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# Transitioning Year 7 Primary Students to Secondary Settings in Western Australian Catholic Schools: A Description of the Process

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# Contents

# TRANSITIONING YEAR SEVEN PRIMARY STUDENTS TO SECONDARY SETTINGS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: A DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCESS

Anne Coffey, Richard G. Berlach and Michael O'Neill

## Abstract

In 2009 the Catholic education system moved to a six plus six model, even though the public education system in Western Australia decided to remain with a seven year primary and five year secondary school structural arrangement. Prior to implementation, a great deal of planning was undertaken by the Catholic Education Office and individual schools to ensure the smooth transition of Year Seven students to a secondary school setting. This system-wide shift presented a one-time opportunity to investigate the planning arrangements of six Catholic secondary schools that agreed to participate in the study. This study reports the unique challenges experienced by each school, what they learned from the process and what hindsight taught them about how things might have been done differently. Insights should be valuable to other systems contemplating a similar transition.

## About the Authors

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## Introduction

Change is never easy. In fact, change analyst Michael Fullan (2007) is of the view that "if people were given the literal choice of 'change or die'…" (p. 42), societal evidence suggests that the likelihood of choosing change is nine to one against. The move from primary to secondary school constitutes a major change for school students. To minimize the effects of this change on students, a number of secondary school systems have moved to implement a middle schooling model (Chadbourne, 2001; Dinham & Rowe, 2008), where middle school is seen as a bridge between the primary and secondary environment. Middle schooling as a way of organising compulsory education is a relatively new concept in Western Australia.

This paper explores how selected schools within the Catholic Education sector prepared for the migration of students from Year Seven in primary school to Year Seven in secondary school. The paper also explores how the concept of middle schooling has been invoked in a primarily secondary school environment, that is, one which caters for student between Years Seven and Twelve. The research is significant as this was a one-time opportunity for transition preparation to be examined for this inaugural group of students.

## Transition

The move from primary to high school may be considered a key 'rite of passage' as students move from one level of schooling to another (Pratt & George, 2005). Despite the variations in schooling systems around the world there is a high degree of similarity in the features of transition (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006). These variations generally surround the mismatch between the cultures of primary and secondary school (Ganeson, 2006). Such a move generally requires a change of school, mixing with a new and different peer group, learning new forms of school organisation and having many more teachers – with each perhaps having a different teaching style. High schools are, in most cases, significantly larger than primary schools and students are required to move to different locations throughout the day for their various classes. In contrast, the primary school provides an environment where students spend the predominant part of the school day with the same teacher in the same classroom and with the same group of peers. It might be anticipated then, that the transition between primary and high schools is characterised by discontinuity in physical location, alienation from peer groups and insecurity in teacher relationships (Ashton, 2008). Dinham and Rowe (2008, p. 3) note that the primary/high school transition is an "abrupt disjuncture" between two very different forms of schooling.

Whilst most students cope with this transition in one way or another, others tend to struggle (Ashton, 2008; Chedzoy & Burden, 2005; Johnstone, 2001). Declines in academic performance, school attendance, self image and engagement in learning are not uncommon outcomes of ineffective transition negotiation (Ashton, 2008; Daly, Shin, Thakral, Selders & Vera, 2009; Dinham & Rowe, 2008; Zeedyk, Gallacher, Henderson, Hope, Husband & Lindsay, 2003). This is not surprising given the different cultures of primary and high schools. Indeed, for some students the move from primary to high school can be the most difficult aspect of their school experience. How well the students negotiate this transition may not only affect academic performance but also affect their general health and well-being. Zeedyk et al. (2003) note that even where students negotiate the transition effectively; it is almost always accompanied by some stress and concern.

Many young adolescents find high school to be more impersonal, competitive and marks oriented than primary school (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000) and consequently lose interest in school. Disengagement is therefore a major concern for educators in the early adolescent years (Dinham & Rowe, 2008). Evidence suggests that the level of disengagement of students increases as they progress from early to late adolescence (Daly et al., 2009). It should be noted, however, that early adolescence can also be a time when some students become far more positive about their learning. Exposure to a more diverse curriculum which is delivered in specialist facilities by specialist teachers in the high school setting may serve to enhance the learning of some students. The high school environment is important, not only because students spend a significant portion of each day at school, but also because high school is a place where students form new relationships with peers and adults (Glover, Burns, Butler & Patton, 1998). There is therefore a need for careful consideration of the transition process between primary and secondary school by educators, parents and policy makers alike.

