmes, particularly in the areas of addressing parental and student concerns prior to transfer.

The exchange of student social and academic information between schools clearly occurs to a level that is satisfactory to Transition Coordinators in the individual schools. Some noted however, that there was scope for improvement in this area: some schools access and process more comprehensive data than others. Many Coordinators felt that while detailed information regarding transferring students was often provided for Year 7 teachers, this was not always used to the maximum advantage. Clearly Year 7 teachers, and in particular Home/Form teachers, can minimise both the social and learning costs of transfer by 'knowing' their students in advance, and having fair and informed expectations of their learning abilities. Some excellent examples of student data gathered from primary schools was seen, and if used appropriately, would do much to ease the disruption caused by school transfer. Many schools noted that improvements could be made in the related areas of gathering student information, and in the use made of this by composite school teachers.

The review of the effectiveness of transition programmes was undertaken by most schools, but reviews appeared to be irregular and often failed to involve contributing school personnel. Again, there were some excellent examples of student surveys, (some done at intervals over the year) but there appeared to be reliance in many instances on anecdotal feedback from parents, other than the valid feedback teachers would receive at year level and/or form class meetings.

Some schools used junior and/or senior students extensively in transition programmes, an area worthy of further consideration for all transition programmes.

Any recommendations stated above have been implied rather than stated explicitly, and have been presented in generalities. While more detailed recommendations would have been in many ways preferable, the intent is to assist composite schools with any review of current transition practices, and to respond to broad if implied suggestions in a manner that best suits the uniqueness of their school and education community's situation.

The overall standard of the transition programmes implemented by composite schools was also such that providing explicit and specific recommendations was not necessary. The many examples of good or excellent practice represented in the following selected resources will also assist in any review and transition programme improvement.

TRANSITION PROGRAMME RESOURCES

Most Transition Coordinators provided resources used in their transition programmes, and indicated a willingness to have these made available as part of this report, subject to school and personal anonymity.

The resources are a representative selection from these and reflect the writers views of 'sound practice', given that all such materials are very school and situation specific.

The resources include examples of:

- Transition Programmes;
- Year 7 entrant/transfer information (teacher, student, parent);
- Orientation visit information;
- Post-transfer surveys;
- Learning-related information;
- Parent/student newsletters; and
- Other.

If you would like copies of these resources please contact the writer:
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