

# Transitions and Pathways from Elementary to Secondary School: A Review of Selected Literature



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## Executive Summary

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In an effort to retain more youth in school and to provide opportunities for student success, the Ontario Ministry of Education has implemented Phase III of the Student Success strategy. One goal of this effort is greater attention to the pathways and transitions of students from elementary to secondary school via the Grade 8 to Grade 9 Transition Planning Initiative. As a follow-up to this initiative, the Ministry is funding a research project to study the transition process. Led by Dr. Bruce Ferguson and Dr. Kate Tilleczek, this research project will engage a team of expert researchers to examine the ways in which young people, parents, and educators experience and negotiate the transition. The first phase of the project is this Literature Review which has been organized to address the following questions:

- What is the nature of the transition and how can we best conceptualize it?
- What are the main risks and problems that occur in moving from elementary to secondary school? For whom is it most problematic?
- What have schools and communities done to address the transition and what appear to be protective factors for young people?
- What are the gaps in knowledge and directions for future research?

The findings of the Literature Review are based on approximately 100 international reports, academic papers, and policy pieces. Together they suggest that we can enact more enduring practices which facilitate the transition. The first step is to re-conceptualize the Grade 8 to 9 transitions as long-term, temporal, and developmental processes. Findings suggest the presence in adolescent development of *nested transitions*. For example, children are in transition from childhood to adulthood over the life course; they are in transition along pathways to success through schools, communities, and families; and are at the same time in transition from elementary to secondary school within these larger transitions.

The simultaneous meeting up of all of these transitions requires recognition that the transition is a critical juncture in the lives of adolescents. As students, they face both *fresh starts and false starts*. Transitions are both growth inducing and potential tipping points. An emotional paradox exists for students; students are both excited and anxious, both doubtful and hopeful. Students look forward to the *fresh start* of moving into secondary school and are adept at making new friends for positive social and academic experiences. As the initial adjustment phase passes, academic issues such as homework take precedence over social and procedural issues leading students to express dissatisfaction and disappointment. Students are in the process of *being* themselves in everyday life; are also in a state of *becoming* young adults, and need to feel a sense of *belonging* and valued for who they are today.

Exemplary programs are those which help to optimize the adolescent development-school fit and assist schools to function as communities which build bridges between students, parents, teachers and communities. Such programs attend to the coherence of transition initiatives that are already in place and balance pre/during/post transition activities and funds (time, resources, etc). Successful programs also begin to mark and celebrate student social maturity by increasing responsibilities which allow for status, belonging, and confidence Teacher beliefs about friendships, academic interests, and youth as motivated learners can be improved Procedural strategies allowing more interaction with teachers are helpful, as are transitional approaches to assessment, curriculum, and pedagogy that attend to both continuities and discontinuities in each. Close attention to students who are at-risk<sup>1</sup> for multiple challenges at school is required in all programming.

Risk factors were detailed both within and beyond the school and found to cross individual, classroom, family, and cultural levels. The research shows that in general, the shift from elementary to secondary school is a journey from a relatively less demanding institution (socially and academically) to a relatively more demanding one. For all of the reasons and ways outlined in this report, it makes good sense for educators, policy makers, and researchers to focus on these cultural shifts, and the effects they have for different groups of students. All students find some difficulty in negotiating this tipping point along their journey. However, students most at-risk are those with multiple risk factors working at multiple levels since risk can tend to compound if unchecked. In general, the risk factors which hinder or help the transition are those which help or hinder school disengagement and student success. We have identified and summarize the risks which occur at three levels: macro (cultural), meso (family and friends); and micro (youth).

The largest gap in knowledge remains in understanding fully the meso level of classes, friends, and families – this is where the intersections of culture and individual meet. While researchers have addressed such issues as important “variables” in quantitative studies, we still need to capture the meaning and experience of the ways in which they work in school. This allows for the opportunity to pose and answer more difficult questions. Such enduring issues and questions are raised and summarized here.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “at-risk” in relation to young people requires historical and cultural consideration. Risk is seen as distributed in the cultural system and grounded in actual practices and assessments allowing for understanding of resiliency and active negotiations. Usually at-risk refers to the individual or their risk group.



## I. Introduction

In an effort to retain more youth in secondary school, and to provide optimal success for all students, the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training has implemented Phase III of the Student Success strategy. One main focus of this Phase is the transition from Grade 8 to Grade 9. Such a transition involves the need for a clear understanding of the current ethos and culture of both elementary and secondary schools, and an examination of the way in which young people, parents, and educators experience and negotiate between them.

Historically in Ontario, students move from elementary to secondary school, either directly or via a middle school system. The feature of making the transition from one to another school culture has been long standing in the country and province. Although some variations occur, most students leave some form of elementary school and move into a secondary school at some point in their early adolescence.

This transition has been recognized as a stumbling point for most students, and particularly for those who are at risk of early school leaving. For example, the movement is commonly associated with a dip in academic achievement (Galton, et al, 2003) and the experience of social anxiety. For students at risk, the experience of transition can be even more problematic. As identified in the *Early School Leavers Study* (2005)<sup>2</sup>, an at-risk youth is one who is unlikely to successfully progress towards graduation with the skills and self-confidence necessary to have meaningful options in the areas of work, leisure, culture, civic affairs, and relationships. Risk fluctuates over time, based on circumstances and contexts, rather than being a fixed quality. Exposure to multiple risk factors increases one's likelihood of experiencing problematic outcomes and the impact of exposure to risk factors at a young age may be more detrimental than exposure later in life. The *Early School Leavers Study* report outlines the host of risk and protective factors that young people encounter in their process of disengaging from school. These were found to occur on multiple levels, both within the school and in the

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<sup>2</sup> For complete report see *Early School Leavers: Understanding the Lived Reality of Disengagement from School*. Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, Rummens, & Roth-Edney (2005)  
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/reports.html>

everyday lives of youth. Similarly, the transition to high school is conceptualized as a multi-dimensional process.

The transition is therefore best seen as a temporal phenomenon which crosses social, academic, and procedural issues. Many progressive researchers and policy makers have located their work in the lives and needs of young people and focussed on the ways in which risk and protective factors can intersect. This opens the discussion to wider issues of the fit between schools, communities and the lives of young people rather than simply targeting student habits and academics. For example, researchers have found that students have more positive transition experiences in schools which modified their social culture to increase a sense of belonging and care than did students in schools that did not (c.f. Eccles et al, 1993; Dubois et al 1994; Keating, 1996). Luckily, it appears that many schools are already engaged in successful strategies which facilitate this match and the transition. A myriad of such programs and strategies have been suggested in the literature and are reviewed here.

This document provides an overview of the published and "grey"<sup>3</sup> literature and research regarding the transitions and pathways from elementary to secondary school. It addresses the risk factors in making these transitions. The review also outlines the factors which are known to be protective or facilitative including programs, strategies, and initiatives. In reviewing the literature and culling the risk and protective factors associated with elementary to secondary transition, many contradictions, issues, and areas for continued research and practice converged. While the literature suggests increasing attention being paid to the importance of the transition in the UK, USA, Australia, Europe, Canada, Scandinavia, and New Zealand, many issues and gaps remain. For example, more local, evaluative, and in-depth process related research is needed. This review of selected literature has been organized to address transitional issues in the following three areas:

- What is the nature of the transition and how can we best conceptualize it?
- What are the main risks and problems that occur in moving from elementary to secondary school? For whom is it most problematic?
- What have schools and communities done to address the transition and what appear to be protective factors for young people?

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<sup>3</sup> Grey literature refers to research summaries, special publications, statistics, and other data that offer a more comprehensive view of a topic. Virtually everything we read outside of journals and books can be considered grey literature. The internet, government publications, fact sheets, statistical data, etc are all examples of grey literature. For a complete definition see Science & Technology Section of Subject & Bibliographic Access Committee, June 2003

- What are the gaps in knowledge and directions for future research?

Following a brief description of the methods, and a more detailed outline of our conceptual framework, we address the answer to the first question. We then provide a review of the literature written from the student perspective on the transition, so as to firmly ground our report in the voices of students. We then answer the remaining three questions in turn. The document concludes by providing a summary of the messages and addressing implications and future directions. We are optimistic that these points of departure may provide a platform for ongoing discussion and practices which facilitate this critical developmental transition for young people.



## 2. Methods

The selection of published and grey materials used for this review began with computerized searches of specified search terms linked to “school transition”, “transition to secondary school” or “student transition”. Searches were conducted using *Epsco Host*, and *Social Science Index*, databases which access all academic journals available through the library. In addition, searches were done through the Statistics Canada website, ERIC (The Education Resources Information Center), and through the “Google” search engine, as well as specific websites focused on transitions to secondary school such as the PISA (Program for International Scholastic Achievement) website which was examined to yield international statistical information on the transition. Finally, the reference sections of highly regarded articles and reports were examined and specific materials which had not previously been identified were collected. The search included English-language material dated from the 1980’s to the present with a focus on most contemporary works available. The works were selected if they were **specifically** related to the transition from elementary to secondary school, although we acknowledge vast literatures which address the **general** discussion of adolescence, schooling, and development. The latter were consulted in the form of synopses provided by scholars who work and teach in the field (c.f. Tilleczek, forthcoming). The reviewed works therefore included:

- Large scale and international reviews of literature



- Key reports and policy documents
- Published, academic papers from various disciplines (for example, psychology, education, sociology)

These searches ultimately yielded over 100 articles, reports, and studies including three lengthy literature reviews from each of New Zealand, UK, and Ontario. Appendix A provides an annotated bibliography of the most significant sources (not included on the DVD). Of the 100 publications, the majority are American. Those from Canada are not always specifically related to the transition to secondary school. The American literature mostly makes use of secondary longitudinal data analyses. Articles and reports were also retrieved from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Scandinavia, and Europe. The majority of all research articles are written primarily from quantitative methodological perspectives (surveys, secondary analysis of statistics, data base analysis, and questionnaires). However, a few key pieces are written primarily from either mixed-method or qualitative methodological perspectives (ethnographies, interviews, focus groups, observations, textual analyses).

