

Perceptions of primary to secondary school transitions: Challenge or threat?

Erin Mackenzie, Anne McMaugh and Kerry-Ann O'Sullivan

Macquarie University

Primary to secondary school transition has been identified as a significant and stressful event for young adolescent students. Recent research has focused on individual aspects of coping with the challenges of transition in order to determine features that may act as protective or harmful factors. This study employs a mixed-method design to examine student perceptions of transition in the pre- and post-transition period. Participants were 75 female students (28 in Year 6, 47 in Year 7) from an independent girls' school in Sydney, NSW. Perceptions of academic and social aspects of transition are explored using an online questionnaire and focus group interview. Results indicate both pre- and post-transition students have positive overall perceptions of the move to secondary school, although the pre-transition students reported a more positive perception than their post-transition counterparts. Having an older sibling at the secondary school was found to decrease social threat scores for pre-transition students. Results are discussed in terms of the cognitive-transactional theory of stress, and specific implications for educators are explored.

Introduction

The primary to secondary school transition refers to the period during which students move from the final year of primary school to embark on their secondary schooling career. In Australia, students will typically range from 11 to 13 years in age during this period. Transition is defined as "circumstances, often arising from social and biological events that disrupt previously existing social equilibria" (Caspi & Moffitt, 1991, p. 157). During any transition period, people must utilise their previously developed strategies and resources to counteract any issues that arise as change invariably brings about new challenges (Caspi & Moffitt, 1991).

The transition from primary to secondary school has been identified as a significant issue for young adolescents (Vinson, 2006), as this period is associated with a range of behavioural problems (Howard & Johnson, 2004) and a substantial decline in academic performance (NTCOGSO, 2005). The reason for this is encapsulated by the following:

...this transition period involves stresses and anxiety for all pupils, even those who adjust well to secondary school. A poor transition is associated with concurrent psychological problems and a poor transition can set in motion chains of events that impact on future attainment and adjustment (Rice, Frederickson & Seymour, 2010, p. 3).

The transition period has also been associated with mental health concerns (Gutman & Eccles, 2007; Zeedyk et al., 2003; Lord, Eccles & McCarthy, 1994), including the onset of eating disorders (Birchley, 2007) and declines in self-esteem (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008).

Furthermore, the secondary school environment may not meet the developmental needs of young adolescents, causing negative educational and psychological outcomes (Eccles & Midgley, 1990).

Problematic aspects of transition

Research into possible negative aspects of transition has elicited a range of concerns and confronting issues for students. Problematic aspects of transition can be classified as academic or social, most of which result from the dramatic changes that occur as students move from primary to secondary school. Considerable academic differences exist between the primary school environment and the secondary school environment, such as greater emphasis being placed on evaluation of students (Benner & Graham, 2009; Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000; Wigfield et al., 1991), the school being larger and more competitive (Demetriou, Goalen & Rudduck, 2000) and ability being more highly valued than effort (Jackson & Warin, 2000). These discourses are amplified by the concurrent need to adapt to different teacher expectations and teaching styles as the student begins secondary school (Pratt & George, 2005; Crockett et al., 1989). Furthermore, keeping up with the demands of secondary school is a source of concern for students (Howard & Johnson, 2004), with pressure to achieve academically arising from a variety of sources including parents, teachers and peers (Walkerdine et al., 2001).

Social concerns during the transition period are also paramount. Adolescence is a period when social acceptance is typically perceived by students to be of great importance (Gerner & Wilson, 2005). This is greatly intensified during primary to secondary transition, when the formation of new social groups is at its peak. In a study of English students, Chedzoy and Burden (2005) found that students identify 'fitting in' and making friends as being of utmost importance during the transition period. Similar findings have been made by Australian researchers (Howard & Johnson, 2004), who have concluded that the key transition challenges are making friends, 'fitting in' and dealing with bullying. At the same time, students are displaced from the top of the social hierarchy in primary school to the bottom in secondary school:

From being the oldest, most responsible, best known and most demonstrably able – both academically and physically – these children became the youngest, least knowing and least known members of the community in which they find themselves. (Summerfield, 1986, p. 11)

This climate has the capacity to produce feelings of irrelevance and anonymity, which is supported by findings that indicate students' self-concept plunges over this period (Tonkin & Watt, 2003). The effects of these social concerns are heightened by their concurrent nature, producing an accumulation of stress factors (Griebel & Berwanger, 2006).

