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What is This?
Relationships: The key to successful transition from primary to secondary school?

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Abstract
Although change can be considered an inevitable part of life, the process itself can be both challenging and confronting. This is no less the case than for early adolescents as they negotiate the transition from primary to secondary school.Whilst this transition can be considered a regular part of the formal school experience, it can represent a significant challenge to all who are involved including students, parents and teachers. As schools plan to support these stakeholders through the process an understanding of the issues faced by each group is important. Whilst transition may be fraught a focus on the relational aspects of the process can help to ameliorate many of the challenges presented during this change. This article examines the importance for schools of a focus on relationships to ensure that the concerns of all stakeholders are acknowledged and accounted for in the planning of school transition programs.

Keywords
Primary, relationships, secondary, transition programs

Introduction
Moving from the familiar environs of the primary school to secondary school is both an important milestone and challenge that confronts most early adolescents. Whilst there is variation between school systems around the world, the challenges that this transition presents bear remarkable similarity (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006) and are, in large measure, due to the disparity between the cultures of the primary and secondary school (Ganeson, 2006). Indeed Topping (2011) notes that many students see transition as a normal part of their journey through the years of formal schooling. Although the majority of children successfully cope with this move and find that many of their initial fears do not eventuate, there is evidence to suggest that the academic progress of children can be compromised when children change schools (Ashton, 2008).

The health, well-being and potential for disengagement of early adolescents is therefore of concern for educators (Dinham & Rowe, 2008), as evidence suggests that this disengagement increases as students move through secondary school (Daly, Shin, Thakral, Selders, & Vera, 2009). Assisting
students to successfully navigate the journey from primary to secondary school is of import to educators, parents and policy-makers alike. Using results from a recent research project, this article explores the importance of relationships and how a focus on relationships can mitigate some of the stresses experienced by adolescents as they negotiate this ‘key rite of passage’ (Pratt & George, 2005). Before considering these factors in more detail it is necessary to elaborate on the key features of the transition process itself.

**Transition**

Transition involves the passage from one place to another. During the early adolescent years students are required to negotiate the move from primary to secondary school at around the age of 11. Changing schools presents both opportunities and challenges, with the associated need for students to adapt and cope (Elias, 2001). This move generally entails a change of school campus, mixing with a new and different peer group, learning new forms of school organization and having a number of teachers, many of whom will have very different teaching styles. Secondary schools are, for the most part, significantly physically larger than primary schools and students are often required to move to different locations throughout the day for their classes. At the same time, they need to arrive at each class on time and with the correct equipment. New levels of organization need to be quickly developed to manage these timetable requirements. Such challenges are a contrast to the primary school where students spend the majority of their day in the same classroom with the same teacher and the same group of peers. All of their personal equipment is conveniently located in this one classroom.

The transition between these very different school environments may be characterized by discontinuity in physical location, alienation from peer groups and insecurity in teacher relationships (Ashton, 2008). While some students make this move with many of their peers from primary school, for others they may be required to make the journey alone. Many students also find that they are travelling significant distances, often by public transport, to access their new secondary school. Despite the many challenges that are presented by the move from primary to secondary school, there is much to look forward to. Students are excited at the prospect of having more freedom, many more subject choices, making new friends and the opportunity to participate in a range of extra-curricular activities (Coffey, 2009; Mizelle, 1999). However, they also worry about getting lost on campus, having more homework, being bullied by older students, and having ‘harder’ teachers (Coffey, 2009; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000).

Teachers are often quick to report that it is generally students in Years 5 to 8 (aged 10–14 years) that are the most challenging to teach (Chadbourne, 2001). It is only in relatively recent times that research has drawn attention to the complexity of these early adolescent years which encompass a developmental period marked by changes in both academic and physiological functioning (Crosnoe & Elder, 2004; Roeser & Eccles, 1998). Redefining relationships, social structures and the settings in which they find themselves, are all elements of the move from childhood to adulthood. This period is marked by the need to develop new methods of intellectual functioning in their quest for independence (Letrello & Miles, 2003). Young people quickly learn that the freedom to which they so aspire is also accompanied by new levels of responsibility.