Three local (Ontario) reports/documents were seen as useful starting points for the review as follows:

- Ontario Ministry of Education. (Hargreaves and Earl, 1990). *Rights of Passage: A Review of Selected Research About Schooling in the Transitions Years*
- Community Health Systems Resource Group, Hospital for Sick Children. (Ferguson, Tilleczek, Rummens, & Boydell, 2005). *Early School Leaving: Understanding the Lived Reality of Disengagement from Secondary School*
- Ontario Ministry of Education (2006). *Grade 8 to 9 Transitions: Regional Training Sessions Resource Material and Working Documents*

The relevance of our method is the understanding of the degree to which transitions to high school are being studied internationally. The range, type, level of analysis, and processes investigated by the researchers are also important in understanding how we have been addressing and conceptualizing the issue to date. Moreover, it points to gaps in approach and evaluation strategies that can be used in the ongoing study of transitions in Ontario. Therefore, the review relied on a number of key sources in the fields of adolescent development, education, transitions to secondary school, and school culture. These sources (c.f. Tilleczek, forthcoming) have informed our thinking about young people, schools, and the conceptual

framework from which we approach this work. We now briefly outline this framework with the purpose of taking an expansive and long view of young people and their processes of transition.



### 3. Conceptual Framework

This literature review makes use of a cultural approach to examine the fit between young people and their schools. It has been adapted from a number of theories and sources and culled from the general literatures on adolescent development, education, and school culture. A similar framework was used in the *Early School Leavers Study* (2005) allowing for a categorization of the myriad reasons at multiple levels as to why young people leave school. This review begins where we left off in the *Early School Leavers Study*. Knowing how and why young people disengage from school, and knowing that the transition to secondary school is a critical tipping point, we can now focus on that specific transitional point which influences pathways and student success.

Our cultural approach suggests the levels at which various influences (either risk or protective) occur and can be conceptualized. The levels of *micro*, *meso*, and *macro* are adapted here from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development* which describes the different social environments which influence youth. Bronfenbrenner suggested that students making the school transition confront an "ecological transition" (p. 26) since they are adapting to role and setting changes which can impede or facilitate in multiple ways. He also reminds us that "every ecological transition is both a consequence and an instigator of developmental processes" (p. 27). We further suggest that the status changes accompanying this rite of passage provide both opportunities and constraints for young people (Tilleczek, 2006; Tilleczek & Hine, 2006; Hargreaves & Earl, 1990).

A *microsystem* is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by a developing young person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics. A setting is a place where young people can readily engage in face-to-face interaction; some examples of settings are a person's home, part-time work place, the school yard, the classroom and so on (Bronfenbrenner's, 1979 p. 22). A young person is involved in

several different microsystems. The most important is the family, followed by school and friendships, each presenting different relationships to be negotiated. Therefore, parents, teachers, coaches, friends, classmates, siblings, step-parents, grandparents, are of significance and the inter-relation between these actors is increasingly being seen to be important.

The term *mesosystem* refers to this system of inter-relations between people in two or more settings in which the young person *actively* participates (for example, the relations among home, school, neighbourhood, peer group). The idea of the active nature of the young person is a theoretically important one (James and Prout, 2005; Jenks, 1996) since it allows us to be aware of the ways in which we can negotiate, advocate, make change, and react to our environments. A mesosystem is, thus, a system of microsystems (p. 25). Mesosystem relations have bearing on development through interactions such as those between school-home, youth-school, family-friends, etc. The *meso* level is where intersections between culture and individual meet and where we can best begin to appreciate and describe the intersections of daily lives of young people with teachers, friends, peers, and parents. It is at this level where the experience and embodiment of social class, poverty, ethnicity, identity and age are played out.

The *macrosystem* refers to patterns and consistencies in the form and content of lower order systems (micro and meso). These consistencies exist at the level of the culture as a whole, including beliefs systems and/or ideologies (p. 26). Some of the events that influence young people are not attributable to their immediate environment but are characteristic of the larger social contexts such as regional or national. Globalization, large scale political or economic factors such as poverty, recession, shifts in educational policy, and historical trends in views about young people are examples.

In summary, our approach sets out to examine the extant forms of these relationships, and the possibility of transforming them by means of a perspective that is not bound to one discipline. It also allows for description and categorization at all three levels of the process. The bi-directionality and inter-relation between the levels is of particular importance.

Such an approach has been recently applied to the study of youth culture (Tilleczek, 2004; Tilleczek et al; 2007) in which culture was seen for its ability to influence (and be influenced by) actions by shaping the tool kits of habits, skills, and styles from which young people, families, and educators construct strategies for action (Giddens, 1984; Swidler, 1986). These strategies are placed within the realities of the labour market, the shifting transition from school to work for young people, and the place of schooling in contemporary society. The stage-environment

fit (Eccels et al, 1993) is a similar approach which has been used to show how the developmentally appropriate needs of young people are often not met in institutions such as schools. Bruner's (1996) *The Culture of Education* reminds us that education does not stand alone but is embedded in a culture which is about power, distinctions, and rewards.

With this conceptual framework in place, we address our first question: What is the nature of the transition and how can we best conceptualize it? In so doing, we draw on the various literatures which have attempted to describe and conceptualize the process of the transition from elementary to secondary school.



## 4. The Nature of Transition, Pathways, and Student Success

Although variations occur, most students leave elementary school and make their journey towards some form of secondary school during early adolescence. This transition has been recognized as a stumbling point for students, particularly for those who are at-risk (Lord et al, 1994; Seidman et al, 1994). The movement is commonly associated with dips in academic achievement, dips in self-esteem, and increased social anxiety (Alspaugh, 1998; Eccles et al, 1993; Galton, et al, 2003). As identified in the *Early School Leavers Study* (2005), an at-risk youth is one who is unlikely to progress towards graduation with the skills and self-confidence necessary to have meaningful options in work, culture, civic affairs, and relationships. Being poor has long been understood to be the most critical risk condition for youth across many outcomes and the pervasiveness of the socioeconomic gradient effect has been documented in detail (Keating and Hertzman, 1999).

Transitions are best seen as developmental and temporal processes which cross social, academic, and procedural issues. Transitions entail changes in school cultures, increased academic demands, rotary systems, and shifts in peer groups which can be difficult to negotiate (Hargreaves & Earl, 1990). Progressive researchers and policy makers locate their work in the lives of young people and their educators. In so doing, research focuses on the ways in which risk

Pathways to adulthood are variable, complex and non-linear. A host of influences on a young person help to shape movements in, between, across, and out of school

and protective factors fluctuate over time and intersect individual and cultural factors. Literature on adolescent development suggests the presence of nested transitions (Tilleczek, forthcoming) as follows:

- Transition from childhood to adulthood over the life course
- Transitions along pathways to success through schools, communities, and families
- Transitions from elementary to secondary school within these larger transitions
- Transitions are both growth inducing and potential tipping points; both false/fresh starts

Three useful organizing principles - *being, becoming, and belonging* - have emerged as ways to categorize transitions strategies (Tilleczek, forthcoming; Tilleczek, 2004). Young people are in constant motion and tension between being and becoming. They are in process of *being* themselves in their everyday lives. This includes issues of forging identities through daily negotiations at school, home, community, work, and with friends. As such, they need to be valued for who they are today and to find places to belong. However, young people are also in a state of *becoming* young adults.

The transition from elementary to secondary school is an important and normative life event that affects different students in different ways. Thus, within a cultural rather than individual context, the term transitions has evolved to encompass the myriad trajectories and pathways that are taken within, between, and across schools over time. Transition, as a concept uses a long view over the life course. Developmentally, early adolescence has been seen as an inopportune time to move from safe and well-known support structures (Eccles et al, 2003; Siedman et al, 1994) and the question remains as to how much school transitions can incite a negative trajectory in the lives of youth “who experience the greatest insults to the self-system”

Transitions can best be conceptualized as a journey along a path across momentary gaps and shifts in schools.

The pathways are diverse and can be bridged by students, educators, parents and communities.

In contemporary society, they co-occur with critical adolescent developmental shifts.

within high schools. How much can we mediate with pedagogy, care, proactive work and school culture shifts? The more youth experience “daily hassles” in transition, the more they set on a pathway of lowered self expectations, academic efficacy, preparedness for class, and antisocial behaviour (Seidman et al , 1994)

Therefore, these issues and challenges are exacerbated for youth at-risk. Many researchers understand risk status as fluctuating over time, based on circumstances and

contexts, rather than being a fixed quality. As such, many believe risk is better understood as a

point along a continuum (Schonert-Reichl, 2000; Catterall, 1998). Smink and Schargel (2004) prefer to use the term 'at-risk' to depict a situation, rather than an individual, and in fact, recommend the use of the phrase 'students in at-risk situations'.

Current studies indicate that exposure to multiple risk factors increases one's likelihood of experiencing problematic outcomes. For example, Rutter (1985, acf, Terrisse, 2000) found that children with only one risk factor had similar outcomes as those with no risk factors, however for children with two or more risk factors, negative outcomes increased four times and for those with four risk factors, the likelihood of unfavourable outcomes increased tenfold. Research has also found that that the impact of exposure to risk factors may be more detrimental at specific developmental stages than at others. According to Landy and Tam (1998, acf Schonert-Reichl, 2000) the number of risk factors to which infants and young children have been exposed, is reliably predictive of future problems. Conversely, for children aged 4 to 11 years, comprehensive data regarding the nature of the risk factor was more predictive than simply the number of risk factors.

Periods of transition can increase risk as they necessitate individual and systemic restructuring and adaptive capabilities (Rutter, 1994, acf Schonert-Reichl, 2000). If a child faces multiple negative factors at home, at school, and in the neighborhood, the effect of these factors is multiplied rather than simply added together, because these conditions interact with and reinforce each other (Werner & Smith, 1992; Schorr, 1989). In situations where a child is vulnerable, the interaction of risk and protective factors determines the course of development. If multiple risk factors accumulate and are not offset by compensating protective factors, healthy development is compromised (Schorr, 1989; Werner & Smith 1992). Garbarino (1990) describes high-risk neighborhoods as "an ecological conspiracy against children." Poverty increases the likelihood that risk factors in the environment will not be offset by protective factors. Poverty is often a constellation of risk factors that combine to produce "rotten outcomes" (Schorr, 1989).

The use of the term "at-risk" in relation to young people requires historical and cultural consideration.

