

# CHAPTER 4:

## Beyond the immediate transition: supporting students over the longer term

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

### Support beyond the Immediate Transition

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*continued ...*

... continued

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

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

## Supporting Students' Ongoing Progress at School

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Important attributes to foster in students were identified as:

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

Student reports on when they learned best or least well<sup>23</sup> complemented the points made by teachers in relation to students gaining a sense of a clear pathway through their schooling. For example, according to the students some of the key elements for when they 'learned best' included: good teaching, incorporating timely feedback and help when they were experiencing difficulties; a positive relationship with the teacher; learning that was interesting, new, relevant and fun; and feeling confident in their ability to handle the work in class.

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

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

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

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

## Support for Teachers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

and needs, and overall progress and achievement;

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

And, as well as these and a range of other

*Dealing with behavioural issues can be especially challenging.*

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

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

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

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

RTLB in a secondary school

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

Year 9 teacher

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

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

RTLB in a secondary school

*Beginning teachers can have their own 'transition issues'.*

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

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

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

Year 9 beginning teacher

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

## Summary Comments

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

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

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

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

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