

Transition in Action:

Targeting students with difficulties transitioning from Year 8 to Year 9

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ABSTRACT

Research identifies that a percentage of students are less successful than others in transitioning from Year 8 to Year 9. A positive support programme was developed to target some of these students and help them ease from the nurturing climate within the primary system into the multi-faceted secondary environment.

Practice paper

KEYWORDS:

Transition to schools, transition programme.

BACKGROUND

Transitioning from primary schools to secondary can be problematic. Annie Overton (a Group Special Education Advisor) and I shared concerns about 'fragile' students at risk of surviving the transition from Year 8 into Year 9 in an urban co-ed high school. A potential slip in attitude, attendance and attainment is supported in literature (Deemer, McCotter & Smith, 2003; Foster, 1998; Graham & Hill, 2003; Hawk & Hill, 2001; Kent, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 1987; McGee, 1989; McGee, Ward, Gibbons & Harlow, 2003; Myatt, 2002; Sellman, 2000; Smith & Lee, 2002; Sutton, 2000). We turned this discussion into a four-session transition programme and a student booklet called *Getting Started at High School*. The programme sits well with Ruth Sutton's analogy of a 'social/personal bridge' in her book *Year 8 to Year 9: Overcoming the muddle in the middle* (2000). It provides an opportunity to help some students be less daunted crossing this bridge and assists them to realise that they have already successfully managed other changes.

Who were these students facing difficulties? Based on our cumulative experience, and with the collaboration of some principals from the contributing schools, we identified a group of 'fragile students'. We targeted Year 8 students who were Māori or Pasifika students (members of school populations known to be at risk), had RTL involvement during the year or consistently demonstrated any of the following characteristics:

- social skills (loners/acting out)
- no social independence
- difficulties with independent learning
- exhibited poor organisational skills
- learning/moderate behavioural difficulties.

Combinations of Year 8 teachers, special education needs coordinators, team leaders and deputy principals selected potential participants. One school involved parents in their decision making. We took all identified students. The number of students submitted for inclusion in the 'Increasing Success' programme in term four in 2002 to 2004 highlighted the importance in helping students manage the transition process.

Enough students were identified to form four groups and comprised 20-26 percent of the Year 9 intake. One principal described selection as "a kind of fence at the top rather than an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff". School groups were kept together and limited to eight to 10 students to enable open communication between us and the students. Anecdotal data was collected on students and any special considerations, such as the presence of their primary school teacher aide or their hearing support person. Participation in the programme was contingent on a caregiver/parent's permission.

All sessions were held away from a formal classroom to help provide a relaxed common environment free from the bias of a host school. Two sessions were held offsite at Group Special Education (GSE) premises, one at the high school when the students were in Year 8 and the last a few weeks down the track when they were in Year 9. The first three sessions lasted one and a half hours and were held over consecutive weeks in term four. The school counsellor who informally made the initial contact picked up and delivered the groups back to their schools in the school van.

SESSION ONE AND TWO

The first two sessions included:

- getting to know their group through informal games
- discussion on how they have already managed change
- defining change
- possible barriers to their success as Year 9s
- supports they could call on to help them, such as their personal qualities and strengths, and school personnel
- things that they needed to think about before starting as Year 9s, including transport and what time to get up in the mornings.

Written work was kept to a minimum.

The anecdotal information was interesting. Students knew little about the high school and common worries included:

- organising materials for each class without a personal desk
- interacting with different teachers
- homework
- uniform requirements
- smoking/drug use at school
- potential aggression from others
- uncertainty about adolescent culture, such as what was cool
- concerns about how the other students would relate to them at their stage of physical development.

Early in session one we found that behaviourally challenged students were unsuitable for the course, demanding more 1:1 attention than time permitted. The programme needed an organised, forward moving approach, broken with interactive games, while allowing impromptu discussion, and a drink and biscuit break. When a group was unsettled we adapted the programme accordingly, by using practical gym type activities to promote group skills, less circle discussion and minimal pen activities.

SESSION THREE

Session three was at the high school and focused on meeting a sample from the school community, including administration and teaching staff, the Year 9 dean, cultural supports, and some Year 9 and 10 students who used to go to their school. There was a question time (panel form) and a short walkabout in pairs with the high school students. We set goals and wrote them on a card, and the students took their booklets home.

SESSION FOUR

Session four served three purposes. Firstly, we could tune in to the students in small groups to see how things were going for them socially, and in their school work and any sport/club involvement. In the six discussion groups, students identified the things they particularly liked, such as making new friends, finding it easy to get around the school, and having some old friends in their classes. Secondly we could find out how the programme sessions worked for them. They enjoyed the interactive games, informal discussions and having their own booklets to take away. Students said “the games were fun” and “the goal setting was good”. Students had the opportunity to verify or change the goal they set in session three. This was written on a card, laminated and posted out to them. Finally, we could check that they were able to tell us who they could turn to for help in the school community.

PARENTS ONLY

The final session was an early evening parent and whānau meeting, which covered change and how parents were a part of the transition process. The high school library was the venue, and this was another opportunity for them to set foot on school grounds. Parental written feedback indicated they appreciated the opportunity to attend this parent only evening.

Parents were very positive about the programme – their children had talked more about going to secondary school. The parents enjoyed being involved with the ‘homework’ exercise. Comments about their children’s reactions and experiences included:

- gave her reassurance that it wasn’t so scary going to another school
- gave me a feeling of trust as a parent
- he was more relaxed and less nervous when the first day eventually came
- he was more confident about starting
- he became familiar with other pupils, didn’t feel as if he was the only one
- familiarised with new environment
- could put a face to some staff members
- made last term of primary more enjoyable.