While these issues are extremely significant, it is important to remember that the primary to secondary school transition is systemic, and a necessary part of the journey through schooling. As a result, it has an effect on all students to a varying degree (Anderson,

Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000). For some students, transition experiences are very negative, and have lasting ramifications on their academic performance and overall wellbeing. However, for the majority of students, negative effects are relatively short term (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000). It is for this reason that transition research has focussed on the identification of factors that may improve transition outcomes and facilitate positive transition experiences.

Facilitating positive transitions

Some positive transition experiences can be, at least in part, attributed to factors external to the student. Situational variables such as having a supportive home environment (Rice, 1997), accessible teachers in high school, a strong peer network and an older sibling have been identified as facilitating successful transitions (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000). Furthermore, considering that many of the problematic aspects of transition stem from the differences that exist between the primary and secondary school environment (for example, increased focus on grading (Benner & Graham, 2009), increased size (Demetriou, Goalen & Rudduck, 2000), different teaching styles and school organisation (NTCOGSO, 2005), there may be some benefit in reducing some of these differences. This may be achieved through increasing student familiarity with the new school environment. The concept of induction days has been found to be helpful in supporting positive transitions from primary to secondary school (Graham & Hill, 2003).

Transition research has also focussed on identification of student characteristics that may facilitate successful transition experiences. A key meta-analysis by Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm and Splittgerber (2000) has suggested that such characteristics include having the appropriate knowledge and thinking skills to cope with the academic challenges of high school, as well as being conscientious and having the ability to work independently. In addition to this, students should have a range of coping strategies that they can employ during times of difficulty. As a result of conflicting findings regarding transition effects, recent research has focussed on individual aspects of coping with the challenges of transition in order to determine features that may act as protective or harmful factors (Vanlede, Little & Card, 2006; Frydenberg & Lewis, 2004; Lohaus, Elben, Ball & Klein-Hessling, 2004).

Coping theorists recognise that loss is central to any concept of stress, and while there can be loss or gain from a stressful situation, loss is more severe (Frydenberg, 2008). Transition from primary to secondary school is seen as stressful, and this could be because of the perceived academic and social losses associated with this period. Individual perceptions play a vital role in the nature of the outcome of a stressful situation, with negative stress stemming from the perception that the demands of the new situation will exceed their resources. By reinterpreting a threat as a challenge, individuals can reduce the negative emotions associated with a stressful situation (Frydenberg, 2008). This concept is central to the work of researchers who have approached individual differences in transition outcomes as being a product of the student's perception of transition (for example, Rice, Frederickson & Seymour, 2010; Sirsch, 2003).

Cognitive-transactional theory

The concept of individual perceptions of a stressful event being fundamental to the actual stress associated with the event stems from Lazarus' cognitive-transactional stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The cognitive-transactional theory considers the appraisal of the situation – as a challenge or threat or loss – as being the most influential component of the stress associated with the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The transactional nature of this stress theory recognises that the individual influences the stress experienced around a situation, and vice versa (Lazarus, 1981). This means that the perception of the event changes the outcome of the situation. There are specific situational responses elicited, depending on the perception of the event. For example, if a situation was perceived as being threatening or damaging, psychological stress would follow as a result of anxiety about harm or loss. If the same situation was appraised as an opportunity for growth, then a positive and well-balanced emotional response would follow.

Transition from primary to secondary school has been shown to be a stressful event in the lives of all adolescents (Rice, Frederickson & Seymour, 2010), and it follows that Lazarus' theory can be used to investigate the situation. If a student were to perceive transition as a challenge, or an opportunity to master the situation, then emotions such as eagerness, happiness and excitement would follow (Sirsch, 2003). Conversely, those students who feel anxious or fearful of the transition would appraise it as an anticipated harm or loss. While Lazarus' work provides a strong framework for investigating any stressful event, it is also necessary to consider issues that are specific to primary to secondary school transition. It is a period that involves changes in social interactions, academic expectations and school environments, all of which occurring concurrently (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000).

