

CHAPTER 5:

Communication and exchange across the sectors

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A significant overall message to emerge from our study is that teachers are often not sure 'what happens' in the other sectors and require (more) opportunities to gain greater understanding of the ways in which their colleagues work. This message is reinforced by findings reported by McGee et al in their review of the transitions literature and other recent research (eg, Hughes et al, 2008; Whitelaw, 2008).

More specifically, primary, intermediate and secondary teachers need to know more about each others':

- approaches to teaching and learning in class;
- perspectives on the curriculum and on lesson content;
- ways of interacting with and getting to know students of different ages and stages;
- ways of interacting with and getting to know parents, families and community leaders;
- overall philosophies for teaching and learning, behaviour management, and for fostering students' emotional and social development.

Despite, or because of, the lack of certainty about what happens in the other sectors, there was considerable agreement among participants in our study that structured, frequent and collegial communication between primary, intermediate and

secondary schools is critical in creating the best possible transition for students and helping them maintain a strong sense of purpose throughout their schooling.

But while there was recognition of the importance of stronger links between schools, teachers, and students in each sector, such as cooperative information-sharing for facilitating a 'seamless' progression in student learning, it was also often perceived as difficult to achieve in practice.

Lack of resources (eg, release days to enable across-school visiting to occur), being personally too busy with everyday teaching duties, feeling overwhelmed by the task when the secondary school receives students from a large number of feeder schools, and historical division between primary and secondary teachers were the key factors identified as preventing better links and knowledge-sharing with the other sectors.

Teachers who'd had the opportunity to observe or work in the other sector(s) were enthusiastic about the benefits.

In contrast to these identified difficulties, however, teachers who had had the opportunity to observe or even more valuably spend some time working in the other sector(s) were enthusiastic about the benefits of this. They felt that it enabled them to better understand the broader and ongoing needs of their students, and better understand the ways in which teachers in different situations from

themselves worked. They felt too that these experiences helped them communicate more effectively and make links across the sectors that were beneficial for everyone.

As well as cross-sector links to increase understanding and knowledge about the curriculum and about different pedagogies, study

participants referred specifically to the compiling, sharing and using of information about the strengths and needs of the students they have in common. This particular aspect of communication and exchange across the sectors is discussed further on the next page.

McGee et al (2003) found that:

- New Zealand research suggests that primary–secondary school liaison/cooperation around transition is disappointingly infrequent.
- Overseas findings show that liaison between primary and secondary schools is often viewed with suspicion by teachers.
- [Students'] previous experience or achievement is often disregarded by secondary schools.
- Researchers who have reported that student attainment is negatively affected by transition variously attribute this to secondary teachers repeating topics already studied at primary school, ignoring or distrusting information from feeder (primary) schools, teaching to the lowest common denominator, discontinuity in and ignorance of each others' schemes of work and teaching strategies and failure to build on the work of primary school. Large numbers of feeder schools compounded these problems.
- One of the issues facing secondary teachers is how much they want to know or should know about their students coming from primary school. It has been found that teachers at overseas secondary schools often favour a 'fresh start' approach, and, faced with children from a variety of schools, tend to start everyone off at the same place, regardless of previous achievement.
- The degree to which teachers build on students' previous achievement varies from school to school and subject to subject. It also seems that much of students' previous work is often undervalued, which may result in unrealistic limits being set on what they can achieve in the early years of secondary school.
- Studies have found that many students are surprised to find academic work in their first year of secondary school no harder, or easier, than in their final primary year. [This can contribute] to students becoming increasingly negative (eg, disillusionment about lack of academic challenge) about their school work as the year progresses.
- As well as the issue of continuity in individual student learning from year to year, there is the related issue of **curriculum continuity**. International data (plus anecdotal evidence within New Zealand) suggest that among teachers there is often a perception that there is a primary

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school curriculum and a secondary school curriculum, in spite of a national curriculum in place designed to ensure continuity across the two sectors.