**Middle Schooling**

The above discussion highlights the issues surrounding the transition from a primary to a secondary school context. The transition, at around the age of 11, is also occurring during early adolescence, a developmental period marked by changes in "academic and psychological functioning" (Roeser & Eccles, 1998, p. 125). Regarding the specific needs of young adolescents, Chadbourne (2001) concluded that it is generally this cohort that teachers find the most challenging, as the learning of students around Years Five to Eight typically falters at a time when it should be progressing rapidly; rates of disengagement and recidivism tend to be highest in the first years of secondary school; and social and emotional functionality is being renegotiated. As such, it could be argued that schools which cater specifically for the needs of early adolescents are better placed to avoid some of the negative consequences of transition. In the Australian context, the middle schooling model addresses the educational needs of students between about 10-15 years of age.

Research has shown that, developmentally, the middle schooling cohort tends to benefit from an education that is focused on meeting the physical, social, emotional and intellectual needs of early adolescents. Current thinking is that students in early to middle adolescence do not need a "slightly upscaled" primary school curriculum nor a "downscaled" secondary curriculum (Groundwater-Smith, Mitchell & Mockler, 2007). Rather, to reduce the likelihood of disengagement from schooling, early adolescents require a curriculum that focusses on holistic student-centred learning (Burvill-Shaw, 2006; Chadbourne, 2001). Garrigan (2005) points out that middle schooling reflects such an approach, professing a particular pedagogy and curriculum. For Garrigan, it is the theoretical approach rather than a particular type of school structure that defines what is meant by middle schooling. Transition can lead to a loss of a sense of belonging (Dinham & Rowe, 2008) for students do not learn in isolation, but rather in a classroom with peers (Ryan & Patrick, 2001) and adolescents place great emphasis on these peer relationships (Longaretti, 2006). The role of the teacher in creating a safe and supportive learning environment cannot be underestimated in helping to foster new relationships. Teachers also play a critical role in ensuring that students adjust to their new secondary school environment and successfully meet all of the challenges along the way (Hinebauch, 2002; Reddy, Rhodes and Mulhall, 2003; Roeser and Eccles, 1998; Zimmerman and Arunkumar, 1994). Characteristics generally associated with teacher support include being caring, friendly, understanding and dependable (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). By developing classrooms that foster relationship building between students, establish clear guidelines for behavior, encourage cooperation and utilize the students' strengths, teachers can create a classroom environment conducive to learning (Jennings & Greenburg, 2009).

Middle schooling has been a key component of educational reform both within Australia and internationally since the 1980s (Burvill-Shaw 2004). As Garrigan (2005) insists, however, implementation of middle school principles and practices has not always been as effective as might be hoped. Across the 12 years of compulsory schooling in Australia, the location of year seven students continues to vary across the States and Territories. Whilst in Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland, year seven students are located in primary school; in New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory, they are situated in secondary schools. In the Northern Territory, year seven students were moved to middle school settings in 2008. As the present study was undertaken in Western Australian Catholic schools, what is now presented is an examination of this context as it applies to the migration of year seven students to secondary schools. This is followed by an exposition of how selected schools managed the process of attempting to provide a smooth transition experience for primary school children one year younger than the traditional secondary school entry cohort. The degree to which the tenets of middle schooling discussed above will become evident.

**The Western Australian Context**

In Western Australia, the model of having seven years of primary schooling followed by five years of secondary schooling operated in unimpeded fashion until the early years of the present century. In 2002 this changed when the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) agreed to achieve a uniform approach to schooling across Australia by the year 2010. Such an agreement set into motion events that would have ramifications for Western Australian education.

A related issue which surfaced at the same time, was a decision to alter the school commencing age by six months. From 2003 onward, rather than enrolling in school in the year they turned six as had previously been the case, only students with birthdays between January 1 and June 30 were permitted to enroll in year one. This resulted in a 50% drop in the usual number of year one enrolments. Due to this change in enrolment numbers, this inaugural group of students came to be referred to as the "half cohort". Ordinarily, the half cohort would move into year eight in secondary schools in 2010 but with the change, a dilemma was created. Retaining this group of students in primary school would mean that they would be six months older than the previous cohorts of year sevens. Further, when they commenced secondary school in year eight, they would be six months younger than previous year eight cohorts, signaling problems relating to maturity (Green, 1998; Huggins & Knight, 1997).