Risk is seen as systemic and assessment-based and grounded in the actual practices allowing for understanding of resiliency and active negotiations

The concepts of resilience and protective factors are the positive counterparts to vulnerability and risk. Resilient children are children who remain competent despite exposure to misfortune or to stressful events (Werner & Smith, 1992) Caring and support, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation are protective factors for children

found in families, schools, and communities (Keating & Hertzman, 1999). One of the key protective factors for children is the availability of consistent adults who provide them with a secure base for the development of trust, autonomy, and initiative (Werner & Smith, 1992).

Catterall (1998) suggests a unique and practical signpost in our use of risk and resilience as applied to children and youth. He suggests that risk be assessed as grounded in actual school performance rather than assessed by abstract categories relating to various group-level probabilities of failure. In studying grade 8 students over time in the US, he found that those who were doing poorly in school could turn themselves around by Grade 10. Family supports, school responsiveness to student needs, and student involvement in school were shown to be strong predictors of student recovery from low school performance. He goes on to suggest that we should avoid seeing all members of risk groups (eg. low socioeconomic status) as necessarily "at-risk" without also seeing the potential for resilience within families and schools.

"One potential response of group labelling is that individual children may be considered at risk who are in fact not at risk; after all, roughly half the students will exceed any group average...In addition, a key proposition supported in the resilience research is that individuals react differently to their surroundings...in a way, risk may be a positive spark for some children, and a central quest of resilience research has been to discover who really is (or is not) at risk in an adversely predicted group. Another effect...is that through stereotyping, expectations for entire groups may be suppressed with unfortunate educational consequence (Oakes, 1985). Finally, some popular conceptions of risk for children should be challenged because risk by association can translate into guilt by association. In one such view, shortfalls of educational achievement and attainment...are interpreted as deficits of individual effort or will...These general characterizations ignore differences within groups; moreover, they fail to apprehend the qualities of individual lives...and assign responsibilities for risk in broad measure to the affected groups themselves ignoring oppressive and discriminatory conditions..." (Catterall, 1998: p. 305)

Resilience, therefore, can be experienced in the ways in which families and schools help students to recover from low performance, lack of confidence, and faltering commitments to school. The current Student Success strategy of the Ontario Ministry of Education has identified four pillars of student success: literacy; numeracy; program pathways; and community, culture and caring. Our work in the *Early School Leavers Study* (2005) and this review on transition to secondary school, suggest that for young people at-risk of disengaging from school, the foundational pillar must be community, culture, and caring. With this foundation firmly in place, schools can proceed with moving students along multiple pathways to success in numeracy and literacy.

This framework opens up discussion to wider issues of the fit between schools, communities, and the lives of young people rather than simply targeting student habits and

academics. Many such strategies have been suggested in the literature and are selectively reviewed here. With this discussion of risk, resilience, pathways, and success in place, we now consider our second and third questions: What facilitates and/ or hinders the Grade 8 to 9 transitions for young people? We begin with the voices and experiences of students themselves.



## 5. The Student Perspective

What have students themselves said about the social, academic, and procedural issues in transition? To begin, we note that very few researchers actually “speak to” students. Researchers have most often used survey methods to measure student perceptions of the transition. In-depth interviews, process evaluation, and observational methods are rare in the academic literature to date. We will continue to hear the student perspective throughout the review. This section, however, highlights the main themes and concerns as expressed by students in the literature.

The majority of students entering secondary school have high expectations and are hopeful about the potential of their new school. Graham and Hill (2003) have shown that the most common response was “looking forward” to a new school, new friends, and learning new things. Moreover, many students report coping better than expected and as Kirkpatrick (2004) has reported, after making the transition students seem adept at making new friends and separating the development of friendship networks in the classroom from friendship networks outside of class. Moreover peer groups were found to be a source of academic support – those deriding academics more the exception than the rule. Students see the academic importance of schools but they most expected the transition to provide a social success with new and existing friendships which would transfer with them (Pietarinen, 2000). Akos (2004) further states that many students viewed the transition as relatively easy and Kirkpatrick (2004) reports that they were looking forward to a “fresh start” with the greater challenges and more interesting opportunities for meeting friends and studying new subjects. However, many of these research studies took place prior to the actual transition, and as Kirkpatrick (2004) suggests, students had little accurate information about the culture of secondary school. However, the repeated



finding of the optimism about the transition is clearly a good starting point, and an avenue for further study and program focus.

The contradiction is that students also express anxiety about the transition prior to its occurrence. For example, immigrant youth state that they expected things to be easier than they turned out (Graham and Hill, 2003). Tilleczek (2007) suggests that an emotional paradox exists at this transition point, as it does at many life junctures. Students are both excited and anxious, and both doubtful and hopeful. The source of anxiety most pervasive is the loss of status and the worries that this loss is accompanied by initiation rituals which are unpleasant (Tilleczek, 2006; Graham and Hill, 2003; Pietarinen, 2000; Kvalsund, 2000). Dips in self-perception and learner identities are pervasive (Silverthorn et al, 2005). Kvaslund (2000) concludes that students are concerned about a "great fall" and a "social descent" (p.412). As Hargeaves & Earl (1990) have pointed out, the move to secondary school is contradictory in that students move toward adult status as they move out of elementary school. At the same time, their status initially decreases while in grade 9. Given the importance of status to adolescents, the social and academic implications are obvious.

Therefore, student's perceptions of the transition are both positive and negative. Academic concerns such as homework, pressure to do well, and potential drops in achievement are paramount for both students and parents (Akos, 2004; Kvaslund, 2000). Social concerns such as getting lost, bullying, and making friends (Schumacher, 1998; Kvaslund, 2000) are the most prevalent perceived risks. Being separated from friends was "dreaded" for male and female students in all types of schools (Kvalsund, 2000). Beyond the negotiation of the

transition, structural problems are imagined and/or experienced by students. Of concern are the size and layout of secondary schools, the time table, and complicated schedules, getting picked on, not knowing anyone, potentially getting lost, having multiple teachers, and remembering where to go (Graham & Hill, 2001; Kvaslund, 2000; Schumacher, 1998). The aspect most troubling in relation to school work was the increase in homework (Graham and Hill, 2001). Kvaslund (2000) further points out that these perceived negative risks in larger urban communities are often passed on through rumours which begin as

early as grade 6. In contrast, students from smaller rural schools had already been to visit their local secondary school and knew most of the people there. They were therefore able to

An emotional contradiction and many tensions exist for students who are excited and anxious; hopeful and doubtful.

Building on their anticipation for *fresh starts* and overcoming *false starts* is a main concern.

“explode some myths” associated with transition. As a result, they concentrated more on the risk of being separated from their friends in class (Kvaslund, 2000).

In following the students through the transition and over two years, Kirkpatrick (2004) found that the students felt that the “honeymoon was over” after the initial adjustment phase. At the later phase, academic issues took the forefront over the social and procedural issues of the adjustment phase. As time progressed, many students expressed dissatisfaction and disappointment with the low level of academic challenge, resulting in boredom and a feeling of a lack of control. In other studies, students expressed increased levels of academic pressure and homework, and shifts in pedagogy that were less child-centred and difficult to manage (Kvaslund, 2000). Students spoke of the “way school is” and the perception that teachers controlled their work. Hargreaves & Earl (1990) also makes the provocative statement that “the tragedy of the transition years is not that students experience anxiety on transfer to secondary school. The tragedy is that this anxiety passes so quickly, that the students adjust so smoothly to the many uncomfortable realities of secondary school life. These realities...can restrict achievement, depress motivation (especially among the less academic) sowing the seeds for dropout in later years” (p. 214). These student voices point to the importance of knowing *which students?, from which school?, to which school?* in measuring and facilitating successful transitions.

Students have, however, perceived protective factors and attractive features of secondary school. These include having more freedom, meeting new friends, and involvement in extra-curricular activities (Akos, 2004). Elementary schools which introduce students to rotation systems were also found to be better able to prepare students (Schumacher, 1998). Students have also felt that their school performance would actually improve with the transition (Graham and Hill, 2003). In the latter example, about 80% of students felt that programming was helpful when including tours, teacher visits to their elementary school, and induction days.

Kirkpatrick (2004) suggests that students also feel that there is still much more to be done to facilitate the transition and that the ability to do so is well within the grasp of educators. For example, more accurate information in final years of elementary school is needed. In secondary school, teacher beliefs about friendships, academic interests, and youth as motivated learners need work. Procedural strategies allowing more interaction with teachers are considered helpful as is a transitional approach to curriculum itself. Such momentum will help to capitalize on the positive feelings about the transition that many elementary students

express. Students further advised their fellow students to a) be aware that secondary school is not that frightening, b) make friends, c) talk to people about your emotions, and c) do not listen to rumours (Kirkpatrick, 2004).

Beyond the perceptions and issues addressed by students making the transition, what has other research suggested about the distribution of risks and problems in transition- both short and long term? Why and how is the transition experienced as a problem? What, if anything, has been and can be done to alleviate these problems both short and long term. We now address each question in turn.



## **6. What are the risks and problems in transition?**

Researchers are pointing to the need to consider not only the host of transitional problems that occur, but also the length of time that students experience transitional problems. For example, many anxieties and fears dissipate quickly. Youngman (1986, cited in Akos & Galassi, 2004) has estimated that 10% of students suffer serious problems after the transition. Graham and Hill (2003), however, suggest that only 2% of students continue to experience persistent anxieties about the transition for longer than one month and that 41% of their sample in the UK stopped feeling concerned immediately. Of course, this suggests that 49% of young people DO remain concerned. Such findings are related to both the methods used to assess these shifts and the kinds of programs available to young people. The problem appears to be a lack of longer term qualitative data to describe the intersections and multi-level processes involved in measuring the youth-school fit. Even with the host of quantitative longitudinal data sets, studies aim to examine only one level and issue at one point in time (before, during the adjustment, or following the transition). Thus the perceptions of the incoming students may be positive and excited, until the "honey moon is over" when the transition continues.