The secondary school classroom can present a new and sometimes challenging environment for students do not learn in isolation, but rather, in a classroom with a teacher and their peers. Adolescents place particular emphasis on developing relationships with their peers (Longaretti, 2006; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Indeed social bonding has been highlighted as an important feature for school success (Ganeson, 2006). Social relationships with peers and
teachers significantly contribute to the sense of community that is created in the school environment. Typically, in secondary school students develop fewer close relationships and may feel a greater need to conform to the accepted group norms (Tobbell, 2003) than is the case in primary school.

Many students find that they are ill-prepared to meet the academic demands of secondary school. They may find that they need more explicit instruction and time to consolidate their learning as well as help with organization and time management. Homework can also be an issue in this regard. The content of lessons may be more difficult and expectations in terms of standard and volume of work produced may exceed that which they experienced in primary school. Further, there is a need to take greater responsibility for their own learning and they may have difficulty meeting expectations in terms of study, note taking and performance in tests and assignments (Elias, 2002). The decision to engage in this more difficult environment may well be reliant on the extent to which the students themselves believe that they can meet all of these challenges, see value in what they are doing and whether they perceive the classroom to be a safe and supportive environment (Roese, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000).

 Whilst most students cope with this transition in one way or another, there is no doubt that some struggle (Ashton, 2008; Chedzoy & Burden, 2005; Johnstone, 2001). This struggle may be evidenced by subsequent declines in academic performance, school attendance, self-image and engagement in learning (Ashton, 2008; Daly et al., 2009; Dinham & Rowe, 2008; Zeedyk et al., 2003). For some students, the transition to secondary school can be the most difficult aspect of their school experience. Chadbourne (2001) notes that the learning of early adolescents can falter when it really should be accelerating. Rates of disengagement and absenteeism are highest, and social and emotional functioning is being sorely tested, as students strive for behavioural and emotional autonomy (Rudzinskas, 2008). Many young adolescents find high school to be more impersonal with changes in their relationships with teachers, and that the environment is more competitive and more marks driven than primary school with a consequent loss of interest in school (Daly et al., 2009; Ganeson, 2006; Letrello & Miles, 2003; Midgely & Edelin, 1998; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Reddy, Rhodes, & Mulhall, 2003; Roese & Eccles, 1998) with a consequent loss of interest in school. Unsurprisingly the coping skills of adolescents are being sorely challenged as they move from childhood to adulthood. Even where students effectively negotiate this transition, it is almost always accompanied by elevated levels of stress and concern (Topping, 2011; Zeedyk et al., 2003). Students need to develop a sense of competence and self-worth to act as a bulwark against feelings of academic incompetence that may arise at a time when they are questioning the relevance of school to their lives (Roese & Eccles, 1998).

Teachers 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 et al., 2003; Roese & Eccles, 1998; Zimmerman & 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 behaviour, encourage cooperation and utilize the students’ strengths, teachers can create a classroom environment conducive to learning (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Whilst some students enjoy the added responsibilities of high school, such as more complex travel arrangements and managing a locker, research indicates that others may feel that they are not ready to live up to the new expectations of their teachers (Tobbell, 2003; Yates, 1999). Students note that one of the key differences in secondary school is that they miss the ‘comfort level’ of learning that they experienced in primary school where they felt that they were in an environment where they were known by their classmates and teachers (Bafumo, 2006).
Given that much of their day is spent in school, the importance of this institution in fostering the development of resilience in students is clear (Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, & Sawyer, 2003; Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1993). Indeed, fitting in at school and peer connectedness are key factors in promoting resilience in young people (Fuller, 2001). Paradoxically, early adolescence can also be a time when some students become far more positive about their learning, possibly as a result of exposure to a more diverse curriculum which is delivered in specialist facilities by specialist teachers.