- Little use is made of standardised achievement measures. Many secondary teachers prefer to apply their own entry assessment tests.
- Continuity of peer group appears to be associated with continuity of achievement. Low achievers at primary/intermediate schools may do better with a new peer group at secondary school.

Sharing Information about Individual Students

Almost all teachers agreed as a general principle that it was or would be valuable for secondary schools to receive information about:

- students' academic achievement up until they arrive at secondary school;
- any learning or behavioural difficulties they might have;
- any particular factors that should be taken into account when dealing with the student, such as a history of abuse or a recent death in the family.

Many primary teachers also wished to pass on more general information about students' personalities and all-round needs and abilities, in order to help the secondary school cater appropriately to the individual needs of each student. Some also suggested that it would be valuable for secondary schools to contact primary schools for added insights if they were having difficulty dealing with individual Year 9 students. A number of secondary teachers indicated that they too would welcome such information.

Issues and Concerns Regarding Student Information

Although there was a general feeling that better communication and information-sharing between

the sectors was highly desirable, most respondents also expressed concerns about this.

Systems for transferring information about individual students often appear to be ad hoc and variable in nature. Some secondary schools request specific information from primary schools, either through forms or interviews with the teachers or both. Others rely on receiving whatever information their feeder primary schools choose to send them.

Systems for exchanging information about students often appear to be ad hoc in nature.

And while it appears that some primary schools have particular systems in place to transfer information about students to secondary schools, others do not. Similarly, whereas some secondary schools may be especially effective at ensuring that information received from feeder schools is passed on to teachers as appropriate, others appear less able to do this.

There were as well different views about how student information should be used. For example, a number of the secondary teachers believed that it was appropriate for deans and senior management to have access to information from primary or intermediate schools about individual students, but that it was best for classroom teachers to start with a 'clean slate'. In particular, some secondary

teachers questioned the objectivity and accuracy of the information received from primary schools.

Conversely, while acknowledging what they saw to be the difficulties and constraints for secondary

There were concerns about the extent to which student information was disseminated and used.

teachers, participating Year 8 teachers expressed concerns about the extent to which the information they compiled about each of their Year 8 students to pass on to secondary schools was disseminated and used.

As illustration, a couple of primary teachers noted that they had prepared portfolios or reports for secondary schools about individual students, only to visit some months later to see the portfolios sitting in an untouched pile in the office. This highlights the importance of communication between schools so that teachers agree on the data that will be useful, and do not waste precious time and effort preparing unwanted material.

And another primary teacher reported specifically advising a secondary school that a group of students did not work well together and should be separated, only to find that the students all ended up in the same form class in Year 9. She stated that the group of students went on to have significant behavioural and discipline troubles.

Others expressed concerns about Year 9 class placement in terms of students' prior achievement.

There was particular reference to the difficulties involved in the effective transfer of information when, as in most cases, there is not simply a situation of one primary and one secondary school, but, instead, a group of schools involved in the transition process. The transfer of individual student information is therefore made more

complex because each Year 8 teacher has students going to several different secondary schools and secondary schools often receive students from a wide range of feeder schools.

From the secondary school point of view, dealing with a wide variety of information delivered in different formats was logistically difficult and sometimes beyond the scope of their resources. Several secondary school teachers commented that although information about the individual students had been gathered, the deans did not always have the time to take account of that information when selecting classes, for example, or to ensure that vital information was passed on to classroom teachers.

Overall, it was evident that there is often insufficient communication across the

sectors about the desired nature and extent of shared information about students and how it can best be used. On the one hand, primary participants were saying that they often spent considerable time and effort compiling comprehensive information about students for their destination secondary schools which they felt went largely unheeded, while on the other hand secondary respondents were saying that when information was provided it tended not to be in a form that, for a range of reasons, they could realistically use.

Davey's story (Case Study 10) draws attention to the regular, informed, insightful communication between teachers, between schools, and between parents and schools that needs to occur for the ongoing welfare of students.