An important study by Sirsch (2003) has approached primary to secondary school transition using the cognitive-transactional theory with Austrian schoolchildren. A questionnaire was developed specifically for this study (The Impending Transition to Secondary School Perceived as a Challenge and Threat (ITCT), which aimed to measure the attitudes of students to the transition from primary to secondary school as a challenge and/or threat. The ITCT was designed to explore student perceptions in terms of academic challenge/threat and social challenge/threat, and questionnaire items fit inside these four domains. Empirical data from Sirsch's study (2003) confirmed that this four-domain structure has a significantly better fit than when the items are divided into only two domains (challenge and threat). Findings from this study indicate that the predominant attitude towards transition from primary to secondary school is positive (challenging). Furthermore, personal factors (e.g. social anxiety and self-concept) were predictors of perceiving the transition as a threat.

In the present paper, Sirsch's theoretical framework is used to investigate the perceptions that students have of the transition period, both before and after they make the transition. This study will aim to identify the specific areas of transition (if any) that pre-transition students appraise as threatening (negative stress), to allow for transition programs to specifically target these areas to support students through the transition period. In

addition, the overall perceptions of post-transition students will also be investigated using Sirsch's framework. The effect of two situational variables on challenge/threat perceptions in both groups is also considered.

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were 75 female students in Year 6 (N=28) and Year 7 (N=47), recruited from an independent girls' school in Sydney, NSW. Although the school caters for students from preschool through to Year 12, the primary and secondary school students attended physically separate campuses with minimal exposure to the organisation or structure of the other campuses. As such, the school had a Year 6 to Year 7 transition program in place at the time of the study. The students at this school tend to come from middle to upper socioeconomic backgrounds. This study received ethical approval from the University Human Ethics Committee and all participants received written parental approval for participation in the study.

Procedure

Data collection took place in Term 4 of the school year for the Year 6 and Year 7 groups. For the Year 6 students, this was their final term of primary school, while the Year 7 students had completed three terms of secondary school. Each student completed an online questionnaire based on the ITCT (Sirsch, 2003) during school hours under the supervision of their usual classroom or pastoral care teachers. In order to specifically examine perceived stressors prior to transition, a focus group was conducted with a small group of randomly selected Year 6 participants (N=8). The focus group consisted of four structured questions.

Measures

Questionnaires

The study employed two questionnaires, one designed for the pre-transition (Year 6) group, and the other for the post-transition (Year 7) group. The questionnaires were based on Sirsch's (2003) The Impending Transition to Secondary School Perceived as a Challenge and Threat (ITCT) questionnaire. The pre-transition questionnaire consisted of 29 items rated on a 4-point rating scale (strongly disagree – disagree – agree – strongly disagree). Minor modifications were made to the questionnaire including the removal of one item due to the similarity between two items. The pre-transition questionnaire included two additional items asking about their intended secondary school, and whether they had an older sibling at their intended secondary school.

The post-transition questionnaire included 26 items rated on the same 4-point scale. Minor modifications were also made to the post-transition questionnaire to make the items appropriate for students who had already made the transition to secondary school (e.g. "When I think of the fact that I will go to a new school next year then I look forward

to it, because I can show what I have learnt” was changed to “I feel that I have enjoyed my first year of senior school because I have been able to show what I have learnt”).