The need to forge new peer relationships is one of the demands of the transition process with students needing to find a sense of place in their new secondary school where they are no longer the ‘big fish in the little pond’ (Topping, 2011). The focus of students is firmly on the social and environmental aspect of the move (Pratt & George, 2005) with students clearly concerned about making new friends and fitting in at their new school. At the same time, they are at a point in their lives when friendships and interactions with their peers are of high importance (McGee, Ward, Gibbons, & Harlow, 2003; Mizelle, 2005). Topping (2011) notes that issues of image and status can emerge when these relationships are disrupted during transition. The need to connect with a new peer group can be made all the more complicated because of the emerging feelings of sexual attraction that occur in early adolescence. The need to feel as though they ‘fit in’ and ‘belong’ in their new environment is paramount and is key to the successful navigation of the journey from primary to secondary school (Elias, 2002; Ganeson, 2006; Pratt & George, 2005). For many early adolescents, the social aspects of school take precedence over academic concerns. Sweetser (2003) notes that students place the need to belong to a peer group above all else and it was to their peers that they look to establish norms of ‘dress, social action and thinking’ (p. 4).

Past research on early adolescents has pointed to the significance of the relationship that exists between student perceptions of support and caring from teachers, parents and peers, to positive aspects of school competence and academic performance (Daly et al., 2008; Midgley & Edelin, 1998; Olsson et al., 2003; Reddy, Rhodes, & Mulhall, 2003; Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994). As such, the role of relationships to the successful transition of students and the implications for transition programs is worthy of further consideration. A transition program may be described as any set of activities, strategies or resources that a school uses to smooth the passage of students from primary to secondary school (Ganeson, 2006). Such a program would seek to reduce the emotional, social, intellectual and physical challenges of the move by reducing student trepidation and expediting the feeling of belonging in the new environment. A ‘culture of relationships’ needs to be created in the recognition that student learning is more likely to facilitated when it occurs in an environment of ‘meaningful and mentoring’ relationships (ACT Department of Education and Training, 2005). Transition programs are key to facilitating the conditions for learning and as such, schools need to give careful consideration to the supports that can be put in place to assist students in negotiating the move to secondary school (Ashton, 2008; Elias, 2002).

**What lessons can be learned from research?**

Using deliberative sampling, six larger secondary schools were invited to participate in a study conducted by the author (Coffey, 2009) in which the views of Year 7 students, parents and teachers were sought regarding transition to secondary school. After a meeting with the school principals, it was determined that a key senior manager should be identified in each school to act as the liaison between stakeholder groups. Principal support was high as these key leaders were keen to gather information about how the transition of Year 7s at their schools was progressing.

Mixed methodology (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2006) was chosen as the investigative tool. The quantitative aspect consisted of administering an instrument to gather information about the
participants’ feelings before, during and after transition along a five-point Likert-type scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree). The survey instrument was created utilizing the expert opinions of the school principals, researchers within the CEOWA and the research team. Each participant was asked to respond to a set themes including commencing secondary school (for example, ‘before I started secondary school I was worried about moving to a new school’), overall perceptions of the transition process (for example, ‘I have made new friends at secondary school’), and teaching and learning programs (for example, ‘I am finding the subjects that I am studying interesting and challenging’). Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Statistics version 17.0 software with descriptive statistics being produced. Respondents to the survey could also comment on two open-ended questions which asked what the most helpful aspects of the transition process were and what could be improved.

The qualitative aspect utilized interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), where participants related their own stories regarding how the transition had impacted upon them personally via semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted with focus groups: school personnel, students and parents. The length of the interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes and the interviews were audio-taped for later transcription and protocol analysis. The focus groups provided the opportunity to examine the themes covered in the survey in greater detail. Whilst the student and parents focus groups were chosen at random and comprised six to 12 members, only teachers who had direct contact with Year 7 students, that is, taught in the Year 7 program, participated in the focus groups with groups varying from two to ten members. The research was conducted mid-way during the first school term of the academic year. Participants in the research are outlined in Table 1.