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Questions to Consider

- **Primary/intermediate schools:** What do we most want Year 9 teachers to take into account when they begin the year with our former students? In what form can we best convey the information we want the secondary school to know about students? Do we know what information the secondary schools would be most likely to use— that is, how much student information they want from us and in what form?
- **Secondary schools:** Primary schools are usually keen to pass on helpful information about their (Year 8) students. What guidance can we provide for the nature and extent of the information we would like them to provide — that is, information that we would use in practice? Do we need to re-think the value of material supplied by primary/intermediate schools (eg, portfolios) that we don't currently take into account?

All schools:

- Thinking about it from a student's point of view, are we aware of what they would or would not want teachers/schools to pass on about them?
- From a parental point of view, are we aware of what information they would feel should or should not be shared about their children? What might be their reasons?
- Other than essential details regularly collected by schools, is there additional information we should obtain from parents, to better inform our work with students? Are there effective procedures in place for this to happen?

Case Study 10: Communicating about students at risk

Studies such as Wylie et al's (2008) *Competent Learners @ 16* (a recently completed phase of the longitudinal study *Competent Children, Competent Learners*) have noted that some of the students at particular 'risk' of poor outcomes are those who arrive at secondary school with established patterns of low achievement and who mostly continue to find class work too challenging. They may also show social or behavioural difficulties, although not necessarily.

In Year 8, Davey was a lonely, troubled boy who said that he had no friends at school and only an occasional, usually younger, playmate outside of school. Davey was achieving reasonably well in maths but had real difficulty with reading and writing. He found it very difficult to concentrate for long and when tasks became too difficult (or he perceived them to be) he would usually give up, sometimes feigning sickness so he could either leave school early for the day or not attend at all.

Although Davey often said he 'hated' school and his subjects and couldn't see the point of them other comments suggested that this was bravado and that he *did* want to succeed and do well. He even had tentative goals for his future.

His parent was very concerned and anxious about Davey's progress at school and kept in regular contact with his school, although for much of his schooling she often did not feel she was 'heard'. However, she was very pleased with Davey's teacher in Year 8, who provided a lot of mentoring for Davey and coached him in his favourite sport — the only activity in fact that Davey expressed any enthusiasm for. She felt that Davey was happier at school than he had ever been and that he was beginning to make some real progress with his school work, albeit still with a lot of catching up to do. Although they did not include Davey amongst their friends, most of his Year 8 classmates had responded to encouragement from the teacher to tolerate Davey's differences and not make trouble for him.

Davey's parent was very worried about the transition to secondary school: she felt that Davey would not cope well with what she expected would be more difficult academic work, feared he would no longer have a particular teacher to keep an eye on him in the way that he needed, and foresaw that she herself would not know who to contact when she wanted to talk over concerns about Davey.

Contrary to expectations, at first Davey made a positive transition to secondary school, saying in term 1 that he now had a few friends to spend time with at lunchtimes. He still said much of his class work 'sucked' and that his hand hurt a lot from all the writing in class (he found writing physically demanding and was very slow at it), but at the same time he identified some topics and activities in his various classes that he was enjoying and considered he was doing 'all right' at.

But as the year progressed, Davey found his class-work increasingly difficult. He particularly disliked homework which both he and his parent said took 'hours' to do, a source of considerable stress for them both. Davey reverted more and more to his avoidance tactics, including staying away from school, sometimes with pretend sickness, but also quite often due to genuine headaches.

In addition, Davey stated that he wanted to leave school as soon as possible (while at the same time contradicting himself by saying he did not want to fail 'graduation' to Year 10).

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His early friendships lessened and a particular blow for Davey was hearing that due to a health problem he could not play his favourite sport for at least a year. (He had joined a team at secondary school, actively encouraged and enabled to do so by his former Year 8 teacher who still coached him, and had earned a special award at school for his contribution to the team which he was very proud about, an unusual feeling for Davey). But when he could no longer play his sport, Davey became more negative about everything, much to the anxiety of a parent who felt that no-one seemed able to help her son get on a path to a positive future. She did not feel that the information about Davey passed on from his primary school had been taken into account, suggesting that Davey's form and other teachers may not even have been aware of it at all.