In this section, we attempt to organize and report on the literature which examines the risk factors within and beyond the school (at multiple levels). For example, school risks can take place in the elementary school at the level of the classroom or school. They can also take place in the secondary schools at multiple levels and/or between school cultures. There are a range of cultural factors that are indirectly related to the school such as social class, gender,

and ethnicity. These culminate in the host of experiences and practices that young people bring with them to the school each day. These factors are best seen as intersecting and can set up risk contexts in the daily lives of students.

## *Risks Beyond the School*

### **Culture and Context**

*Social Class:* Being poor has long been understood to be a most critical risk condition for children and youth across many outcomes and in many countries. The pervasiveness of the socioeconomic gradient effect in multiple learning and behavioural outcomes have been documented in detail across countries (c.f. Keating and Hetzman, 1999). Just as in Canada, New Zealand researchers have found that students in schools in low income areas,

“did significantly more poorly on about three quarters of the assessed tasks or more for mathematics, social studies, literacy and information skills on National Education Monitoring Project tasks”. (Alton-Lee and Praat 2000 p. 299, cited in McGee et al, 2003).

The best documented correlate and risk factor in disengagement and early school leaving is socioeconomic status (SES) and parental social class. Students from lower SES backgrounds are much more likely to leave high school without obtaining a diploma, than are those from higher SES backgrounds. As reported in the *Early School Leavers Study* (2005) in 2000, American youth living in households with incomes in the lowest 20% of all U.S. family incomes were 6 times as likely as their peers from families in the top 20% of the income distribution to leave high school without obtaining a diploma. In Ontario, early school leavers were most often living below the poverty line and provided detailed accounts of the ways in which their “being poor” related to their process of disengaging. This ranged from bullying due to classism through to negative teacher expectations (Ferguson et al, 2005)

What is it about our educational responses to poor children which compels this situation?, and How does social class relate specifically to transition? Lee & Smith (1997, cited by McGee et al, 2003) report that the negative effect of school size is most pronounced for students of low socio-economic status. Further clear and compelling data exists which shows that the transition does little to alleviate the effects of social class and has a negative impact in large, resource poor, urban schools (Seidman, et al 1994). Decline in extracurricular participation and lack of school personnel supports were cited as reasons. Also of importance, was the student experience of increases in “daily hassles” with school personnel. However,

they also reported fewer daily hassles with peers and an increase in the cognitive and motivational domain as seen in increased social and academic efficacy. These poor inner city youth felt that they could master difficult work and social encounters once in high school. The inconsistency of these results with those of other researchers (c.f. Eccles et al 1993) suggests differences in the samples of schools such that researchers can either focus on economically poor schools and youth or a range of schools. Also, there is good deal of variability in measures used to assess social class, achievement, and sense of self.

In focusing analysis on the structure of poor schools, The *Smithfield Project* in New Zealand suggests that some low socio-economic status schools entered a "spiral of decline" (Lauder et al, 1994, p. 12 cited in McGee et al, 2003). This spiral can be seen in the cultural practices of schools such as placing students in rigid tracks based on ability which gate them into prescribed and closed pathways. This is similar to countries such as Germany that use the transition to secondary school as a moment for the practice of further sorting of students into schools and pathways by intelligence, ability, social class and region. Schnepf (2002) cautions that such sorting becomes increasingly difficult to correct as students move into and through secondary school. Issues of school choice and school popularity in New Zealand were also "linked to questions of class and ethnic prejudice" (Lauder et al, 1994, p. 12, cited in McGee et al, 2003). It "was mainly the well-off who managed to send their children to other than local schools under zoning" (Lauder et al, 1994, p. 33, cited in McGee et al, 2003). Similarly, a Swiss study reports that in subtle ways, school organization mediates and pressures parental decisions as to where to place their youth. For example, lower or basic classes have more non-Swiss students, and female and Swiss students more often receive advanced allocation. If the school has more "low spaces" then non-Swiss have more balanced representation (Imdorf, 2003).

However, Catterall (1998) in a longitudinal study of risk and resilience over the transition to high school, shows that we should be cautious about labelling whole groups of low income or low achieving students as "at-risk". For example, he found many examples of academic resilience for these students. His measure of student resilience was based on performance of grade 8 students to achieve higher than expected by grade 10 from both low achievement and low commitment to school. Social class held an interesting place in the findings such that it was significant in resilience for achievement and commitment. Catterall (1998) found that there are large shares of young people within "risk groups" who are performing well and are committed

to school, and another substantial number who show mobility out of performance-based risks. However, Eltis et al (1987, cited in McGee et al 2003) found that higher SES children had greater confidence and greater academic achievement, and that although lower SES children gained more on transfer to high school they did not reach the same level. Catterall (1998) asserts that if you follow young people from Grade 8 to 10, the further behind a student started, the more room there can be for improvement, so long as schools are responsive and safe, and families are supportive. He suggests that more insight can be gained on further exploration of the stories of 10<sup>th</sup> graders who have turned themselves around.

Sorting out the sheer importance and place of social class and poverty in the school experiences of young people is a daunting task. Multiple literatures exist on the topic and have been reviewed elsewhere. We summate that on one hand, there is a simple and enduring finding that social class relates negatively to multiple school outcomes including the transition to secondary school. Apparent in the daily experiences of young people at school, this effect is organized socially in the structures, practices, and treatment of poor students in poorer schools, relative to their more privileged peers. On the other hand, as Catterall (1998) has shown, the situation is complex, and possibilities for moments of resilience occur with responsive schools, engaged students, and supportive families.

*Minority Group Status:* Research indicates that minority group status (due to for example, race/ethnicity, country of origin, language and/or sexual orientation) is significantly associated with high rates of early school leaving (Dei et al., 1997; McMillian & Marks, 2003; Mufioz-Plaza, Quinn & Rounds, 2002). The *Early School Leavers Study* (2005) highlighted relevant social, economic and educational statistics from youth whose minority group status is due to their identification or membership with one or more of the following groups: visible minority; Aboriginal; newcomer/English as a Second Language (ESL); and francophone. Each was shown to have differing constellations of risk and protective factors for early leaving and disengagement. Further Canadian research indicates that social class is a frame of reference which, concurrent with race, can provide a double sense of alienation among some Canadian Black students who see themselves as both socially and economically disadvantaged (Dei et al., 1997).

Graham and Hill (2003) have reported a variation in coping with the transition to high school by ethnicity in the UK. A lower portion of Asian students (50%) than white (66%) and

other ethnic groups (60%) reported feeling very settled after transition and felt less positive about being in secondary school. However, Hirsch and Rapkin's (1987) study in the US found that Blacks show greater satisfaction with school life and greater commitment to school than whites after the transition if they moved into high schools in which the principal was Black. Also based on US data, Catterall (1998) reports that social class does not influence resilience for African American and Hispanic youth, and that Hispanic youth were found to be less resilient over the grade 8 transition. In the New Zealand context, McGee et al (2003) found that Māori students had difficulty adjusting to secondary school. In part this was found to be a factor of school size but also a change of school organisation, teaching methods, and curriculum. Key informants described support mechanisms but these were available for all cultures and not necessarily designed for Māori in particular. It was suggested that facilitating an opportunity for Māori students to stay together during the transition would keep them "closely connected". However, segregation of Māori students in secondary school home rooms was not thought to be a good solution as it overlooks the heterogeneity of the group. There was frequent mention of Māori and Pacific students coming from the lower socio-economic levels and having greater problems with transition.

*Gender:* The *Early School Leavers Study* (2005) has shown that young men and women have differing levels and processes of disengagement. They tend to engage and leave for different reasons and experience the daily life of school in different ways. Young men are more likely to leave high school without obtaining a diploma than are young women. In Canada, throughout the 1990s, young men have had higher early leaver rates than women and the gap has widened in recent years. The risk factors for young men are the need to work, mental health and addiction issues, and/or incarceration. Young women tend to leave to take care of children, families, or to work (Ferguson et al, 2005).

Although young women are currently completing high school at higher rates than young men, studies indicate that those women who do leave school early are at a greater disadvantage than men who leave as they face an increased risk of unemployment, poverty and lack of social support. In addition, it is the educational level of mothers (not fathers) which is likely to impact children's educational attainment levels. Research in general suggests that girls are more negatively effected by the transition than boys (McGee et al, 2003). Wright (2000, cited in McGee et al 2003; p49) further suggests that communities still often "worry about boys

doing less well (in school) than girls in a way that they do not worry when girls doing less well than boys

At the time of transition, girls' attitudes towards learning are different from boys (McGee et al, 2003). Adjustment patterns are also different; girls experience more depression, more feelings of vulnerability, greater decline in commitment to school, decline in self-esteem and more hostility (Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987). Lord et al (1994) reviewed the literature on gender difference in transition and report that girls, especially early maturing girls, evidence a decline in self-esteem that was not matched by boys. Moreover, risk and protective factors were found to differentially relate by gender such that perceived physical attractiveness is more important to girls' development of self-esteem. Lord et al (1994) found in their own longitudinal analysis, that being a male was predictive of self-esteem increases over time whereas being a female was predictive of decreasing self-esteem. Girls have also been shown to be more affected by the perception of positive teacher-student relationships, showing more interest in class and subject attitudes when the relation is positive (Ferguson and Fraser, 1998a). Boys have been shown to be more negatively affected than girls by self-consciousness about academic performance such that this predicted declines in self-esteem and problems with adjustment (Lord et al, 1994).

However, girls also have clearer views of their own strengths and aspirations than do boys and girls experience less of a dip in general academic achievement which relates to their relatively easier time in adjustment and coping (Pietarinen, 2000). To complicate matters, others have found that the transition has a positive effect for boys in their mathematics grades (McGee et al, 2003) and that boys show a decrease in depression and hostility but experience an increase in disruptive behaviour and a need to socialize around sporting events (Hirsch and Rapkin, 1987). The gender differences in academic achievement, patterns of adjustment, meanings, and experiences of transition clearly require more detailed and careful attention.

## **Families, Friends, and Peers**

Parents have concerns about the transition to high school, and yet they are very important members of the student support system. Williamson & Johnston (1998) found that underlying many parent concerns was a belief that American middle schools lacked academic rigour. In one school, an examination of results on state achievement tests revealed a persistent pattern



of underachievement by minority students; the school acknowledged its areas of weakness and used them as an opportunity for greater collaboration with parents to design solutions. Lord et al (1994) similarly found that parents rely almost solely on performance as an indicator of their child's adjustment to high school. Thus, if parents perceive that the child is doing well academically, than they believe that they are adjusting well. But, familial engagement in the transition could be extended beyond the academic.