In response to middle schooling agenda and half-cohort issue, the Catholic Education Office of WA (CEOWA), responsible for coordinating over 100 Catholic primary schools and 48 secondary schools in Western Australia, entered into serious dialogue regarding how the move of Year Sevens to secondary schools might be managed. The CEOWA is the central authority governing all Catholic schools. Its schools cater for over 70,000 students and is the executive arm of the Catholic Education Commission, a body appointed by the Bishops of Western Australia. While a centralised bureaucracy, it devolves financial management, decisions related to staffing, capital infrastructure and curriculum delivery to the school principal.

Dialogue around how the move was to be managed was undertaken in anticipation of a similar move being made by the public schooling system. While the government was still undecided, the Catholic system publically announced its intention to commence the transition. The decision was made to organise Catholic education predominantly around primary schools from kindergarten to year six and secondary schools from year seven to year 12. In the first instance, the CEOWA supported schools by offering advice around capital infrastructure and design, professional development on learning in the middle years and approaches to pastoral care. Such advice, however, was not prescriptive, with schools being given the autonomy to devise their own approach to the transition. The CEOWA held a number of consultation and information meetings with parents regarding their decision to implement systemic change, emphasising at the meetings that schools had autonomy in matters relating to process.

For its part and in consideration of the schooling uniformity agenda, as well as anticipation of the challenges the "half cohort" might create (State Schools Teachers' Union, c2009), the Department of Education in Western Australia commissioned a report entitled *The Future Placement of Year 7 Students in Western Australian Public Schools: A study* (2007), which investigated the issues surrounding the relocation of year seven students to secondary schools. The report concluded that such relocation was not presently feasible given the associated costs, incapacity of the Department to provide sufficient teachers to facilitate the change, and the concerns of rural and remote communities.

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations (WACSSO), the peak body representing parents of students in the public school sector, applauded the government decision. In a presentation to the WA Primary Principals Association public forum in 2009, WACSSO reiterated its position that in the absence of research evidence indicating "improved educational outcomes and significant benefits" (p. 1) Year Seven students should remain in primary school. The Western Australian Primary Principals' Association (WAPPA) also produced a position paper on the issue (2006) and opposed the move of Year Sevens to secondary settings "in the absence of convincing educational rationales" (p. 2).

Contrary to WACSSO and WAPPA's position, the Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association (WASSEA, a government school Association) supported the move of Year Seven students to government secondary schools. Various issues in support of this relocation were raised in their position paper (2009). Some of these included the loss of Year Sevens to the Catholic sector, failure of the current primary school curriculum to cater for an older cohort of Year Sevens, the growing public perception that Year Seven commences in secondary school in the private sector, and the positive impact on National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results for Year Seven students in secondary schools being taught by specialist teachers.

While the government education system had faltered regarding any six plus six reform, the Catholic system had decided to embrace the shift - a decision which resonated through to 2009, when the first group of Year Seven students entered Catholic secondary schools. As the preceding discussion suggests this decision was reached in an

environment of an absence of uniformity across all education sectors. The remainder of this paper chronicles how six participating schools prepared for the move, the planning strategies utilised to assist in transitioning students, the "model" of secondary schooling (e.g. a traditional high school approach or one aligned with a middle school philosophy) employed and what was learned. Information regarding how the program was facilitated in the inaugural year of its operation (2009) is also presented.

**Investigative Methodology**

This section of the paper consists of a brief introduction to the investigative methodology followed by demographic information about each participating school. An exploration of the transitioning process preferenced by each school is then presented. As the data indicate, although all schools had the same goal in mind – successful transition – no two schools approached the planning task in the same way.

Modified convenience sampling was utilised to identify schools. The approach was modified in the sense that although potential participants were directly approached, consideration was given to the variables of gender (boys, girls and co-educational schools) and structure (separate primary and secondary, and Kindergarten – Year 12 [K-12] schools), prior to any approach being made. Socio-economic status was not considered as a significant variable as each of the schools draws from a variety of geographical locations which do not necessarily mirror the geographical location of the school.