By the end of Year 9, Davey was reported by his teachers to be losing ground. No particular strategies had been devised for him in order to help address his problems.

Important Overall Reasons for Effective Information Sharing across School Sectors

As identified earlier, there are a range of reasons to support strengthening communication and links among and across teachers in the different sectors. Some of the key ones are discussed in a little more detail below.

Continuity of Curriculum and Pedagogies: Understanding Work within the Other Sector

Teacher awareness and understanding of the sorts of pedagogies colleagues in the other sector use and of how they impart the curriculum is fundamental if students are to have the best possible

Student learning pathways are facilitated when teachers in the different sectors have current knowledge and understanding of each other's pedagogies and approach to the curriculum.

opportunities to gain a sense of continuity throughout their schooling.

The New Zealand Curriculum for English-medium teaching and learning in Years 1–13 document (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.44) outlines five learning pathways: early childhood, Years 1 to 6, Years 7 to 10, Years 11 to 13, and

tertiary education. These learning pathways each exhibit unique foci and attributes, while at the same time providing for smooth and positive transitions between each stage of learning: '... students ... should find that each stage of the journey prepares them for and connects well with the next. ...' (p.44).

Of particular relevance to the primary to secondary schooling transition, the curriculum document states in respect of the Years 7 to 10 learning pathway that:

'A responsive curriculum will recognise that students in these years are undergoing rapid physical development, becoming increasingly socially aware, and encountering increasingly complex curriculum contexts. Particularly important are positive relationships with adults, opportunities for students to be involved in the communities, and authentic learning experiences.

"I think what is really important is making the link with the New Zealand curriculum framework from the [other sector's] perspective. ... Somehow we have to free up teachers ... to build relationships with our contributing schools."
Year 9 teacher

Students' learning progress is closely linked to their ongoing development of literacy and numeracy skills. These continue to require focused teaching.'

There were participants in the study who commented similarly. Also, Blatchford et al (2008, p.29) stated that ...'curriculum continuity has been shown to play a key role in successful transition.

The development of consistent policies relating to the quality and quantity of transfer of information is needed, as are strategies to help teachers take account of pupils' prior learning and special needs. These strategies should not be restricted to core subjects'

A Ministry of Education (2002, p.16) report regarding transitions between learning settings²⁵ states that:

'...as students progress through school, they face increasingly complex text material that is expository in structure. It is this more complex structure that [can cause] problems for young high school readers. Some are able to read the stories in their "readers" but not their content textbooks, which contain a more extensive vocabulary and concept load and require more background knowledge.'

'...Transition is a process whereby the domains of inquiry that students engage in become segregated into distinct fields of knowledge. Students in transition from primary to secondary school [can] find that, at secondary school, content areas quickly become technical, topics and vocabulary are often unfamiliar, and text appears in new forms.'

The report further indicates that students often need help with the different literacy demands they encounter at secondary school but that, instead, of being taught how to deal with the more complex information by developing information skills, information may simply be passed on to students (involving students spending 'a great deal of their time copying information from books or classroom boards').

Key strategies emphasised in the report for addressing this issue included: 'careful planning between sectors' [eg, by]: 'visit[ing] local contributing schools, [to] ... learn about the learning environment'; and 'access to and use of information about learning [at different stages]'. Case study schools in the project also referred to the need to ensure that there is an explicit focus on developing and extending students' literacy skills as part of primary to secondary schooling transition programmes.

²⁵ This was part of the Ministry's Literacy Leadership in New Zealand Schools Years 9–13 work (for more information go to <http://literacyonline.tki.org.nz/>).

How Well Students have been Doing in Particular Subjects

As well as having information about individual student progress to hand, knowledge of overall

Knowledge of patterns of achievement can help better focus efforts with students.

patterns of student achievement can help teachers better focus their efforts when working with students.