Family support and parental engagement have been linked to student achievement more generally, and are beginning to be addressed in interesting ways (c.f Pushor, 2007). As related to the transitions specially, McGee et al (2003), reviewed several US studies (c.f. Catterall, 1998; Falbo, Lein & Amadow, 2001; Falbo & Lein, 1999; Rice, 2001, cited in McGee et al 2003) which have shown that the following parental actions promote school success after the transitions to secondary school:

- presence of books and a place to study,
- maintaining rules on limiting television viewing,
- frequency of checking on homework,
- discussion of schoolwork with their children,
- participation in parent-teacher organisations,
- monitoring their child's social life and creating a positive peer network,
- monitoring their child's academic progress
- knowledge of school structure and bureaucracy,
- ability to intercede on their child's behalf when necessary,
- ability to provide time, energy, and money for resources.

Parents need to attend meetings with educators to discuss transfer arrangements, choices of schools, and common understandings of curriculum (Nicholls & Gardner, 1999; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991). This list is easier to achieve for some parents than for others. The question that remains outstanding is; how are **all** parents to be encouraged and empowered to do this? As Lord et al (1994) have shown from their longitudinal study of youth in transition, parents who are most *developmentally attuned* and supportive of autonomy, were the most able to able to help in positive self-esteem and adjustment to secondary school. This support mediated a lack of self-consciousness and encouraged positive self-concept which were necessary for young people to adjust to their new school. Young people who reported having less opportunity to express their own desires and opinions and perceived a "lack of attunement" between themselves and their parents did more poorly in adjustment to transitions (Lord et al, 1994).

An interesting dilemma occurs during early adolescence such that young people move away from their parents as the main influence on their daily affairs, and move towards their friends and peers. Therefore, the ways in which families are to support and facilitate the transitions and adjustment to secondary school is important, yet under studied. The approach outlined in this Literature Review suggests we attend to the fits or misfits between the developing adolescent and their multiple environments. How well does each support their needs?

This shifting relation and differential influence of family and friends during adolescence has been much discussed in the general research on adolescent development and will not be outlined here. In short, the social, cognitive and emotional changes increase opportunities and needs to experience independence both inside and outside of the home. Same age friendships tend to be more mutual and helpful to developmental tasks (Eccles et al, 1993) and confidence in one's peer-related social skills is an important contributor to self-evaluation and adjustment to high school (Lord et al, 1994). As this relates precisely to the transitions to secondary school, however, very little is known. We do know that friends are extremely important to the process and that peers are seen as a coping strategy during transfer (Demetriou et al, 2000; Galton et al 2003; Kvaslund, 2000; Pietraninen, 2000). Moreover, a significant link has been found between peer relationships (group membership, acceptance, and friendships) and student academic achievement, so long as peers and friends are bound to pro-schoolwork and school commitments (Demetriou et al, 2000). Students were clear about the potential of working with friends and the detriments of being distracted by them (Demetriou et al, 2000).

However, isolation, loneliness, and peer rejection have been found to be important social risks in the transition, especially for children with special needs (Tur-Kaspa, 2002), and the importance of friendships to academic support is often eclipsed by their more obvious place as social support. In moving into secondary school, students begin to experience peer group relations that are based less on the orientation to study, and increasingly more on the degree of respect each person has to the peer group (Pietarinen, 2000). Galton et al (2003) report that a majority of students are discerning about the friends with whom they work well and who are able to support them academically. Teachers need to recognize the value of peer support in learning and come to legitimize it. The value of helping to establish and maintain good friends for a student in transition is clear. For example, elementary students are often consulted about student friendships and parents could make additional comments and requests (Demetriou et

al, 2000). It has been suggested that students could also be given a greater say in seating plans and working groups in order to integrate the social and academic aspects of friendships which are so critical to young people (Galton et al, 2003).

In a multi-method investigation of the meanings and experiences of transitions and friendship (social relations) in Norway, it was shown that the context, size, and group dynamics of elementary school related to the friendships and transitional experiences of young people. For example, rural schools housed pupils with greater social integration than did large urban schools which showed a measure of social disintegration. Collective play dominated in the smaller schools and students were found to work out problems on their own. Play and activities were chosen and set based on their ability to include boys and girls at multiple ages in a way which was fluid (Kvalsund, 2000). In the larger urban schools, an age and gender segregated, restricted form of play and socializing was seen. For instance, instead of "playing football, they were "practicing the sport of football" (p. 409), and the dominant school yard activities were based on segregation into sub-groups. It was concluded that the elementary schools were "signalling this social logic" in the way that resources were divided and structured.

## **Young People**

In thinking about the multitude of risk factors associated with the transitions to secondary school, it is useful to reflect on the salient developmental tasks of adolescence. In conjunction with their social class, minority group status, gender, and cultural experiences, young people enter into the transition with forming identities and histories as learners, friends, family members, and community members. A central task is to develop a sense of self as an autonomous person and to enter into the process of identity formation in a new way (Eccles, et al 1993). This move towards autonomy is traversed on physical, cognitive, and social terrains (Lerner, 2006). Personal coping resources that help to buffer ill effects of stress include a sense of autonomy, self-efficacy, competence, and confidence (Lord et al, 1994). Alternately, worry, anxiety, and self-consciousness may be detrimental and act as risk factors.

The individual narratives and stories of youth intersect with school and youth culture in ways that are difficult but important to determine. For example, young people with special education needs and learning challenges, such as learning disability (LD), have been found to experience higher levels of social risk than do students without LD (Tur-Kaspa, 2002). These

students were found to be rated significantly lower by their teachers on social skills such as cooperation, assertion and self-control and were found to exhibit more problem behaviours than their peers. As a result, Tur-Kaspa (2002) found that these students were socially rejected during their transitions to grade 9. However, in surveying the young people with LD, they found that they rated themselves as equally socially competent as their peers.

The *Early School Leavers Study* (2005) clearly alerted us to the many externalizing and internalizing mental health issues with which young people in secondary school are struggling. Especially for those who are disengaged and/or leaving school early, the host of challenges were outlined by both students and teachers as a main risk factor. Wallis and Barrett (1998) further found that the nearly three-quarters of youth could be diagnosed with mental health challenges when combining a number of measures including family and clinical interviews. Moreover, the transition point can exacerbate mental health issues and we could best be targeting that time as useful for intervention in the host of emotional and behavioural challenges for both boys and girls. Rudolph et al (2001) demonstrate further that the transition exacerbates depressive and anxious symptoms which lead to a trajectory of negative self-regulation and disengagement. Thus, this process is not simply a stumbling block for those who are disengaging, but is a gateway process for continued disengagement via further loss of control and depressive symptoms.

Galton et al (2003) found that tensions and pressures in school and in transition can lead pupils to adopt a particular identity in relation to their learning. These identity patterns were found to be difficult to drop, once established. Students spoke about wanting to change from "shirkers to workers" but did not know how; some even suggested that they were "addicted" to "messaging about" and could not escape the peer group in which this was valued. They also spoke about the problems of labelling which occur once teachers saw them in one or another learner identity pattern. They found that the process of disengagement could actually be reversed if students could find significant people who could acknowledge their strengths. Anti-work identities are easier to change in elementary than secondary school and any change happens over time, not on a one-off session (Galton et al, 2003). Students needed more time in school to speak about such issues, time to speak about their difficulties, and small targets to build success. Demetriou et al (2000) suggest a "twin peaks" of identity and engagement such that they are highest as the social novelties of a new school are encountered, but can drop off

with perceived lower status. Learning can be overshadowed by the social excitement. After the adjustment, "getting good grades" then returns as an identity motivator.

Indeed, the transition itself can be seen as a moment in youth development in which excitement and anticipation can drive positive identity developments. Lucey & Reay (2000) go so far as to show that the development of "self" is ridden with anxiety and risk, and that anxiety is not necessarily negative. Tilleczek & Hine (2006) similarly show how social risks in adolescence are viewed differently by age and gender, but seen as moments of potential for negotiating adolescent rites of passage. However, there is a level beyond which anxiety and risk are counter-productive for some young people. Experiences such as "getting lost", "feeling frozen" and suffering from a range of mental health challenges should be signals to invoke greater care and support (Lucey & Reay, 2000). Tilleczek (2004) further shows how Beck's notion of our modern *risk society*, as a context for contemporary youth culture, requires increasing numbers of such negotiations and supports in the complex lives of youth.

Omitting these complex life stories and the active input of youth in the process of education further strains their development given the overwhelming evidence of their need to belong and have meaningful input (Tilleczek, 2003; Eccles et al, 1993). This sets us up for overestimating risks and underestimating active negotiations of young people such as changes in pedagogical regimes and shifts in student-teacher relations (Kvsuland, 2000; Pietrinen, 2000). We need to attend to the ways in which young people adapt to both opportunities and constraints of elementary and secondary schools, and the length of time needed for each phase of the transition between them. How do the lives and stories of young people intersect with elementary and secondary school cultures? This is now examined in relation to the risks presented by both.

## ***School-Related Risk Factors***

### **Academic Achievement**

The intersection of the lives of young people and their schools is most frequently seen in their academic achievements and outcomes. Although not solely of importance, academic achievement is the most pervasive measure of student success across the transitions. Is there a natural progression? Are students motivated and ready for secondary school? What happens

to their achievement when they get there? Students who have the greatest difficulty in the transitions are those who are not academically prepared, and a decrease in grade point average further complicates the transitions (Anderson et al, 2000).

In the international literature on the effects of transitions there appears to be substantial agreement that there is often a decline in achievement following transition (Barone, Aguirre-Deandris & Trickett, 1991; Carvel, 2000; Collins & Harrison, 1998; Galton, Gray & Ruddrick, 1999; Mizelle, 1995; National Center for Education Statistics, 1995; Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, 2002, all cited in McGee et al 2003). Galton et al (2003) suggest that we should attend to these continuities and discontinuities in achievement, its precursors, and outcomes. For example, Nicholls & Gardner (1999) suggest that the discontinuity in the progress between elementary and secondary school could be related to the shift in school cultures, the lack of recognition of student achievement in elementary school, and the wide range of feeder schools from which students were assessed. We have already considered, in the sections above, that both parents and students focus on achievement and academic progress, and some of the factors that impinge on these outcomes. We now turn to the cultures of elementary and secondary school to examine the factors which can further impede academic and social progress across the transitions. We focus on school structures, curriculum, pedagogy, and student-teacher interactions.