The modified ITCT questionnaires included items under the subscales of academic challenge, social challenge, academic threat and social threat. The challenge subscales were used to measure a positive appraisal of transition, while the threat subscales measured a negative perception of transition. In Sirsch's (2003) study, scores greater than 2.50 were described as 'high', and scores lower than 2.50 were designated as 'low'. In the challenge domains, 'high' scores denote positive stress perceptions of transition, while in the threat domains, 'high' scores indicate negative stress perceptions. This description was also used in the present study. Each subscale was found to have an acceptable level of internal consistency. The Cronbach's alpha for each subscale in this study are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Scale reliabilities for pre-transition and post-transition questionnaires

Subscale	Pre-transition		Post-transition	
	No. of items	Cronbach's alpha	No. of items	Cronbach's alpha
Academic challenge	7	0.86	7	0.83
Social challenge	7	0.86	7	0.83
Academic threat	7	0.81	8	0.87
Social threat	5	0.85	6	0.83

Focus group

The focus group was conducted to generate conversation about the aspects of transition Year 6 perceived as challenging and threatening, as well as investigating feelings of preparedness for senior school. The focus of this discussion was with Year 6 students in order to provide the school with potential programming directions for their transition program for the following year. Insights provided by the Year 6 students could then be used to support those students in their transition to secondary school. One focus group was conducted with Year 6 students, which took place during school hours. Students who participated in the questionnaire were invited to participate in the focus group at random, and the session was audio-recorded for later analysis. The focus group session ran for approximately forty minutes. All students in the Year 6 focus group were intending to move to the senior school component of their current school (rather than moving to an alternative school).

The focus group interviews were semi-structured, with the structured portion of the interview consisting of the following four questions.

1. How do you feel about going to the senior school?
2. What do you look forward to most about going to the senior school?
3. Do you think that you are well-prepared for senior school?
4. What concerns do you have about going to the senior school?

In addition to these questions, the moderator was also able to ask additional questions to explore the perceptions of participants further.

Results

In order to examine the study objectives, analyses were conducted to a) investigate the challenge and threat perceptions concerning transition of Year 6 and Year 7 students; b) examine the role of specific protective factors in these perceptions; and c) explore specific aspects of transition that Year 6 students were looking forward to and concerned about. Descriptive statistics are initially reported to examine Year 6 and Year 7 perceptions of transition. Comparisons between Year 6 and Year 7 scores are then conducted, and the relationship between protective factors and transition perceptions are analysed. Finally, specific aspects of transition of concern to Year 6 students are presented in the focus group results.

Descriptive statistics

The means and standard deviations for each questionnaire subscale are presented by year group in Table 2. Both Year 6 and Year 7 academic and social challenge mean appraisal scores were greater than 3.00 (high), although the Year 6 mean scores were greater than the Year 7 scores in each of the challenge domains. High challenge scores suggest that students view these aspects of transition as being an opportunity for growth and development (positive stress appraisal). Both the academic and social threat mean scores for the Year 6 group were considered to be low (less than 2.50). The Year 7 group social threat mean score was also low, however the academic threat mean score for the Year 7 students was high (greater than 2.50).

Table 2: Means and standard deviations for transition subscales by year group

Subscale	Year 6 (N = 28)	Year 7 (N = 47)
Academic challenge	3.38 (0.37)	3.02 (0.54)
Social challenge	3.42 (0.40)	3.31 (0.56)
Academic threat	2.01 (0.52)	2.67 (0.58)
Social threat	1.79 (0.52)	2.12 (0.74)

Percentages of high mean values for each domain and for each year group are presented in Figure 1. When Year 6 and Year 7 data is combined it emerges that 91% of students in this study consider the transition to high school as an academic challenge. 94% of students consider the new school environment as a social challenge. Approximately one-third of students regard the transition as an academic threat, while 21% view it as a social threat.

Variations in pre-transition and post-transition perceptions

Independent samples t-tests were also conducted to determine differences in Year 6 and Year 7 scores. To account for slight variations in the Year 6 and Year 7 questionnaires, several items were omitted from the Year 7 data to make this comparison valid. This study found that Year 6 students ($M=3.38$, $SD=0.37$) had significantly higher academic challenge scores ($t(73)=3.22$, $p=0.002$) than Year 7 students ($M=3.02$, $SD=0.52$).