In the tradition of interpretive analysis, the study provided participants with the forum to tell their own transition story. Responses from each of the stakeholder groups – students, parents and teachers – were sought. A survey instrument was developed for this purpose of obtaining initial data. The surveys comprised a series of statements with respondents being asked to rate their reaction on a five-point Likert-type scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree). Although each stakeholder group received a slightly different set of questions representative of their particular stake in the evaluation process, consistent themes were easily identifiable across the surveys. Results were analysed using SPSS Statistics version 17.0 software and descriptive statistics produced.

Survey responses were followed-up using semi-structured interviews with stakeholder focus groups in each of the schools. Groups generally ranged from six to 15 selected participants. Meetings were held on the premises of the school at a negotiated time. The length of the interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes and the interviews were audio-taped for later transcription. Whilst focus groups for the teachers and students were conducted during school time, those for parents were held either during the school day or in the evening, as convenient.

**Participating Schools and the Transition Process**

Not all incoming year seven students and/or their parents chose to participate in the study, although the vast majority did so (Table 1). The Table also indicates teacher participants. In some schools teachers were assigned the task of spearheading the process (reflected in the small number involved), while in others, many more staff were included in the process. Within each of the schools one key person was identified to act as the liaison between the researchers and the school. This person was typically the Year Seven Coordinator, Head of Middle School or Deputy Principal.

**Table 1**
*Schools and Participants*

| SCHOOL | TEACHERS | STUDENTS | PARENTS |
|--------|----------|----------|---------|
| A | 2 | 43 | 39 |
| B | 46 | 190 | 109 |
| C | 6 | 33 | 36 |
| D | 15 | 33 | 41 |
| E | 13 | 156 | 49 |
| F | 4 | 51 | 60 |
| TOTAL | 86 | 506 | 334 |

Table 2 shows the comparison of the features of the transition process adopted by each of the participating schools. It was clear that the processes traditionally used by each of the schools to cater for the incoming Year 8 cohort had simply been modified in an endeavour to better cater for the younger Year 7 students. The schools did not try to incorporate vastly different processes.

**Table 2**
*The Transition Process in the Participating Schools*

| TRANSITION PROCESS | SCHOOL A | SCHOOL B | SCHOOL C | SCHOOL D | SCHOOL E | SCHOOL F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of Year 7s | 43 | 190 | 120 | 33 | 156 | 51 |
| Middle School/ Traditional model | Traditional | Traditional | Middle | Traditional | Middle | Middle |
| Induction Day (one day prior to term 1) | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Orientation Day (previous year) | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Head of Transition | Head of House | Deputy Principal (Year 7 Coord) | Year 7 Coord | Year 7 Coord | Year 7 Coord | Head of Middle School |
| Primary or Secondary Teachers (core subjects) | Primary | Secondary | Mix | Secondary | Primary | Primary |
| Primary School visits in year 6 | YES | YES | YES | NO | NO | YES |
| Enrolment | 2 years prior | 2 years prior | 2 years prior | 2 years prior | K-12 School | K-12 School |
| Peer Support Program | NO | YES | NO | NO | NO | YES |
| Parent Information Nights (previous year) | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Pastoral care group organisation | Horizontal | Horizontal | Horizontal | Horizontal | Horizontal | Horizontal |
| Separate Year 7 building | NO | NO | YES | NO | YES | YES |
| Academic Testing | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Lockers | YES | YES | YES | YES | NO | YES |

What follows is an explication and interpretation of the data contained in Table 2. Such an endeavour is intended to provide the reader with further insight regarding the decisions made by participating schools.

There were a number of common features of the transition process across the schools. The transition process was managed by a key member of staff – whether it was a Year Coordinator, Associate Principal or Head of House. It was important that this person was someone with whom Year 7 students, parents and teachers could identify. Each school chose to run a number of information evenings or day events in the year prior to the students commencing at the school. These events commenced the relationship building process between the school and the incoming parents and students. All schools conducted academic testing in the year prior to the students commencing at the school. However whilst most simply used the information from the testing to build an academic profile of each student, School B used the information to stream the students in mathematics and English. This "streaming" process in both mathematics and english from the first year of high school is not a common practice, and while some might argue that it is too early to stream in year seven, this school's position is that it provides a differentiated model of curriculum delivery in two major learning areas that better meets the needs of individual students.