## **Elementary Schools**

It has been noted that *transition to* is determined by what students *transition from* (Kvaslund, 2000) and that we should focus as much on the elementary schools as we do on secondary school adjustment. Students in elementary school, before making the transition, worried about getting to school on time, finding lockers, dealing with crowds, bullying, safety, and failing grades (Anderson et al, 2000). The structure and quality of elementary schools (be they rural, urban, middle schools, or K-8 models) is therefore an important factor in understanding the transition. Although no large scale, longitudinal research exists, data from the USA suggests that students in K-8 schools out perform those from middle school. These K-8 schools are making a comeback in the United States as they slowly begin to replace the middle school in many states (Pardini, 2002). Therefore, the elementary-secondary K-8 split (i.e. 8 years in elementary education and 4 in secondary) is the optimal chunking to enhance self-esteem,

grade point average, extracurricular activity, and perceived autonomy (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Also, the structure makes only one transition necessary, thereby reducing the stresses related to making changes at an already difficult period of the life course (Eccles, Lord & Midgeley, 1999; Alspaugh, 1998a). Students in the K-8 schools were found to have had less of an achievement drop than those making multiple multiple transitions (Alspaugh 1998b). Alspaugh (1998a) reports a correlation between the number of transitions a student makes and the likelihood that he or she will drop out of school. The lowest rates of early leaving were found in districts which were organized into K-6 and 7-12 schools, with only one transition at 7<sup>th</sup> grade. His advice is to put a small group of kids together when they are in kindergarten and "keep them together". The bonding and friendships made in elementary school are more important than previously thought.

Research suggests that the nature and quality of the middle school makes a good deal of difference in student outcomes. As Kvaslund (2000) has shown, elementary schools provide students with systematically different social and academic experiences by virtue of size and structure. Students from smaller schools have several social supports from older peers and classmates. Those which focus on the developmental needs of young adolescents (ages 10-14) and smaller class sizes do very well. These quality schools have been termed "elemiddle schools" (Pardini, 2002, p. 5) and have been shown to exhibit excellence in student centred approaches to learning and social involvement. Teacher beliefs and expectations have been found to play a role in transitions. In general, elementary school teachers were found to have more positive image of students and also trusted students more and used less control in their discipline than did secondary teachers (Midgley, Feldlauer & Eccles, 1987).

Galton et al (2003) found that "more effective" elementary schools made as much as half a year level of progress difference at transition when compared to their "less effective" counterparts. Moreover, these schools were attempting to facilitate the transition to high school by introducing rotary systems for classes and introducing content based instruction, labs and curriculum into grade 9. However, the same study found that student's progress "routes" through math and reading should also be taken into consideration. For example, they grouped students into four progress routes and found that roughly 40 percent of students made equal-sized steps from year to year, 25 percent made variable progress, and fewer took increasingly larger steps or decreasingly smaller ones in their progress. This large scale analysis of 3000 elementary school students in the UK, (Galton et al, 2003) found that in reading, students who

were on “equal-sized routes” made the most progress. The differences were more substantial in math outcomes. Students on a “decreasing path” (fast starts followed by smaller steps in achievement in subsequent years) made two levels of progress while students who were on “increasing routes” continued to lag behind. When looking across the two subjects and combining evidence, the researchers concluded that “there is some support for the desirability of pupils to follow more “equal-sized” academic steps which neither compensates for a slow start nor relies on a “spurt at the finishing line” (Galton, et al 2003: 105).

Therefore, effective elementary schools are engaged in the understanding and monitoring of student academic progress routes and in establishing solid transition plans which integrate curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. The elementary stage of the transition process is critical for student’s social and academic engagement and provides a real opportunity to build on the excitement and hopes for fresh starts and/or the continuation of successes. As these same young people continue to negotiate their nested transitions, they move into their new secondary school dwellings which provide both opportunities and constraints; both familiarities and differences; both continuities and discontinuities. This moment of dialogue between elementary and secondary schools is therefore critical.

## **Secondary Schools**

The notion of a trajectory through secondary school is important but fuzzier than once thought since the new school culture instates new influences on student’s pathways (Dauber, Alexander and Entwistle, 1996). After making the transition, students report that their courses are more difficult, their teachers are stricter, and making friends was more difficult than in elementary school (Anderson et al, 2000). Secondary schools have been found to be relatively bigger, more heterogeneous, more compartmentalized, less tolerant, more rule bound, more concerned with ability, and less personal, than are elementary schools (Anderson et al 2000). Eccles et al (1993) point to the cluster of school environment issues which keep schools from conforming to the developmental needs of youth. For example, classroom organization, instruction, ethos, task structure, ability grouping practices, evaluation techniques, motivational strategies, locus of responsibility for learning, and quality of student-teacher relation. High schools are more focused on control and discipline with fewer opportunities for choice and decision making – More time is spent on maintaining order. Intermediate elementary students (grades 7 & 8 had more control over their work than secondary students (Kvusland, 2000; Ward et al, 1982).



Thus, the fit between adolescent desire for autonomy and their perception of the extent to which school afforded it to them, decreases with school transition.

Lower levels of cognitive engagement in class work have been found in secondary schools. British, American, and Australian studies have reported student disillusionment at the lack of academic challenge in their early secondary school experiences (Green, 1997; Kirkpatrick, 1992; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997; Mullins & Irvin, 2000; Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, 2002 all cited in McGee, 2003). One study found that students handed in inferior work in order to meet deadlines, finding that the volume of work increased rather than the difficulty level, and as a result felt a lack of control over their own learning (Kirkpatrick, 1992). Eccles et al (1993) cite evidence of low level learning activities peaking in grade 9 (copying answers from board, worksheets etc) which made fewer cognitive demands just when young people are reaching a higher ability cognitively. Campbell (2001) reported a case study of success in sustaining good grades via shifting curriculum and pedagogy. The secondary school focused on 80 Grade 10 students who were experiencing a decline in grades, and paired them with four teachers who worked together to teach study skills, goal setting, and who used an integrated curriculum. Academic achievement improved for at least 61% of the students in science, mathematics, English, and history. Curricular continuity and coherence remain an issue for the transition. McGee et al's (2003) review shows that research indicates that there are gaps in subject content, inconsistencies in expectations of students, and differences in teaching and learning practices.

Pedagogical and assessment shifts in secondary school are also important. They have been found to be whole class, task oriented, much less individual instruction, fewer individual variations of assignments, and with teacher use of more social comparisons, competitive grading, and normative grading (Eccles et al 1993). Kvaslund (2000) has also shown that the pedagogical shifts in high school are from child to teacher centred. Students are also adept at describing the significant changes in school practices, teaching, and social relations that accompany the move into secondary school (Pietarinen, 2000). On the whole, they found the teachers and teaching "quite boring and quite different" with fewer possibilities of real involvement and "action" (Pietarinen, 2000; p.390). Eccles et al (1993) also cite evidence to suggest that the decline in achievement in high school could be related to the strictness in standards for judging students and grading rather than actual competence. Standard test scores remain the same, but general scores drop. Contradictions with those who say it is "too

easy” needs further work. The dip in academic achievement, as cited by many researchers, could be studied as an artefact of shifts in assessment, pedagogy, and curriculum. Once in secondary school, the original emphasis on academic placement by standardized test score results, relatively practical and easy in elementary school, shifts (Dauber, Alexander and Entwisle, 1996). In assessment, it has been suggested that teachers need to think about strategies they could use in the classroom that would emphasise mastery, understanding, and improvement (Midgley & Maehr, 1998, cited in McGee, 2003). These included:

- allowing students to redo work;
- de-emphasising mistake-free papers;
- using portfolios to assess student progress;
- using project-based approaches to the curriculum;
- integrating curriculum areas and use thematic approaches;
- recognising effort and improvement both formally and informally;
- providing complex, challenging work for students, and
- de-emphasising test scores and high grades.

Student-teacher relations become less personal, less positive, less supportive, less caring, and teachers were found to trust students less (Eccles, et al 1993). The perceived change in student-teacher relations and student support in high school significantly explained changes in levels of academic, personal, and inter-personal functioning achievement (Barber & Olsen, 2004). Teachers believe themselves to be less effective, especially with students who are struggling academically. Teachers had lower efficacy rating and students who had teachers who felt less confident did more poorly than students who had more efficacious teachers, especially if they had highly efficacious teachers in elementary school (Eccles, et al 1993).

Teacher expectations and beliefs are an integral part of this relationship. Stereotypes and negative images of young people were reported in research which focused on the teacher’s view of the transition. For example, it was found that elementary school math teachers were found to have more positive image of students than did secondary school math teachers (Midgley, Feldlauer & Eccles, 1987). Elementary teachers trusted students more and used less control in their discipline than did secondary teachers. Student-teacher relationships are a critical part of the learning experience. Many studies have shown that shifts in this relationship during the transition can create risks for students. In general, the principles of *care* and *control* are seen as the core of elementary school culture while *academics*, *student polarization*, and *fragmented individualism* have been found to pervade secondary school cultures (Hargreaves & Earl, 1990). From the student side, the number of teachers relates to this shift in relationships

such that there are different teachers in practically every class so one can skip, grades can drop, and homework is completed just before class (Pietarinen, 2000).

On the social front, secondary schools are seen as a place to gain social status and to begin to set the norms of what it means to be "grown up". However, it is also a cultural institution with a more hegemonic frame in which the older students "own it" and the newcomers "inherit it" (Kvalsund, 2000, p. 416). Part of this change is seen as a lack of spirit in relation to elementary school and increasing tension between students (Pietarinen, 2000). Another part of this age-related hegemony is that play is a part of the past, is no longer serious, becomes forbidden, and certainly not to be initiated by grade 9 students.