Academic threat scores were significantly lower ($t(73)=-4.96, p<0.001$) for Year 6 students ($M=2.01, SD=0.52$) than Year 7 students ($M=2.67, SD=0.57$). Social threat scores were also significantly lower ($t(73)=-2.09, p=0.04$) for Year 6 students ($M=1.79, SD=0.52$) than Year 7 students ($M=2.12, SD=0.74$).

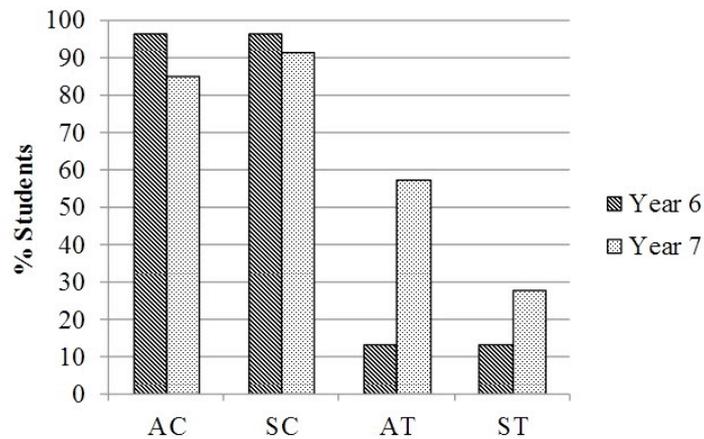


Figure 1: Comparison of Year 6 and Year 7 high mean values

Protective factors and transition perceptions

In order to investigate whether potential protective factors (as identified in the literature) had any effect on perceptions of transition, independent samples t-tests were conducted on the data. Of the 28 Year 6 students, 17 had an older sibling who attended the secondary school. In the Year 6 data, social threat scores were significantly lower ($t(26)=2.974, p = 0.006$) for students who had an older sibling already attending the secondary school ($M=1.58, SD=0.45$) than those who did not ($M=2.11, SD=0.46$). The presence of an older sibling at school had no significant effect on the other domains of academic or social challenge and academic threat ($p>0.05$). Independent samples t-tests were also used to test the effects of having an older sibling for year 7 children. There was no significant difference in threat and challenge perceptions between those with or without older siblings, across all four domains.

T-tests were also used to examine differences between Year 7 students who attended the same school in Year 6 compared with those who came to the school from an alternative primary school. Of the 47 Year 7 students who participated, 28 had attended the same school for primary school. The primary school attended had no significant effect on any domain ($p>0.05$).

Focus group results

A focus group was conducted to generate discussion about the specific aspects of transition Year 6 students were looking forward to and worried about. A number of significant themes emerged from this discussion, as outlined below. Excerpts

representative of each theme are presented, along with a contextual discussion of that theme. The dominant feelings identified by Year 6 students surrounding the transition to secondary school were a conflict between excitement and anxiousness, with most of the group identifying this at some stage during the interview thus, “I’m actually quite excited to go to the senior school, but also quite scared.”

This conflict is also reflected in the questionnaire data gathered for this study, as many students reported some high challenge and threat scores for various aspects of transition. Indeed for many of the following themes, some students are conflicted between positive and negative aspects of transition.

Social issues

The social issues that emerged from the focus group as being of importance to Year 6 students included aspects such as meeting new people, making new friends, and being worried about not making friends, or people not liking them. Meeting new people was perceived as something to look forward to about the new school.

I’ll get to meet new people and make more friends ...

However, making friends was also a source of concern for some students, as they were apprehensive about other students not liking them.

I don’t want someone not to like me. (Student A)

Yeah, some people might be mean and stuff. (Student B)

Students also expressed some concern about the difference in social hierarchy between the primary and secondary school. They were worried about the transition from ‘the top’ of the primary school social ladder to being beneath all other year groups in the secondary school.

Sometimes I’m a bit scared that like for the past 2 years like in Year 5 and 6 we’ve been like at the top of the school like we’re like leading everyone but then when we get to Year 7 we’ll be at the bottom – starting all over again.

This concern reflected feelings of loss associated with their perceived place of leadership within the school being taken away from them, as they were to become the youngest group within the new school environment.

