

Troubled Transition

What teachers and schools can do to ensure educational transition points do not interrupt student learning

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Abstract

In 1996 we became aware of the impact that transition to secondary school has on students. The initial data came from interviews and group discussions with over 1000 students in the AIMHI schools and we wrote this up in the first of the AIMHI reports (Hawk & Hill, 1996). We described the transition process as 'traumatic' for students and, at the time, were challenged for over-dramatising the situation. Over the last four years we have continued to listen to students and teachers at all levels of education, and have clarified and strengthened our opinions on the topic. In the 1998 AIMHI report (Hill & Hawk, 1998:96) we first talked about 'educational islands' and some of the associated issues. As our awareness of the issues has heightened, our information collecting and understanding has broadened across the educational spectrum.

Our New Zealand National Curriculum and Qualifications Framework go a long way towards providing the potential for education to be a 'seamless' experience. The National Curriculum, including Te Whaariki, provides guidelines for early years through to the end of secondary schooling. The curriculum levels provide the opportunity to plan, teach and assess appropriately regardless of the chronological age or school year of the child(ren). The qualifications framework takes the assessment seamlessness through to the tertiary sector.

In spite of this potential to provide a seamless experience for students, the lived experience is usually very different. This discussion uses the metaphor of islands in an educational sea. We will restrict the discussion to the Primary, Intermediate/middle and Secondary islands. We will highlight the differences between the islands, the structural reasons for their separateness, the impact of

this on students and their learning and the bridge-building that needs to happen if we want to rescue some of our students from drowning on their learning journey.

Structural and Organisational Differences

There are many ways that the schools differ from each other. These differences are historical and may on the surface appear normal and expected because we have become so used to them. They combine, however, to make student transition difficult.

Teacher training

For a long time, in New Zealand, we have trained primary and secondary teachers differently. Primary teachers needed three years in order to be equipped for the classroom. Over the last three decades, increasing numbers of teachers included university papers in their education programme until we finally decided that the training itself was worthy of degree status. Secondary teachers, on the other hand, did a degree in a 'teaching subject' and then needed only one year's training to be ready for the classroom

Recent changes in government policies have opened up a wide range of types of teacher education programmes. Many programmes have been shortened. Whatever the strengths or weaknesses of the training programmes, they have always provided a very different experience for primary and secondary teachers who carry this through to their classrooms.

Teacher pay

The relatively recent pay parity for primary and secondary teachers has broken down some barriers. Parity has given teachers freedom to move 'up or down' the years' ladder without being financially penalised for doing so. Primary teachers in secondary schools and vice-versa have brought new strengths and valuable contributions to increasing understanding of the different islands and of each other.

Buildings

The main problem faced, in relation to building bridges between schools, is their geographic separation. There are a few contributing schools that are located close to their main receiving school but they are in the minority

The Ministry has recently recognised the benefits of geographic proximity and new initiatives have seen pre-schools built on school sites and schools relocated

on a joint site or joined into a Campus. Unfortunately making these changes with existing schools has caused many serious problems that are not easily resolved. School staff have tended to be protective of existing ways of doing things within their own sector and resistant to the major change that such collaboration requires.

Both primary and secondary schools were built around the architectural and educational conventions of their day. Secondary classrooms are planned for students to sit in rows facing the 'blackboard' at the front. Primary rooms and furniture allow for more flexibility.

The timetable

Most primary schools have a relatively flexible timetable. On the whole, a primary teacher is free to integrate learning experiences and organise them to suit the students and the needs of the topic.

Secondary timetables by contrast, are very complex and fairly rigid systems. The day is usually broken into five or six periods and governed by a bell. Because of the enormous complexity involved in having hundreds of students doing different things and teachers who are highly specialised in what they can, and cannot teach, there is very little opportunity to change the prescribed timetable.

This means that the day of a primary and a secondary student is vastly different. Intermediates have traditionally worked on a primary model, although there are many that are now combining the perceived benefits of both sectors through a specialisation programme. The primary benefit of one teacher for the year who gets to know the whole child and teaches them for the literacy and numeracy; and the secondary benefit of expertise in specific learning areas being developed and fostered by teachers with a particular interest or level of knowledge and expertise.

Meeting student needs

At primary and intermediate school the student is managed as a whole person whose needs are generally assessed and met by one teacher who works with them all day. At secondary school the student moves from teacher to teacher for each subject and each period. Sometimes this occurs up to six or seven times in one day. As well as the changes in teachers, we 'split' the student into different segments and send them to different people to have their other needs met. If they are learning needs we send them to individual teachers or to a levels/curriculum co-ordinator. If it is discipline we send them to a dean, DP or somebody designated to manage discipline. If it is a pastoral care need they go

to the tutor/form teacher, or sometimes the dean, or seek out a counsellor. If a student is a serious problem, these people sometimes co-ordinate and discuss their student 'problem'. Most secondary students never have any one person who connects all the 'bits' together and talks with, or about, them holistically.

At tertiary, most students are on their own unless they make the effort to seek help.