Schools B, C, E and F are co-educational schools whilst School A is a boys only school and School D is a girls only school. The transition processes employed in each are outlined more fully in Coffey, Berlach and O’Neill (2011). The following discussion reports in greater depth on those aspects of the research which focused on the relational aspects of the transition process. Consideration is given to relationships between students, teachers and parents during the transition process. Other results are reported more fully in Coffey, Berlach and O’Neill (2013).

**Relationships between students**

Given that one of the chief concerns of students prior to transition is making new friends (Ashton, 2008), it is important that this aspect of the transition process is carefully considered. Students may well be ‘grieving’ for friendships from primary school that have been severed.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Teachers&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Students</th>
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<td>B</td>
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<td>51</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>334</td>
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<sup>a</sup>Respondent numbers vary as in some schools all teachers were invited by the leadership team to complete the survey, while in others only those directly involved with the incoming cohort participated.
Evidence from the research suggested that mid-way in the first term of the academic year some of the students’ main concerns – making new friends and fitting in – had quickly dissipated. The vast majority (85%) of students reported that they felt safe at secondary school which was powerful evidence that they quickly adapted to, and felt comfortable in, their new environment. Above all, it was testament to the work of the school personnel in providing opportunities for the students to settle into their school and develop relationships with other members of the new cohort.

Students frequently commented that the older students that they encountered through peer support programs ‘teach you how to get through high school’. Familiar older students can be important in providing a sense of security in a still unfamiliar environment (Johnstone, 2001). The need for peer support and help is often more acute with transition to secondary school (Ashton, 2008; Pratt & George, 2005) and hence it is important that transition programs provide opportunities for transitioning students to feel supported (McGee et al., 2004; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Feelings of vulnerability can be significantly reduced if students feel that they have allies and are accepted as part of a group. Feeling listened to is also important as is evidenced by the following student comments:

They’ve asked us if there is anything hard about the move then they talk about it at meetings to see if they can make anything easier. (Student, School A)

The school hasn’t done anything that stands out dramatically, but they have just been supportive when we need help and don’t get too mad when we are late for class or forget things, at the start of the year especially. (Student, School E)

Part of the development of a sense of belonging in the new school can also be fostered through the extracurricular activities that may be offered by the school. These activities also provide the opportunity for the students to establish new friendships. Each of the participating schools involved the new secondary students in the inter-school summer sporting competitions. This can reinforce the development of the sense of allegiance to the new school. A range of other opportunities such as membership of various clubs were also offered to the students. It should be noted that parents also reported great delight in seeing their children positively interacting with older students. The opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities has been associated with positive youth development and becoming educationally resilient (Peck, Roeser, Zarrett, & Eccles, 2008).

Related to the issue of student relationships is bullying. Despite the opportunity to discuss bullying, either through the anonymity of a survey or in a focus group, it was not raised as a major issue by the students in this research. It was also not an issue that they reported as being of concern to them prior to commencing at secondary school. Whilst some students indicated that they had noted that bullying was evident in the schools, others also commented that it occurred to a lesser degree than they had experienced in primary school. As is often the case, the students did not necessarily want to take the matter further for fear of being labelled a ‘dobber’. Students felt that bullying occurred more in groups in the form of derogatory comments directed at a group of students rather than the individual. Students within the Year 7 and 8 cohort were identified as the most frequent culprits, whilst the students noted that the older Year 11 and Year 12 students were often protective of their younger counterparts. This lends weight to the powerful impact of peer support programs which, as mentioned above, provide an opportunity for the younger students to strongly identify with the older students.