"You've sort of grown out of it,,,at the primary school it was kind of the older ones who started to play tag, and then all the others joined it, didn't they. But here, you can't just...it is such a huge area so it is difficult to make that sort of thing work". (Kvaslund, 2000; p 416)

Young people were found to "sneak away" and/or camouflage their play so as not to "get caught", which was seen as a social catastrophe. Without this play, students find the breaks long and strange. Play becomes sport in secondary school, and thus the availability of sport to students becomes critical, especially for students who are disintegrated and isolated. Given that up to 80% of students in secondary school stay in age and gender segregated groups (Kvalsund, 2000), the practical implications are obvious. Clearly, a developmental shift in friendships and practices is enacted and experienced, and requires attention in both elementary and secondary schools.

## **Summary of Risk Factors**

In summary, many researchers have found that in general, the shift from elementary to secondary school is a journey from a relatively less demanding institution (socially and academically) to a relatively more demanding one (Kvalsund, 2000; McGee et al , 2003; Galton et al 2003; Hargreaves & Earl, 1990). For all of these reasons, and in all of the ways outlined above, it makes good sense for educators, policy makers, and researchers to focus on these cultural shifts, and the effects they have for different groups of students. All students find some difficulty in negotiating this tipping point along their journey. However, students most at-risk are those with multiple risk factors working at multiple levels. In general, the risk factors

which hinder or help the transition are those which help or hinder school disengagement and student success. Risks compound if they are not checked. We have identified, and now summarize, these risks which have been found to occur at three levels: Macro (cultural), Meso (family and friends); and Micro (youth).

**Table 1: Synopsis of Risk Factors in Transition**

|   |
|---|
| <p><b>Macro Level (Culture and School Structure)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social class and poverty, important to keep “daily hassles” for poor students at a minimum, there is some evidence that risks can be attenuated</li> <li>• Gender differences in adjustment</li> <li>• Ethnicity and visible minority status</li> <li>• Age and “age-ism”, the developmental struggles of adolescence can get lost</li> <li>• The primacy of the need for status and belonging can get lost</li> <li>• Cross-school and cross-panel cultures are different and set up need to negotiate new pedagogy, assessment, curriculum, procedures, structures</li> <li>• Tend to focus on academics issues only, rather than relation of academic/social/procedural issues</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Meso Level (Families, Friends and Classrooms)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Losing, keeping, and exposure to new friends is critical</li> <li>• Some learning pathways are better than others, for example an even achievement pathway is best as students do not need to quickly catch up on math and reading. The quality and structure of elementary schools are important in establishing these pathways for students</li> <li>• Friends and dating are important part of adolescent development which get lost</li> <li>• Adult status is sought at the very time that they enter a school where they are “newcomers” and the youngest</li> <li>• Adult status is critical to the excitement of going to high school but gets lost</li> <li>• Social isolation can occur in new, large, bureaucratic setting at the very time when friends and peers are critical</li> <li>• Familial relations are changing and needs for autonomy coincides with familial negotiation of new school and structures – how do they stay engaged?</li> <li>• Teacher-student relationships remain critical but often change to one of distance, mistrust, and less personal</li> <li>• Multiple, new relationships are being negotiated which is more difficult for some students</li> <li>• Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment all shift in multiple ways</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Micro Level (Youth)</b></p>   |

- Identity issues are critical and often overlooked
- Alienation and isolation can be a result of both age and school – lack of developmental fit
- At-risk students require additional assistance through adjustment
- Adjustment patterns are variable for students
- Mental health issues can be overlooked, (eg. stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness can be seen as artefact of the adjustment)
- Dips in academic achievement can lead to disengagement



## **7. What can we do to facilitate the transition? Protective Factors**

Given the contradiction in the way students feel about the transition and the host of inherent risks which have been found, how have educators worked to facilitate the transition? These protective factors can be loosely grouped into academic, procedural, and social categories. In each of elementary and secondary school, issues of assessment, pedagogy and curriculum are of importance. Although researchers tend to focus on one or two aspects at a time, fully describing the school cultures and gaps between them requires more developmental, temporal, and cultural models. It should be noted that very little literature addresses the idea of “families of schools” and instead speak as if there is generally one secondary school and one elementary school. Researchers have done little to differentiate and define the range or constellations of schools from which students originate, although they suggest that it is important to do so. Attention to community based strategies is also rare in the literature.

### ***Programs and Strategies in School***

## Elementary Schools

What can elementary schools do to address the issues students face as they journey from elementary to secondary school? Besides the list of positive factors of elementary school cultures outlined above, it seems that the ability to ready students is paramount to facilitating the transition and establishing needed supports (Anderson et al, 2000). Elementary schools and families play the largest role in preparing students. Galton et al (2003) found 3 main strategies dominating elementary transitions initiatives a) practice tests used regularly, b) “booster classes”, to bolster grades in certain subjects, and c) curricular bridging units. The latter were started within the last few weeks of elementary school and continued for several weeks after transition. Their main value was in promoting dialogue between elementary and secondary teachers on content, assessment, and pedagogy. Elementary schools which introduce rotation systems were also found to better prepare students for transitions to secondary school (Schumacher, 1998).

A number of researchers suggest the possibility of a multidimensional measure for elementary schools which could be adapted and checked prior to students leaving for secondary school (cf. Anderson et al, 2000; Galton et al, 2003). We caution that this concept could be misleading if it is used to assign either blame or a diminished role of importance to the elementary side of the process. Given the nature and concept of transitions used here, we suggest that such a “measure” should not be quantified or standardized and should be use only insofar as it is seen as useful as one of many possible pulse-taking tools used by families of schools as they follow students over time. We have adapted the list as follows;

- Academic pulse of the intermediate grades (curricular, pedagogical, assessment, content, and student grades)
- Independence, industriousness, and coping skills of students (responsibility and status)
- Awareness and information about the transition for students, parents and educators
- Social pulse (support and engagement of friends, families, educators, schools, & communities)
- Procedural preparedness (transition plans, cross-panel supports, integration, etc)

Basic principles are suggested by the literature such that the less a student is deemed to be ready, the more support will be needed. Also, the greater the discontinuity between feeder and receiving schools, the more support will be needed. The timing, type, and comprehensiveness of the efforts could be geared to individual students. Anderson et al (2000) suggest the

development of a) individualized transition plans, b) planning teams across schools, c) a student driven goals and problems assessment, and d) ongoing evaluation of the transition process. We further suggest that such principles and pulses can and should be taken for secondary schools and will now discuss such strategies.

## **Secondary Schools**

Researchers have found that students have more positive transitions into schools that modify social cultures to increase a sense of belonging and care than did students in schools that did not (Eccles & Midgley et al, 1996; Keating, 1996). In an effort to facilitate transitions for immigrant adolescents, Lucas (1996) studied exemplary programs. He concludes that these programs generally make schools function as communities which build bridges between students, parents, teachers and communities. The application of a “family of schools” model to bridge school cultures looks promising.

Students who are struggling academically need more help with study skills and provision of academic tutors, time management classes, and discussion of academic expectations (Demetriou et al, 2000). Galton et al (2003) found that a number of secondary schools were experimenting with post-induction programmes in an attempt to develop student awareness that they are life long and “professional” learners. These programs involved study skills, problem solving strategies and learning styles inventories. Students were found to be enthusiastic about such programs when they occurred.

Demetriou et al (2000; p. 432) provide a list of useful practices, based on their review of research, that educators in secondary schools can enact to raise commitment to learning and student achievement. They are:

- Providing a clear and positive culture of learning including activities for students which promote and enhance their positive learner identities
- Creating time, early in the Grade 9 year, for dialogue about learning and long term implications of their high school lives
- Ensuring that there are increasing opportunities for students to exercise responsibility

- Respond to problems of “catching-up” if students miss work, through illness or choice. Students need to know that what they miss matters, and will be need scaffolding to make up the ground
- Monitor the messages that school gives about the assessment and status of each year.
- Treat students with respect, firmness, fairness, and good humour

### ***Programs and Strategies Across Schools***

One could argue that **ALL** transition programming must address the shifts between and across schools. Students themselves are very capable and instrumental in articulating ways to create this positive transition. What is essential is the promotion of the possibility for student learning and personal growth. Students place great trust in educators to support the adjustment to the new school and make suggestions as to ways to bridge pedagogical, social, and physical environments. From the view of pupils, it is essential that teachers each maintain their own aims, goals, flexibilities, and styles in class, but work at the school and inter-school level to coordinate efforts (Pietraninen,2000). A prerequisite for achieving the “culture of cooperation” (p. 397) is that teachers understand all processes involved in bridging, work across panels as inter-teacher collaborators, and demonstrate an ongoing willingness to support student attempts to adapt. If these modes already exist, then making everyone aware of them, promoting them, and evaluating them are essential steps.

Further research corroborates these notions of bridging and comprehensive schooling. For example, transition programming is helpful when including tours, teacher visits to elementary school, and induction days (Graham and Hill, 2003; Galton, 2003). Galton et al (2003) found that promoting dialogue between elementary and secondary teachers on content, assessment, and pedagogy was critical to positive transitions. He also suggests sending high school students into elementary schools for discussions; joint arrangement of tours and visits; and the implement of hotlines and/or website for parents and students are useful. Akos (2004) promotes “vertical teaming” to increase communication about curriculum and expectation between teachers across elementary and secondary schools. Principals have been found to report stronger school programs when they invested in interdisciplinary teams of teachers to



create supportive conditions for teachers and students. Principals also report that extensive school transition programs reduce the number of students who need to repeat the grade immediately following the transition (MacIver & Epstein, 1991).

Weldy (1991, cited in Schumacher, 1998) provides the following guidelines to help; a) build a sense of community, b) respond to the needs and concerns of students, and c) provide appropriate approaches to facilitate the process. These approaches can include the following:

- Provide multiple activities for students, parents, and teachers in both elementary and secondary school
- Establish a transition protocol
- Establish a timeline for transition process
- Schedule collaborative and cross-panel meetings to discuss all issues
- Assess human and financial support available
- Identify adult leaders from all schools
- Speak to students, teachers, parents and counsellors, in evaluating the programs and process
- Consider some of the following activities: curriculum articulation across school, teacher visits across panels, letters to parents and families, Parent Council involvement, students to become ambassadors of good will in receiving schools, letters between schools can be exchanged (email etc), program highlights when students visit; open houses etc; school handbooks written and shared with family and student.