Pedagogy

Primary schools make a great effort to organise new entrant classrooms to help the children when they arrive but it is still a very different experience from a day of choosing their own activities.

The cartoons in Ruth Sutton's book (Sutton, 2000) encapsulate the key differences in primary and secondary pedagogy. While the primary illustration may be exaggerated, it gives the idea of the relative flexibility in a primary classroom in contrast to the lines of desks in a traditional secondary classroom. Many secondary classrooms we have been in are not as rigidly organised as the stereotype but there is still a big difference as students experience it.

Some intermediates attempt to bridge the primary/secondary divide by introducing specialisation programmes. The students have the same classroom teacher each morning for literacy and numeracy but rotate around teachers for other subjects in the afternoons. This probably works really well for most students but care needs to be taken to ensure that NESB, ESOL, special needs and low decile students do not suffer from this system in the way many of them find changes of teachers hard to cope with at secondary.

What knowledge is valued?

Although we have a National Curriculum, all schools are allowed to decide what they consider the balance to be and are encouraged to adapt it to provide learning opportunities that are appropriate for their own students. Primary schools feel very free to do this. Secondary schools, on the other hand, are working towards the public state controlled external exams. Parents attribute reputations to schools on the basis of their performance in these exams and so most secondary schools feel pressured to prepare their students to succeed and teach to exam prescriptions. Secondary teachers feel pressured to 'cover' the year's curriculum whether or not it is meeting student learning needs. We often see the fallout of this in de-motivated students who have lost all self-efficacy and begin a cycle of failure

Transition to Secondary

This is the greatest divide between the educational islands and the transition happens for most students at a vulnerable stage of their lives. They are undergoing the changes that puberty brings with the resulting insecurities about self-image, friendships, relationships with adults and future directions. On top of this they have to cope with the following changes

- Being a senior in a small school to being a junior in a large school
- Having learning divided up into distinct 'subjects' that are taught by different people
- Having the day broken into periods and having to physically relocate each period
- Carrying their gear with them all day
- Having to co-ordinate out of school demands, like homework, from lots of teachers who make no attempt to check what homework is being set in other subjects
- Having to learn the systems of a large and complex organisation
- Having to go to lots of different people to have different needs met
- Learning similar skills but being taught them in different ways with different expectations
- Having to adapt to different teachers voices, teaching styles and behaviour expectations
- Having no place to call 'home' where their work is displayed and possessions can be left.

Ruth Sutton, in discussing compulsory schooling years says

There seems to be, in my mind at least, some certainty about the purpose and strategies for teaching at both ends of the age spectrum – in the early years and the final stages of institutionalised learning. But the question remains: at what age and at what stage does the learner shift from one structure to the next? Is there a 'muddle in the middle' and what's to be done about it? (Sutton, 2000:25)

There is no doubt that for the great majority of New Zealand students the greatest shift from one system/structure happens at entry to secondary school. They arrive at secondary school very anxious. Teachers have said things such as

When you get to secondary school

- *you will have more homework*
- *the schoolwork will be harder*

- *you will have to carry all your own books*
- *you will have to be more organised or you will never manage*
- *teachers there won't have time to care about you the way I do*

The anxiety as well as all the adjustment means that some students are unable to relax and continue focussing on their learning to the same extent. Some students said it took them nearly a year to feel confident and enthusiastic about learning again.

The secondary school itself is also made up of islands that are sometimes very separate. The autonomy of departments has sometimes led to teachers not wanting to communicate with others and being quite content to live within their own specialised learning area. This has been demonstrated in many schools that have tried to change the old department system and form faculties. It is also often evident when generic school-wide issues are discussed such as assessment, appraisal, discipline systems, pastoral care, centralising of resources and reporting to parents. These are all issues for which, in the interests of students, the school needs consistent and co-ordinated practices and procedures yet some departments will insist on their right to do things differently.

We do have a 'muddle in the middle' that continues to make it very hard for students to have their needs met.

Building bridges between the islands

The difficulties of transition have probably always been an issue for students. The difference, it seems to us, is that now we know about the difficulties students experience. This puts a responsibility on all the adults in the wider educational world to do all they can to build the bridges that will help children continue through their educational journey without serious interruption. Schools, and individual teachers, can do a great deal to help.

What teachers can do

- The more a teacher knows about the learning programme in the school and the children, prior to their beginning at the new school, the better. It is not realistic to expect a teacher to visit all the classes of enrolled students but even one visit to the main contributing school to sit in classes for a half day would help.
- Teachers investigating prior knowledge and actively affirming the knowledge and the programmes in the previous schools makes their teaching more targeted and the children's contributions more valuable

and valued. Criticism of a previous school, class or knowledge will impact adversely on a child's self-efficacy. Positive comments and valuing the contribution a student can make to the class's learning is a win/win for all.

- Students need positive and constructive messages about their next phase of learning. It is very important that teachers do **not** use the next school as a threat or means of controlling behaviour

e.g. You will not be able to get away with not doing homework when you get to secondary school

e.g. You will be all on your own when you get to University. You won't have a teacher to remind you when an assignment is due

Some comments that teachers make are not accurate. Others are about important issues and are well intentioned but they present a negative view of the next stage. Students need encouraging comments and a supportive approach to getting them prepared.