The IEA Third International Mathematics and Science Study

(TIMSS)²⁶, for example, indicates that many students in New Zealand schools are largely in a 'holding pattern' for mathematics between Year 5 and Year 9 — that is, they do not show as much movement across curriculum levels as might be expected during this period, for whatever reason. This is perhaps why, amongst students in our study, their mathematics scores suffered the greatest decline following transition²⁷, emphasising the rather 'vulnerable' state of their maths mastery.

The following findings from our transition study also suggest that prior patterns of low achievement are likely to endure over time unless specific steps are taken to 'diagnose' and overcome any gaps in the knowledge, skills, and attributes that students possess that could hinder effective learning.

Findings from our transition study

- While asTTle results showed good achievement gains for most students by the end of Year 9, there was need for concern about some students' learning and achievement, particularly those students in the lowest achievement quartile in mathematics. Between the

end of Year 9 and early in Year 10 students in the bottom achievement quartile for mathematics had the lowest rate of progress.

- The gap between the high and low achieving students in mathematics widened at secondary school.
- Although students' achievement scores fluctuated over the four phases of the study, around half of the students who were in the bottom quartile in one or more of mathematics, reading or writing in Year 10 had also been achieving in the bottom quartile in Year 8.
- Two-thirds of the students achieving in the top quartile in mathematics and reading in Year 10, and half of the students in writing, had also been high achievers in Year 8.
- The high achievers in mathematics and reading were more consistent in their achievement patterns than other students. Around half of the high achieving students in mathematics or reading consistently achieved in the top quartile across all four phases of the study.

A number of teachers also noted that some students were not being sufficiently challenged following transition.

Students' Experiences of Assessment

Students' understanding of what is required in assessments can affect how well they perform.

Secondary teachers and deans observed that Year 9 students often became very anxious when first faced with more formal test situations that they hadn't encountered at primary or intermediate school. And although some of the Year 8 teachers

²⁶ See Chamberlain (2007).

²⁷ For more information about participating students' achievement in mathematics (and in reading and writing) refer to our previous report *Students' Achievement as they Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling*.

tried to give their students some advance experience of 'secondary school-type tests', they felt that being more informed themselves about secondary school assessments, both generally and in different subject areas, would have helped them prepare the students more effectively.

In particular, it was noted that it is important to be aware that students, especially early on at secondary school, need clear explanations of how tests relate to what they are learning in class, and help to understand what skills and concepts — from previous as well as current learning — they need to bring in order to prepare well.

Special Needs, including Literacy, and Emotional, Health or Behavioural Issues

There was concern that students with special or extra needs would struggle to adapt to new systems at secondary school, and that this difficulty could be compounded by the secondary school either not having prior information about these students' individual needs, or not having systems in place to ensure that the information was passed on to relevant teachers so that it could be acted upon in good time.

As well, there were reports of students whose previous support systems, such as a reader/writer in place at primary school, did not carry on automatically at secondary school, making transition extra difficult for these students.

Other evidence too indicates that, overall, certain groups of students may be at greater risk of unsatisfactory schooling outcomes than others. For example, in common with other studies we found that Pasifika students were over represented in the bottom quartile for reading. They were slightly more likely to be in the bottom quartile for mathematics than students from other ethnic groups and were not present at all in the top quartile for this subject. This was the case before

and after transition. Findings of this sort suggest a particular need for collaboration in order to effectively analyse and address barriers to the students' learning and achievement.

A primary teacher provided an example of good collaboration, describing how the local secondary school had sought her input to design a special programme for one of her former students which catered to his strengths in practical rather than academic subjects. She felt this had been successful in supporting his self-confidence and ensuring he was focused on schoolwork rather than disrupting classes.

Class Placement

Prior information about students' social networks and development can be as important for placing students in appropriate classes as information about their learning and achievement.

Following transition, students often find that they have few, if any, of their former friends in the same classes as themselves. The views of students in our study about this situation were divided, however, emphasising one aspect of the challenge for schools in attempting to achieve the best class placements for individual students.