Secondary school subjects

Year 6 students overwhelmingly expressed an excitement and interest in the new subjects that would be offered to them in the secondary school. Subjects that were specifically mentioned included Science, Design and Technology and Food Technology.

I’m looking forward to the new subjects and new classes and the teachers and the new girls. I’m looking forward to all the new stuff, which is pretty much everything.

I'm looking forward to design and technology, and food technology, and the different atmosphere...

They were also excited about the prospect of being able to choose some of their subjects as they travelled through the secondary school.

Having new and different teachers

Several students identified having new teachers, and a range of teachers as being something that they looked forward to about going to secondary school. The reason behind this is encapsulated by one of the students.

Well, maybe if you don't like one subject because you don't have that good a teacher, there's always another subject and different teacher.

There was significant agreement by the group that being able to change teachers many times per day was a positive aspect of the secondary school. No students made negative comments about this theme.

Homework and assessments

This theme was the most negatively discussed issue in the Year 6 focus group. Students were scared and worried about the level and amount of impending homework and assessments, indicating that they did not think that their current homework requirements were preparing them for the onslaught of secondary school homework. Their reasons for this apprehension were varied, ranging from being worried about not doing well to being worried about not being able to cope with the amount of work. Several students in the focus group identified that having an older sibling increased the amount of perceived pressure to do well, stemming from their parents, and their own expectations in some cases.

'Cause if I get a bad mark then my parents would be like ... not very happy.

... my sister always gets As in everything and so she pressures me to get As in everything .

The Year 6 students expressed concern about not being prepared for the amount of work, and the concept of grouped examination periods (e.g. Yearly Examinations). They had unreasonable expectations of themselves needing to be able to cope with the workload of their older siblings (who in some cases were several years older than them).

Secondary school environment

The structural and functional aspects of the new school environment were a source of some comfort and anxiety for these students. They expressed relief that the secondary school was considered "small" in comparison to other schools, as they felt that it would be easier to find their way around the school. They were also looking forward to the small nature of the school allowing their teachers and fellow students to get to know them and how they learn.

The less people that are there the more they can focus on people's individual faults, like otherwise they'd have to concentrate on everyone. And then you don't really learn much because the teacher's doing what like everyone needs. They don't really teach you what you need help with.

Anxiety regarding the secondary school environment was derived from the prospect of timetables, and being able to find their classrooms.

Well I'm sort of worried that I might get lost! Because the classrooms don't say like 'maths room' they say 'A064' or something like that.

There was also some concern that there is little perceived time to get from one class to the next. However, students who had older siblings at the school indicated that their sibling was already teaching them to read the timetable, and assured the group that this was not a concerning aspect of moving to senior school.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore stress perceptions of students surrounding the transition from primary to secondary school. The study was designed to investigate some individual characteristics as potential protective factors, and to compare the opinions of students prior to the transition period with those who had recently navigated the transition from primary to secondary school. Finally, the study sought to identify the particular aspects of transition Year 6 students looked forward to and felt threatened by, in order to explore better ways of supporting these students in their transition to secondary school.

Results from Sirsch's (2003) study indicated that the predominant attitude of pre-transition students towards the transition was positive, with 50% perceiving it as being positive and 20% regarding it as being a negative experience. The Year 6 scores in this study were similar to those reported by Sirsch (2003). Both academic and social challenge mean appraisal scores were high, with the academic challenge mean being greater than that reported by Sirsch. The social challenge mean was slightly lower in the current study. High challenge scores suggest that students view these aspects of transition as being an opportunity for growth and development (positive stress appraisal). Both the academic and social threat means from the Year 6 data were lower than those reported by Sirsch (2003), with both scores considered to be low. This suggests that the students in this study had a low academic and social threat appraisal of transition. The high challenge and low threat scores in the academic and social domains may indicate a positive adjustment to these aspects of transition.