- Students need help from teachers and school programmes to prepare them for the next stages of learning independence. They need to be taught the skills of self-management, time-management, studying, information seeking, gathering and using, communication, decision-making, conflict resolution and relationship building. Many teachers are so focused on curriculum coverage that they do not take the time to incorporate these into the programme.
- The transition can be marked in a number of helpful ways. For example, an intermediate introduced the practice of each student writing to their former primary teacher at the end of their first term at the new school. They described their new experiences and acknowledged how their previous teacher had helped them prepare for their new school. This feedback helped both the teacher and her/his current students to have positive feelings towards the intermediate school. It also helped the students writing the letters to reflect on the success of their transition.
- Teacher advice to parents about the suitability of future schools should be professional and carefully thought through. The 'reputation' of a school often bears no resemblance to the reality and parents tend to place a great deal of credibility on teachers' views. A teacher should not give advice about a school unless they have visited and spent time in it recently.

What schools can do

- Principals set the scene for their schools through their own attitudes and actions. If staff know these leaders are committed to making links and building bridges, they are more likely to see it as important and put effort into the liaison.
- Co-ordinated curriculum links should be established. There are a few clusters of schools in which the maths teams, for example, get together once a year to share information, developments, achievement expectations and information relevant to the two organisations. There are a small number of schools we know of that are beginning to liaise in order to provide co-ordinated programmes, share specialist staff and share professional development opportunities.
- Many schools make the effort to organise a student 'visit' to their new school before the end of the year at the previous school. While such visits do help, there are many ways that schools can foster student interaction with students at other levels of education. Successful examples we have seen include
 - secondary students coaching a primary culture group
 - primary students visiting a secondary school marae and being hosted by the secondary students
 - contributing school students being the (free) audience for the secondary school's production dress rehearsal
 - secondary students working with pre-schoolers and gaining unit standards in childcare
 - intermediate students joining with secondary students for foreign language lessons
 - a year eight student joining a School Certificate Maths class at the nearby secondary school while continuing regular classes for other subjects at the intermediate

Each interaction has positive educational and transitional benefits for all involved.

- When a school has a particular programme or approach that is critical to the learning culture of the school, it is of great value if that can also become part of the culture of contributing and receiving schools

- Induction programmes are of great benefit and can go a long way towards preventing students' loss of confidence and helping them to cope with changes to routines and expectations. We always get very positive feedback from students on the peer support programme. Buddy students and buddy class systems have the same potential if well managed. In the schools we have worked in, vertical form classes have not provided the support and positive role modelling that some teachers have assured us is the case. Rather the students report an informal and often destructive induction process and more rejection than support from seniors. An advantage of a horizontal system is that needs related to a particular age or year level can be targeted and more effectively met. Good induction is one of these needs.
- Some schools have made organisation changes to enhance the transition of year nine students. These have included having a home classroom for year nine and ten students so it is the teachers that change class rather than the students. Longer tutor periods each day have enhanced the continuity of adult contact and follow-up on issues at an early stage. They have also enabled a skills-based programme to be implemented. Employing primary trained teachers for secondary school junior classes has provided a continuity of learning styles and classroom practice that students have found greatly enhances their ability to focus on their learning. Timetabling the same teacher to teach more than one subject has cut down the number of interactions with different adults in the one day. Longer periods have meant fewer disruptions, changes of teachers and more students being able to complete work.
- Secondary schools need to find a way of ensuring that, at least once a year, a professional adult conferences with each child about all aspects of their educational experience. This means their effort, progress, achievement, behaviour, involvement, future hopes and plans, and anything else that is impacting on their learning.
- All schools need to keep up their efforts to educate and inform parents about what they are trying to do, why they do it this way, how parents can help and what parents can do if they are worried. Schools should be professional about the opportunities they give to receiving schools to make contact with the parents of their current students. We heard stories from students and parents about how schools had been selective and unfair with the information they had given. We have observed examples of schools that would not let their main receiving school have access to their parents and would not pass on information to them. These are unethical adult power games that adversely effect children's educational opportunities.

- A student support committee that involves all the key pastoral care and learning support staff is able to ensure holistic care of student needs.

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The researchers acknowledge the contribution of the AIMHI project for much of the knowledge and understanding around this issue that began the wider investigation. AIMHI is a project in low decile, multicultural schools. It is a partnership between the AIMHI Forum, representing nine secondary schools and the Ministry of Education. Our gratitude also to the students in many other schools who shared very personal information and feelings with the researchers.

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Additional Reading

“Year 8 to Year 9: Overcoming the Muddle in the Middle” is a book Ruth Sutton wrote following a Ministry of Education contract which looked at the issues of transition to secondary school. It places the ‘middle’ in the wider educational context and provides evidence of how student learning can be put on hold while they cope with the transition to a new school.

Bibliographic Details

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