Visits were conducted to the Year 6 "feeder" primary schools by many of the schools with the exception of School E which is a K-12 campus. For the inaugural Year 7 cohort, Year 8 students accompanied the transition coordinator on these visits. An induction day was also conducted in each school on the day prior to the remainder of the students commencing at the school. The different features of these induction days will be outlined in the discussion of each school below. Three of the schools embarked on a program of building a separate classroom block or modified existing facilities to create a separate facility for the Year 7s. Three of the schools were more overt in operating as a "middle school"; however School C clearly articulated and operated as a "true" middle school in Years 7-9. At the school the students were provided with a middle school diary, designed for young adolescents, which contains a learning log and the opportunity for personal reflections. This diary provides students with the opportunity to write about anxieties they may have during the transition, organisational worries, and academic or broader pastoral concerns. The diary is also designed to enhance the adoption of an important skill, the practice of self-reflection.

The schools differed in the way in which the teaching and learning programs were delivered. At School A the "core" subjects, english, mathematics, science and society and environment were delivered by the two primary trained teachers. The school made a conscious decision to employ primary teachers because of the affinity they had with younger students and thus a greater empathy for their transitioning experience. One teacher had expertise in English and society and environment while the other had expertise in mathematics and science. Whilst initially the intention was to reduce the need for the boys to move to different rooms by having the teachers come to them, timetabling imperatives prevented this. Both teachers expressed a desire to follow the boys to Year 8 the following year. At School D the intention was also for the girls to remain in the same room and for their teachers to come to them however again, timetabling issues prevented this.

At School B a mix of primary and secondary trained teachers were responsible for curriculum delivery; however the primary trained teachers were already employed at the school and were not specifically teaching in the Year 7 program. Primary trained teachers were responsible for curriculum delivery at schools E and F and simply moved from the primary to secondary campus. School C which was the most overt in its implementation of a middle school philosophy, employed a mix of primary and secondary teachers to deliver the "core" subjects. Interestingly at School C the teaching program for the year seven students in their first week was modified and based around providing opportunities for students to develop relationships and acquire requisite organisational skills. Students did not commence their formal timetable until week two of term one.

Peer support programs in which Year 11 students acted as "mentors" for their younger counterparts operated in two schools. Students at school B indicated very strongly that the program had been instrumental in them being able to quickly settle into their new school. At each of the schools the pastoral care groups were comprised of Year 7 students only. However School A which has a vertical structure for these groups, was intending to extend this structure to include Year 7s in the following year.

Students at each of the schools with the exception of School E had access to lockers. It was not until Term 4 that lockers were to be made available to Year 7s at School El. The intention was to try to minimize the number of "organizational" tasks with which the students had to contend in their first year of secondary school.

Other features of the transition process and the details of the participating schools are outlined below. It is apparent that each school went about the process of planning and implementing the transition process in a different way.

**School A: The Transition Process.**

This is a boys school which has four major feeder primary schools, although students attending come from around 15-20 different primary schools. A strong house system operates at the school with the Head of House assuming the leading role in the pastoral care of the boys. At the orientation day, parents were invited to stay with their sons until morning tea. The boys were then involved in a variety of classes from across the curriculum. Lunch was organised in the form of a social barbeque after which the students were engaged in sporting activities for the purpose of just having fun and furthering developing relationships.

Hawkes (2001) makes the following observation, "Two of the strongest impulses in a boy are to belong to the tribe and to grow up. Both of these impulses can be satisfied in part, by a boy going through an initiation ceremony" (p. 290). The transition was marked by boys being given a "guard of honour" by the Year 12 students at the commencement of the day. This symbolic process signified leaving behind their primary school and formally being "initiated" into the secondary community. This ritual operated at two levels; firstly, highlighting to the older boys that they have a leadership and mentoring role – almost becoming custodians – and secondly, introducing the younger boys their role models. Both parents and students spoke glowingly about this experience.

**School B: The Transition Process.**

This is a co-educational school which provides secondary education for over 1600 students from Years Seven to 12. Whilst the school has five main feeder primary schools, the school has an intake of students from a large number of local primary schools, both Catholic and government.