CONTRIBUTING SCHOOLS’ FEEDBACK

Principals from the contributing schools felt that the opportunity for socially fragile students to access support was very useful, because they are often overlooked. They considered students who were experiencing a number of significant events outside school, such as a chronically ill parent or living away from home and those presenting learning/behavioural problems at school particularly benefited from their involvement in the programme.

EVALUATION

After running the programme for over two years, I needed to know if the students felt this had helped to ease them from the nurturing climate in the primary system into the multi-faceted, more formal secondary environment. Students were asked to complete a written questionnaire, at the beginning of the first session, at the end of the third session and then as Year 9s – see Appendix. This questionnaire was a modified version of one by Don Payne, workshop leader at the centre for educational leadership, Christchurch College of Education in 2003. Overall a shift in perceptions was noticeable in nine out of 35 items between sessions one and three, when the students were Year 8s, and this increased between sessions three and four, when the students were Year 9s. Changes were made for many of the students in our programme in a number of areas:

1. They were no longer afraid of getting lost.
2. They found the high school wasn’t too big.
3. They did not find it difficult to get from one class to another on time.
4. They found knowing their way around the high school wasn’t a problem.
5. They were less worried that teachers would pick on them.
6. They did not think new teachers wouldn’t be interested in them.
7. They did not think there was a teacher who wouldn’t like them.
8. They found homework was not much harder and they didn’t need extra help with it.

9. They were not worried about how much homework they would get.
10. They were not worried about making new friends.
11. They did not think Year 8 was better.
12. They found other students did not tease them.
13. They were not scared of being bullied.
14. The Year 9 work was not too hard.

RESULTS

Overall the targeted students were helped with attitude, attendance and attainment. Quantitative data, collated from the first students on the programme, showed 28 out of the 35 students still attend the high school, now as Year 11s. Table one shows further data:

TABLE ONE

n = 35	students in programme	students not in programme
Average of total year student attendance	92.8%	92.5%
Total high school's behavioural referrals	11	18
Total stand-downs	2 (one for four days & one for five days)	3 (one for one day, one for two days & one for four days)
Total suspensions	1	0

Note: the comparison group 'students not in programme' were randomly selected from the total Year 9 intake roll in 2003 by using every sixth student's data.

Accumulating informal supplementary qualitative data from the students was an unexpected plus from being involved in the programme for me and for the high school counsellor. The data from the contributing schools and the students' surveys had the potential to signpost possible modification of curriculum learning programmes, to heighten awareness of support for Year 9 teachers for in-class interventions, and to help build Year 9 dean's, Māori/Pasifika, RTLB mentoring and pastoral care systems.

CONCLUSION

Transitioning Year 8 to Year 9 at an urban co-ed high school was going to be daunting for a targeted group of students who were already identified as 'fragile'. When I did the numbers, attendance hadn't dipped and attitudes were mostly positive. Long-term effects on attendance and learning may be doubtful, given it is a brief programme, but it was inexpensive to run, fun to do and broke down barriers between staff and students. The fact that it made a difference was noted by students and their parents.

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AUTHOR PROFILE

Denise Burrow has been an RTLB in the Mairehau Cluster for three years. She has taught extensively as a classroom teacher, a specialist subject teacher, and with individuals who have specific learning disabilities. Denise followed a B.Ed with M.Ed second class honours (Division 1) in special education at Massey in 2000. She has always been involved in helping students maximise their learning opportunities, mainly at Year 7-12 levels.

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APPENDIX

CONFIDENTIAL SURVEY – 2005

A = Agree DA = Strongly Disagree

1.	Year 9 will be great	A							DA
2.	The homework will be much harder in Year 9	A							DA
3.	I am worried about subjects that I have not done before	A							DA
4.	I think I will do very well in all subjects	A							DA
5.	I will need extra help with homework	A							DA
6.	It will be easy to make friends with other students at high school	A							DA
7.	It will be difficult getting to know new teachers	A							DA
8.	I am afraid of getting lost	A							DA
9.	There will be too much work in Year 9	A							DA
10.	Other children will push me around	A							DA
11.	My friends will change	A							DA
12.	It will be good to have more work to do after school	A							DA
13.	I am worried about making new friends	A							DA
14.	Year 8 is better	A							DA
15.	I know there is a teacher who won't like me	A							DA
16.	I am looking forward to finding my way around the new classes	A							DA
17.	My new teachers won't be interested in me	A							DA
18.	I think there is a lot of bullying in the high school	A							DA
19.	Learning new subjects will be difficult	A							DA
20.	I am worried how much homework there will be	A							DA
21.	It is important that I make friends quickly	A							DA
22.	I will be happier when I am in Year 9	A							DA
23.	I think the other students will tease me	A							DA
24.	The high school is too big	A							DA
25.	The work in Year 9 will be too hard for me	A							DA
26.	I am scared of being bullied by the high school students	A							DA
27.	I am looking forward to Year 9	A							DA
28.	I will have to do more homework	A							DA
29.	I hope that I can stay with my old friends	A							DA
30.	I am worried about going to Year 9	A							DA
31.	Teachers in Year 9 are nicer	A							DA
32.	It will be difficult getting from one class to another on time	A							DA
33.	I am worried teachers will pick on me	A							DA
34.	Some older students will be nasty to me	A							DA
35.	Getting to know my way around the high school will be a problem	A							DA