**Relationships between students and teachers**

The role of the teacher in creating a safe and supportive learning environment cannot be underestimated in helping to foster new relationships both between students and between teachers and
students (Prosser, 2008; Tobbell, 2003; Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994). Any change involves a period of adjustment to the new conditions. For new secondary students they must adjust to no longer being the oldest in the school and may find that they are treated as being younger and less independent by their teachers than they had been in primary school (Yates, 1999). One of the participating teachers in the research noted the disconnect between the primary and secondary school environment:

One thing that concerns me is that a lot of the high school teachers still expect them to be high school kids. They are not really aware that they are still really young and really immature and they need a lot more scaffolding. Things like reporting and parent nights need to be different. They [parents] need a bit more time and a bit more feedback from the teachers to the parents. They [teachers] expect it to be here’s your report and see you later. Year 7 parents still want a bit more. They still want to see you and talk to you and have that interaction with you. Although they have moved back to the ‘drop off and leave’ they still want a bit more from you as a teacher. Some of the senior school needs to be a bit more aware of that… . Year 7s are different. (Teacher, School C)

The author found that students were very aware that their teachers had ‘gone easy’ on them during the first term at secondary school and had overlooked issues of lateness to class or forgetting particular books or equipment. Similarly, it emerged that attending to small details such as informing the students precisely what to bring on the first day was important. This was not always the case in each of the participating schools, with students arriving at some schools on their first day over-laden with all of their books and other paraphernalia. One of the participating parents commented that the importance of providing initial clear information about the first day helped commence the process of establishing a relationship between the student and their new school:

I found [NAME] was preparing himself because it was very clear in black and white. He was also told so he could take the initiative of getting ready [for the first day] which I found was very important. This has lasted. He started out the way he has carried on and it was well directed and very simple. (Parent, School A)

Teachers are pivotal in helping the students settle into their new environment. The following comment from a teacher points to the importance of staff understanding the issues facing students during transition:

I have found that every bunch of Year 7s that come in have the same problems no matter what procedures we put in place. We try and give them different bits and pieces along the way – every year it is the same problem. They are just not accustomed to it [secondary school]. They find that settling in takes them a term to half a year before they start to get organized. (Teacher, School C)

Such awareness is important. For example, School C suspended the general teaching program during the first two weeks of the academic year which allowed for the teachers to establish the organizational skills with the students and get them settled. The following comment is testament to this:

As staff, we made allowances for the kids to allow them to settle in before teaching curriculum. Therefore I believe the transition was very smooth – my kids were settled almost immediately. (Teacher, School C)

It is necessary to acknowledge the importance of teachers’ understanding and responding to the issues with which the students struggle during transition. As has been mentioned above, the students frequently allude to their friendly and helpful teachers as being an important part of their move to their new school.
Another important factor in the transition process that became evident from this research is the importance of the transition coordinator (Coffey, 2009). This person was the link between the students, parents and teachers and was pivotal in helping the students settle into their new environment. They became the key adult with whom the new students identify and whom they feel ‘knows them’. In each of the participating schools the transition programs provided the opportunity for the incoming students to meet the coordinator when they visited the students in their final year of primary school. Orientation days held in the year prior to commencing high school were also an opportunity for the students to further get to know this key teacher at their new school. Because of the importance of the role of the transition coordinator, it is important that judicious consideration is given by schools to the appointment of this person (Coffey, 2009). The capacity to empathize with students as they settled into the new school was a key trait that emerged as being vital in the selection of the transition coordinator. It is important to note that this coordinator is also the person that teachers mention as being pivotal to the transition process when they wish to raise general concerns or issues related to particular students (Coffey, 2009).

Parents and transition

The role of parents in the transition process is also worthy of consideration as their participation is critical (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). When parents are involved in the transition process there is a greater likelihood that they will remain as a participant in their child’s secondary schooling. This partnership increases the likelihood that the students will achieve at a high level, be well-adjusted and are less likely to drop out of school (Mizelle, 2005).