In this study there was a significant difference between the Year 6 and Year 7 perceptions in most domains. Year 6 students seemed to have a much more positive perception of the impending transition, reporting significantly higher academic challenge scores, lower academic threat scores and lower social threat scores than their Year 7 counterparts. Qualitative information gathered from the Year 6 students reflected a very positive perception of the impending transition, and although there were some specific concerns,

their discussion indicated that they were looking forward to moving up into the secondary school. The seemingly more negative appraisal of transition by Year 7 students is consistent with numerous studies that have found a decline in average grades across the transition period and a more negative attitude towards schooling in general (NTCOGSO, 2005). Furthermore, following the transition from primary to secondary school, students report that they “feel it is more difficult to make friends and they feel more alone” (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000, p. 327). This may explain the higher social threat scores reported by the Year 7 group in this study. The more negative academic appraisal by Year 7 students may also be explained by the time of testing as the Year 7 cohort participated in the study approximately two weeks prior to their Yearly Examinations, a period when negative stress appraisals were potentially higher than normal. It is also possible that this Year 7 group may have had a more negative appraisal of the transition initially, in comparison to the Year 6 group tested here. A longitudinal study would be required to investigate these differences to a greater extent.

Within the stress and coping field, perceptions of the individual are deemed to be influenced by risk and protective factors. Much research has focussed on investigating these mediating factors for transition, with a number of potential protective factors being identified. While the investigation of many of these were beyond the scope of this study (for a thorough discussion see Gutman & Midgley, 2000), two environment-based factors were considered in terms of their potential influence on student perceptions. In this particular school environment (K-12), the majority of the Year 6 cohort will transition to Year 7 at the same school albeit a different campus. As a result of this, the Year 7 cohort will be made up of a significant percentage of students who had attended the primary school component of the same school. This familiarity with the broader school ethos was hypothesised to be a protective factor in transition perceptions, as many negative issues stem from the differences that exist between the primary and secondary school environments (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000). Surprisingly, no significant differences were found in the perceptions between the groups of students who had attended the primary component of the school and those who had not in the Year 7 cohort. This may suggest that the primary school attended by students, and their exposure to the secondary school may make little difference to the attitudes of students once they have moved into the secondary school. The climate in Year 7 may be more influential than prior experiences in this regard.

Another potential protective factor for primary to secondary school transition is having an older sibling who already attends the secondary school (Rice, 1997). A positive relationship between having an older sibling and making a successful transition has been found, possibly because of the information and experience that they can provide to the younger sibling (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000). The ability of an older sibling to provide information to the younger student was apparent in the focus group with Year 6 students. The students with an older sibling in the secondary school had a much greater knowledge about aspects of the senior school, such as homework and assessment expectations, and general functioning of the senior school. However, these students also reported concerns with their own academic performance, particularly if they perceived their older sibling to be a high achiever in this area. Interestingly, data from the

questionnaire indicated that there was no significant difference in academic challenge scores between the Year 6 students with or without an older sibling at the school. However, there was a significant difference in the social threat scores of students in Year 6 who had a sibling attending the secondary school, when compared to those who did not have an older sibling at the school. The students with an older sibling reported lower social threat scores, suggesting that having an older sibling may reduce anxiety and negative attitudes towards the impending social discourses associated with the transition from primary to secondary school. There were no significant differences in any domains for Year 7 students with older siblings when compared to those without.

The final aim of this study was to identify the specific aspects of transition that Year 6 students looked forward to and felt threatened by. Students in this study identified that they were looking forward to the new subjects that they were to study in the secondary school. They identified specific subjects and activities that they were looking forward to (e.g. experiments in Science, Design and Technology). This is consistent with research that has indicated that pre-transition students look forward to starting practical subjects and having new learning experiences (Graham & Hill, 2003). The students in this study also reported that they were looking forward to having new teachers, and a range of teachers, which is also consistent with previous research (Marston, 2008; Graham & Hill, 2003). While this aspect of secondary school is thought to contribute to negative transitions due to the differences in teacher expectations that exist in comparison to having one teacher in primary school (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2006), it is likely that pre-transition students do not consider this aspect of having a range of teachers. Kirkpatrick (2004) suggests that pre-transition students do not have accurate information about the nature of secondary school. The positive perceptions about teachers may be diminished after the transition period, as students experience less personal relationships with teachers (Mizelle, 1995). In terms of social aspects of the move to secondary school, students in this study were looking forward to meeting new people. This finding is supported by research that suggests that students are looking forward to a “fresh start” and making new friends (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008; Marston, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 2004; Graham & Hill, 2003).