The Deputy Principal was central to managing the transition process. In term four an orientation evening for both parents and students was conducted at which general information about the following year was provided. At this event, students were also informed about the classes to which they would be assigned based upon performance in the placement tests. At the end of term four, the students from the local Catholic primary schools spend half a day of pre-orientation at the secondary school by engaging in a variety of activities. Cluster meetings with the local feeder primary schools also occurred at which issues faced by the Year Sevens were raised. Chief among these was the issue of better preparing the students for secondary school academic expectations, organizational requirements and homework.

Trained Year Eleven students involved in the peer support program also attended the orientation and took the students through a series of activities, talked with them about their timetables and took them on a tour of the school. The Year Seven students attended one period per week of a structured peer support program during term one which was facilitated by the Year 11 students who met each week with the coordinator of the program to discuss and plan the following week's activities. Past research has identified this aspect as important 'social capital' which students can harness to make the transition less stressful (Weller, 2007). The year seven students were also allocated to a pastoral care group in which they would remain throughout their secondary schooling. Each pastoral care group had three or four peer support leaders. The deputy principal, who also taught the year sevens, visited each pastoral care group on a regular basis.

**School C: The Transition Process.**

This is a co-educational school catering for an enrolment of some 1200 students in Years Seven to 12. The school has a Middle School Coordinator and a Year Seven Coordinator and operates as a Middle School and Senior School structure. The school introduced the International Baccalaureate Middle Years program in 2009.

On the induction day year ten students assisted in conducting a range of different activities and organized a tour of the school for the new students. At the beginning of the school year parents were also invited to attend a further evening at the school to meet their child's teachers and were provided with information about how their child's class would run. The school is developing a strong leadership program for the students across the year groups, in particular offering leadership experiences to year sevens from their first year onwards. The school has introduced a lap top program for year seven students in 2009 which will progress through the middle school. Students are not streamed until year nine; hence classes have students of varied ability.

**School D: The Transition Process.**

This is a school for girls in Years Seven to 12 which also has boarding facilities. This arrangement has demographic implications as many students are drawn from regional and remote communities. An orientation day for the Year Six students and their parents was held in August of the year before commencement at which students and their parents shared the same program for the first half of the day and then had a separate program in the afternoon. Based upon the experience in 2009 the decision has been made that an additional information day also needed to be arranged later in the year for the incoming year six students.

In preparation for the transition of the Year Seven students, the Year 7 Coordinator first visited feeder schools to determine what processes were being adopted for the transition. The Coordinator also spoke to the current year eight students to determine the issues and concerns they had experienced when first commencing secondary school. The provision of some type of recreational equipment was investigated as the Year Eight students had indicated that initially they felt that they had nothing to do at recess and lunch time. This equipment was used by the Year Sevens during term one but its use declined during term two indicating, perhaps, that its availability was warranted in the early stages of the transition. Further, "Year Seven days" in the school gymnasium were arranged in order to give the students something to occupy them at recess and lunchtimes. Students were involved a sleepover in week two of term one which provided an opportunity, in a relaxed environment, for the girls to get better acquainted with each other and their teachers. The decision was made to hold the sleepover in the school gymnasium to help the girls feel part of the school community.

**School E: The Transition Process.**

This school is co-educational catering for students between Kindergarten to Year 12. A new and separate year seven building was constructed in preparation for receiving the students. The building was designed to create a separate environment, slightly removed from the general activity of a large school, where students could feel a sense of safety and comfort in their own "territory".

An induction day was held one day prior to the commencement of the rest of the school. Year 12 students and the school leaders are involved in facilitating this day. The Year Seven students were taken on a "Heritage" tour by the year 12 students to help the newcomers to appreciate the history and culture of the school. This also provided the opportunity for students to familiarize themselves with a very large campus. The event culminated in a social sausage sizzle.

During the first week of school the students were familiarised with their timetable and were informed that all classes were to be conducted within the Year Seven building. Teachers of "elective" subjects came this building to commence their programs in week one. In week two, students then moved to specifically assigned "elective" areas wherever these were located in the school. All of their core subjects continued to be conducted in the Year Seven building. During the initial weeks of term there is a strong emphasis on the life skills program devoted to organizational skills, use of the diary, time management, study skills, homework and activities to develop interpersonal relationships.