What also emerged from the research was that it is important to bear in mind that parents too are forging relationships with the new school. First-time secondary parents are coming to terms with an entirely new mode of school operation. Rather than enjoying reasonably ready access to their child’s teacher, they now have to forge relationships with a number of teachers. At the same time their children are beginning to seek independence and no longer wish to be seen in the company of their parents. An understanding of school procedures is important because it can help to allay some of their fears for their children. The following comments from parents are indicative of this need for good communication:

The school held a number of information evenings for parents prior to the beginning of my child’s Year 7. These were reassuring in that I felt confident the school was developing a program that would be ready for the new intake. Being kept informed was crucial. We also received much information that was sent by post. Our confidence was conveyed to our child who consequently was quite happy to move to Year 7. (Parent, School F)

[NAME]’s transition to high school was relatively smooth. However, most of the information about high school (paperwork, orientation, etc.) came at the end of Year 6. I think an introduction throughout the year would have been better as [NAME]’s anticipation and questions increased without answers up until the very end of the year because we didn’t have the information. Once at high school everything has gone very well and I feel the school is going beyond their requirements to help the girls settle in. (Parent, School D)

Clearly, parents value being well informed about the school and the procedures. Given that their children may not be as communicative as they were in primary school, parents need to have an avenue through which to obtain the information that they require. Having some form of parent/teacher event early in the first term in the new school can be important in avoiding situations where a lack of awareness of procedures can lead to misunderstandings:
Explaining to children that teachers no longer chase them for work, i.e. handing in completed homework. My son was used to being reminded to hand in his work, so when this was not happening, he was not handing in his work. As a result of this his report indicated that he was not completing homework, however this was actually not the case. I had to bring this up at a parent/teacher interview. (Parent, School E)

The role of the transition coordinator is also important from the parents’ perspective as they can be one member of the school staff to whom queries can be addressed. The coordinator is someone that parents will have had the opportunity to meet prior to the commencement of the academic year and with whom they can build a relationship:

School is excellent with their communication with the parents. They have firstly got the diary – any information you want to give to the teacher or the teacher to you. You ring up teachers and they return your calls. They give you what you need to know. It is fantastic the school here. It is commendable the type of staff they’ve got here. It has a lot to do with the Year Head. The kids have felt safe, names are known and if there is a problem it is always followed through. (Parent, School B)

Parents also commented that they would welcome the opportunity to meet other parents through social events conducted at the school. Whereas in primary school they may well have known the parents of their child’s friends, this is not necessarily the case in secondary school when their children were making new friendships. Hence some capacity to establish contact with other parents was frequently cited as an issue that can ease the transition process.

**Conclusion**

Change is an inevitable but challenging part of life. The transition from primary to secondary school, regarded as a regular part of the educational landscape, represents a significant challenge to all who are involved in the process – students, parents and teachers. An understanding of the challenges faced by each of these stakeholders is important. Whilst this process may be stressful, positive relationships can help to ameliorate many of the challenges presented by this change.

The findings of this research support an emphasis on the relational aspects of the transition process. Ensuring good communication channels amongst and between the stakeholders before, during and after transition, is crucial in this regard. Judicious consideration needs to be directed to the appointment of the transition coordinator as this is the key person to which each of these stakeholders will turn when issues arise. Students need to be afforded numerous opportunities to meet and develop relationships with their new peers and teachers. Parents and teachers need to be acutely aware of the many issues that students will encounter in adjusting to their new school environment in order to assist them help them quickly settle into their new school. Effective lines of communication need to be established between parents and the school so that both can work effectively together for the benefit of the students. It is important to remember that first-time secondary parents are also transitioning to a new school environment.

Whilst the transition from primary to secondary school can pose many challenges, careful planning can ensure that all involved are well placed to meet these challenges. A focus on relationships and empathic school personnel can ensure that both student and parent concerns are acknowledged and accounted for when planning transition programs.

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