More than half of students were either glad to have some of their previous year's friends or classmates in their Year 9 classes, or were sad that they had not. However, around a third of students didn't mind either way, and just over a tenth of students preferred *not* to have previous friends with them, primarily because they tended to distract one another from their learning in class. Thus in cases like this, the transition represented a potential

Prior information about students' social networks and development can be as important for placing students in appropriate classes as achievement data.

opportunity for students to escape from troublesome social interactions which they weren't able to handle effectively.

But it was also pointed out by a number of participating teachers that the logistics of taking individual student information of this nature into account as fully as might be desired is problematic, especially when a secondary school's Year 9 students come from a considerable number of feeder schools.

Participating deans for instance stated that while they might try as hard as they could to take into account advice from one feeder school that two of their students needed to be in separate classes, they

often found themselves having to simultaneously consider perhaps even more compelling recommendations from other feeder schools about certain students. The end result could be that the first two students mentioned did, nevertheless, end up in the same class — usually simply because there were not enough different classes to accommodate every request about desired groupings.

Despite identified difficulties, there was still overall agreement that it is extremely worthwhile continuing to try and find workable solutions to this ever-present challenge.

On the basis of the available research evidence, McGee et al stated:

- Primary schools rarely seek feedback about the success of their students once they go on to secondary schooling, but in cases where this has happened, the information gained has been used successfully to modify and develop teaching programmes in order to raise achievement standards.
- It has been found that secondary teachers find it difficult to find a starting point for students with different kinds of educational background; this is compounded by having students from several contributing schools.
- Achievement information forwarded by primary and intermediate schools has been found to be a helpful supplement to secondary schools' diagnostic testing of new students for appropriate placement.

Other Evidence on the Importance of Cross-sector Links

Results of an 18-month evaluation of three pilot initiatives in Scotland which aimed to improve the transition between primary and secondary school (The Scottish Executive Education Department, 2007) indicated that 'it was not so much the precise model that affected the smooth running and success of the projects, but other factors and processes, [including] issues related to staffing, the importance of cross-sector liaison and interchange, effective communication, and the ability of the pilots to be flexible and responsive.'

Key findings included:

- Staff (other than key project staff) 'should be given control over their level of involvement — asking for volunteers will attract those most committed to cross-sector working';
- 'Transitions projects can be used to enhance/improve existing transitions arrangements and cross-sector relationships. This can lead to more effective teaching in both sectors, and also provides pupils with some familiarity with secondary work and at least one teacher when they arrive [in Year 9];'
- 'A well-specified, purposeful observation period should work both ways, with teachers from each sector observing in the other; this leads to true reciprocity of learning from each others' teaching methods';
- 'Projects should build in adequate time for discussion and feedback between primary and secondary teachers'; and '[Cross-sector] social events can successfully improve communication'.

Summary Comments

- In addition to recognising the importance of social integration for students during and after transition, it is equally important to know about and give recognition to transitioning students' prior learning and achievement in order to ensure optimal 'starting' points for the resumption of their studies at secondary school.
- Meeting students' ongoing needs within the framework set for the overall class also requires knowing as much as possible about the individual student, including awareness and understanding of their broader skills, knowledge and interests, as well as specific strengths and weaknesses.
- This has implications for the sorts of information about students that is passed between primary and secondary schools and for how and when that information is used.
- Evidence that some new Year 9 students were finding their work in certain subjects too difficult while other students were not finding it challenging enough is a particularly compelling reason for very good communication between the sectors regarding students.
- Also, the evidence that students are increasingly likely to disengage from aspects of their schooling as they move through the 'middle years' (Years 7 to 10), emphasises the need for teachers and schools in each sector to understand how different approaches to

and understandings about the curriculum, and different pedagogies, may impact on students' attitudes to subjects, their ongoing motivation to learn, and their levels of achievement and progress.

- Although it is always likely to be complex to achieve, continuing to strive for the best possible class placement for students is highly

desirable, as the overall dynamics of a given class with its particular mix of students and teacher(s) can have a powerful impact on every individual within that class.

For all of the above reasons, and more, it is important to foster improved links between schools and teachers in the different sectors.