**School F: The Transition Process.**

This is a co-educational school with campuses on three sites divided as Kindergarten to Year Three; Year Four to Six; and Year Seven to Year 12. The school has an overall enrolment of some 1800 students. The administration of the three sites is integrated. Students access the senior campus from a number of different suburbs.

An induction day was held one day prior to other students commencing. For many of the activities the students were arranged in Guild groups. A Year Seven camp was held during term one at which the students had the opportunity to meet many of their counterparts. It was felt that this extended period of time together in an informal setting would greatly enhance the social cohesion of the year group.

Students were placed in pastoral care groups, based upon their Guild. Teachers for each pastoral care group were also heavily involved in teaching the year seven students. Further, apart from having a Year Seven coordinator, a peer support program involving year eleven students operates within the school and provides further support for the year seven students. In year twelve, some of the students act as peer mentors providing advice and assistance to their younger counterparts.

**Conclusion**

Although a challenging and expensive undertaking, preliminary indications suggest that Catholic secondary schools involved in this study seem to have effectively managed the transition. Taking a younger cohort of students seamlessly into the secondary setting required many hours of planning and deliberation. What also appears evident is that a decision to devolve to schools the responsibility for managing their own transition planning was a wise one. Although

all schools were given the same mandate by the Catholic Education Office, each participating school was able to approach the task in a way that was considerate of its own individual and contextual needs. A keen understanding of the issues surrounding the transition of students from primary to secondary environments as well as the needs of these early adolescents in the "middle years" is central to planning good transition programs. Whilst there were common features among the six schools involved in this research, it is also apparent that certain features of the transition were tailored specifically to meet the needs of the incoming cohort. The fact that the schools were planning for the first time to cater for a younger group of students is noteworthy.

Five key factors can be identified across most of the schools and these appear significant to the overall success of both planning for transition and its implementation. First, school-based individuals who are responsible for driving the process are crucial to achieving a successful outcome. Each school appointed a specific member of staff who was to manage all aspects of the transition of the Year Seven students. This person, typically a Year Seven Coordinator, was central to the establishment of relationships between the school and the incoming students and parents. In some schools this coordinator would follow the students through to Year Eight and beyond, whilst in others the coordinator would stay with future cohorts of Year Seven students.

Second, current senior students are a valuable resource when mentoring arrangements for incoming year sevens are being contemplated. At School B in particular, the students spoke glowingly about the role of their peer support leaders. The program was so successful that it was being used as a model for programs to be implemented in other schools. Senior students were involved at each of the induction days and provided an opportunity for the new students to learn about their new school.

Third, pre-enrolment opportunities to experience both the academic program and the culture of the school need to be provided for prospective Year Seven students and their parents. Orientation days in the year prior to the new cohort commencing are an invaluable means of disseminating information about the school and establishing connections with the new students and their parents. If more is known about the "new" school both students and parents can approach the transition with a greater degree of certainty.

Fourth, the place and timing of academic testing needs to be carefully considered as this has the potential to sabotage experiences related to the introduction of the culture of the school and potential relationship-building events due to the anxiety created amongst students about streaming. Several schools were re-evaluating the timing of this testing as it was felt that it detracted from the "collegiality" of the orientation day.

Finally, emphasis needs to be placed not just on the needs of the receiving school but also on those of the departing school, where appropriate rites of passage need to be instigated. In this initial year of Year Seven students moving to Catholic secondary schools many primary schools had only a small number of Year Six students leaving to complete Year Seven in a Catholic secondary school environment. These exiting Year Six students missed many of the typical end of primary school activities such as formal graduation ceremonies.

The experiences encountered and documented here with regard to transitioning Year Seven students to secondary schools may be of value to other systems considering similar moves. Such an experience should give heart to the public sector in Western Australia which is still considering moving Year Seven students to the secondary school environment (Hiatt, 2010, 2011; Lampathakis, 2009). Queensland Education is also exploring the possibility of restructuring its compulsory years of schooling along a six-plus-six continuum (Kellett, 2010).

This study has shown that if prior thought is given to transition arrangements, the likelihood of a positive preparatory experience for all stakeholders is considerably increased. Consultation, information and participation appear to be the requisite ingredients for scaffolding success. Permitting process autonomy is also a key factor. A further paper (under review) chronicles the first year's experience for the Year Sevens arriving at the six schools which framed the present study. This will provide greater insight into how the transition was managed.

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