While their overall perception of the transition to secondary school was quite positive, there were some aspects of the transition that were sources of concern and anxiety for the Year 6 students. Academic concerns were centred on the amount and difficulty of homework that they thought they would receive in Year 7. Students were worried about not being able to do the work, and having to spend the majority of their free time doing homework and assignments. They also expressed concern about not doing well in tests and assessments, citing pressure from themselves and their parents as driving this anxiety. The largest area of concern regarding transition has been identified to be educational by a number of researchers (Marston, 2008; Vinson, 2006; Galton et al., 2003), with Marston's (2008) findings indicating that homework, tests and examinations were the greatest concerns within the academic aspect of transition. While Graham & Hill (2003) found that non-academic sources of anxiety concerning transition were identified more readily by students, they also found that the academic aspect of transition that worried students most was having more homework.

The majority of the social and organisational concerns raised by students in this study have been noted by previous researchers. For example, making friends and dealing with a new social hierarchy were the main social concerns, as observed by Jindal-Snape & Miller (2008). The identified organisational discontinuities, such as learning to read a timetable, being in class on time and finding classrooms are also commonly recognised by transition researchers (Graham & Hill, 2003; Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000; Kvaslund, 2000). One notable exception is that these students did not express concerns about bullying, while a number of researchers have found that pre-transition students are worried about being bullied in the secondary school (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000).

Limitations

The small sample size of this study limits the generalisability of the findings, and caution must be taken when generalising the findings to other populations. A larger scale study involving a range of schools is required to further explore transition issues in Australia. The study is also limited due to its cross-sectional nature. Comparison of Year 6 and Year 7 data is problematic due to individual differences that may exist between the cohorts (e.g. the Year 7 group may have reported a more negative perception of transition when they were in Year 6, meaning that their perceptions in this study had not declined). A longitudinal investigation would elicit a more valid comparison of Year 6 and Year 7 scores.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that pre-transition students appraise the impending move to secondary school as a positive experience overall. Although some aspects of transition were considered a concern (such as increasing homework demands, social hierarchy changes, organisation discontinuities and making friends), students in this study indicated that there were a range of academic and social aspects of secondary school that they were looking forward to. Perceptions of these specific aspects of transition should be taken into account when designing content for transition support programs, in order to cater for the specific concerns of students. Post-transition results may confirm the notion of a decline in school grades and motivation immediately after the transition from primary to secondary school (NTCOGSO, 2005), however the cross-sectional nature of this study must be taken into account when analysing these results. Further research in this area is required to investigate the specific aspects of transition that cause the more negative perception of transition, however other researchers have found that for most students the negative effects are temporary (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000). Potential protective factors were investigated in both pre-transition and post-transition students. This study confirmed that for pre-transition students, having an older sibling at the secondary school had a positive effect (Rice, 1997), however this effect was limited to reducing social threat scores only. These results can be used to guide transition support programming, although further research is required to confirm the value of targeted transition programs.

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Erin Mackenzie is completing postgraduate studies in education and is a secondary school Science teacher. Her research interests include primary to secondary school transition and student coping mechanisms during this period.

Email: erin.mackenzie@students.mq.edu.au

Anne McMaugh is a Lecturer in the School of Education, Faculty of Human Sciences, at Macquarie University. Anne teaches in the areas of educational psychology, child development and inclusive education. Her research interests encompass teacher education and the development of learners in school and higher educational contexts.

Email: anne.mcmaugh@mq.edu.au

Dr Kerry-Ann O'Sullivan is a Senior Lecturer in Education at Macquarie University, NSW. Kerry-Ann is the recipient of a number of awards for her research and teaching including an Australian Learning and Teaching Council Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning, 2010. **Email:** kerryann.osullivan@mq.edu.au