Graham and Hill (2003) add to this list as arising from their work with minority group students, and suggest the following:

- Keep useful existing programs – they work!
- Pay attention to adjustment to secondary school, not just preparatory programs
- Pay attention to mechanisms which assist newcomers and minority youth
- Dialogue across teachers and schools about roles of school, child and family, language and cultures
- Build on strengths in families and ethnic communities

- Recognize ethnicity as an issue which detracts from finding support and mentoring
- Address racism and bullying swiftly and directly

A New Zealand example (Hill and Hawk, 2000 cited in McGee et al, 2003) reverberates with this list. The project *Achievement in Multi-Cultural High Schools* (AIMHI) was based on a Ministry of Education strategic plan to raise the achievement of Māori and Pacific students in low income secondary schools. At the beginning of the year, teachers worked with their classes to establish ground rules, clear expectations, and to encourage group cohesion. The report describes how teachers used student-centred teaching techniques and provided positive feedback. Successful teachers talked about accommodating different learning styles and about providing variety and *making learning fun*. Predominantly Māori secondary schools illustrated that transition problems for low socio-economic status pupils were reduced by shared experiences at the start of Year 9. In this case, Year 9 students spent the first week of school at camp, culminating in a school house regatta. These shared experiences were seen to avert major transition problems, at least in the short term.

### ***Programs and Strategies in Communities***

Some work has suggested that transition programs for newcomer youth need to be at least two-pronged in order to enable immigrant students. Schools need, at both levels, to commit to functioning as the hub of the community and build bridges to families and others organizations outside the school which can help with language, culture, and school transitional challenges. The curricular level needs to be addressed for these students to also include English as a Second Language, academic skills, and support for native language development. In an effort to facilitate transitions for immigrant adolescents, Lucas (1996) studied three exemplary programs in the USA (New York, San Diego, and New Jersey) and attended to the literature surrounding the issue. She concludes that while distinct in some ways, these programs generally have the capacity to make schools function as communities and to build bridges between students, parents, teachers and communities. The development of English language skills, academic skills and content knowledge was accompanied by support for native language development and cultural sensitivity.

It is clear that schools and communities could best respond together to facilitate the transition. While few studies have examined the process or outcomes of such initiatives, it is stated by Schumacher (1998) that the community of students, parents, teachers, staff, business partners, and residents needs to define first the kinds of schools which they wish to create. A sense of belonging to a new school can be extended into community belonging. Critical to this process is increase communications with parents (how is it done? electronic vs face-face), and helping to engage parents in school. The latter includes helping parents to help their sons and daughters with homework, inclusion in social events, and discussion of academic issues facing the school (Schumacher 1998).

## Summary of Protective Factors

A host of specific and practical strategies which enhance transitions emerged from the literature. Table 2 provides our conceptual synopsis as organized at three levels: macro (cultural); meso (classrooms, friends, families, communities); and micro (youth and teachers).

**Table 2: Synopsis of Factors Which Facilitate the Transition**

### **Macro Level (Culture and School Structure)**

- Attend to social class, gender, and ethnicity, anti-racism, anti-classism, and bullying awareness
- Attend to school-development fit, belonging, friends, teacher training on youth culture and development
- Attend to continuities and discontinuities in elementary and secondary school cultures (structures, practices, pedagogy, assessment, curriculum, teaching, etc)
- Create well coordinated transitions, decrease adjustment time, keep what works, document, describe, communicate, evaluate. Provide adequate information for students and families. Focus on long-term adjustment not just immediate movement
- Get administrative work out of the way so that students can focus on school and social events in first weeks
- Engage across panels (parents, students, and teachers) with multiple strategies (letters, hotline, websites, visits, clear timetables, open house, handbooks, maps, meet teachers, ongoing meetings of personnel, internet chats, teacher/student cross-visits)
- Make time lines and transition plans for each student and parent (attend to at-risk issues early in elementary school)

- Redirect efforts and funds, assess human and financial supports, identify caring adults
- Note complexity of “families of schools” model, multiple feeder school possibilities and issues, fewer transitions the better for students

**Meso Level (Classes, Friends, Families)**

- Focus on teaching style/care, similarities across schools, student input in seating plans, work partners, class activities, sense of belonging, teachers as human developers
- Focus on pedagogical issues/similarities across panels, less competitive pedagogy in grade 9, use friends, make friends, task-focused strategies
- Focus on friendships, peer groups and influence, continuity in peer groups, connect students to friends/peers/classmates (seating plans, working groups)
- Focus on shifts in parental/peer relations which occur at the time of transition; parents require more information at precisely the time youth distance from parents
- Focus on roles of counselling, caring, community outreach, and parental input
- Focus on core/bridging curriculum across schools, language across the curriculum, post-induction programs for study and organizational skills, elementary booster classes
- Focus on student success/fresh starts, front load grade 9 with courses based on student’s strengths
- Focus on issues of assessment and its practice and meaning across panels, focus on dips in achievement per subject
- Focus on numeracy, literacy, academic and career pathways and care/culture/community

**Micro (Youth and Teachers )**

- Elementary students are positive and excited about the transition (build on this!); youth should know that some anxiety is expected and appropriate
- Help youth commit to learner identities and belonging, acknowledge strengths, prior achievements, create fresh starts, avoid old labels, students can “unlearn” math, language and reading, change “shirkers” to “workers”, friends are important, self-perception dips are lasting, set clear goals
- Support at-risk students, look beyond regular assessment data when tracking risk, look to how risk factors play out in class (e.g. boys who are meeting targets but not challenged)
- Engage youth and friends in the transition process at all levels and stages
- Engage parents and students to see the importance of academic and social development
- Teachers are human developers, teachers are also in transition, teachers need support



## 8. Summary

Researchers have found that many young people at the threshold of secondary school are hopeful about the potential of their new status, school, friends, and education (Graham & Hill, 2003). Kirkpatrick (2004) has reported that students look forward to this *fresh start* and are adept at making new friends for positive academic and social purposes. Some students report coping better than expected, enjoying new freedoms, and involvement in extra-curricular activities (Akos, 2004).

A contradiction exists, however, in that many students also express anxiety about the transition. Poor and immigrant youth state that they expected things to be easier than they actually turned out (Graham and Hill, 2003). An emotional paradox exists at this transition point, as it does at many life junctures. Students are both excited and anxious, both doubtful and hopeful. The most pervasive source of anxiety is the loss of status at precisely the time when they are moving toward adulthood (Tilleczek, 2006; Graham and Hill, 2003; Hargreaves & Earl, 1990). Dips in self-perception and learner identities are pervasive (Silverthorn et al, 2005). Given the importance of status to adolescents, the social and academic implications are obvious.

Academic concerns such as homework, pressure to do well, and potential drops in achievement are paramount for students and parents (Akos, 2004). Social concerns such as getting lost, bullying, and making friends (Schumacher, 1998) are prevalent, perceived risks. Beyond the negotiation of the transition, structural problems are imagined and/or experienced by students. Of concern are the size and layout of secondary schools, the time table, complicated schedules, being bullied, not knowing anyone, getting lost, and having multiple teachers (Graham & Hill, 2001; Schumacher, 1998). The aspect most troubling in relation to school work was the increase in homework (Graham and Hill, 2001). Kirkpatrick (2004) has reported that students often feel that the *honeymoon is over* after the initial adjustment phase to secondary school. At later phases, academic issues take precedence over social and procedural issues, leading students to express dissatisfaction and disappointment.

However, many educators and parents have found innovative and helpful ways to support young people in making these nested transitions and new ways are within our grasp. These range from interventions and programs relating to individual young people, schools, and communities. Focussing on both risk and protective factors is critical so as not to overlook

moments of resiliency and critical junctures in which to intervene. Protective factors can be loosely grouped into academic, procedural, and social categories. In each of elementary and secondary schools, issues of assessment, pedagogy and curriculum are of importance. In approaching the issue in this way, the transition from elementary to secondary school can be seen as moment of possibility in contemporary society in which we can enhance the pathways, successes, and trajectories of youth as they move toward adulthood. Fully describing school cultures and gaps between them assists in our developmental, temporal, and cultural approach.



## 9. Implications and Future Directions

Practically speaking, Tables 1 and 2 provide a host of evidence-based risks and practices that can be attended to in transition programming. We should attend to the coherence of transition initiatives that are already in place. We should also balance our pre/during/post transition activities and funds (time, resources, etc), and begin to mark student social maturity by increasing responsibilities which allow for status, belonging, and confidence (Galton, et al 1993). In remaining aware of the *nested transitions* which young people are making, a longer conceptual view and more enduring practices can be enacted (Tilleczek, forthcoming).

Research shows that more needs to be done to facilitate transitions and educators have the ability to do so. In secondary school, teacher beliefs about friendships, academic interests and youth as motivated learners need to be improved. Procedural strategies allowing more interaction with teachers are helpful, as are transitional approaches to assessment, curriculum, and pedagogy. Students advise their fellow students to a) be aware that secondary school is not that frightening, b) make friends, c) talk to people about emotions, and d) do not listen to rumours (Kirkpatrick, 2004). We are in a position to facilitate these and other goals.

Seventeen years ago, Hargreaves & Earl (1990) conducted a literature review on research about schooling in the transition years in Ontario. They concluded then that “the

tragedy of the transition years is not that students experience anxiety on transfer to secondary school. The tragedy is that this anxiety passes so quickly, and that the students adjust so smoothly to the many uncomfortable realities of secondary school life. These realities...can restrict achievement, and depress motivation (especially among the less academic) sowing the seeds for dropout in later years" (p. 214)

Since that time, a good deal of research has been conducted on the risk and protective factors surrounding the transition from elementary to secondary school. Unfortunately, this research has suggested that the tragedy outlined by Hargreaves & Earl (1990) has not been fully appreciated. The *Early School Leavers Study* (2005) has since demonstrated that educators and schools have room to become more proactive, caring, and understanding in order to encourage student success and engagement. Similarly, the transition from elementary to secondary school, as a potential tipping point for young people, requires further attention at administrative, academic, and social levels. The current Grade 8 to Grade 9 Transition Planning Initiative of the Ontario Ministry of Education is taking a considerable step in this direction. As yet, there has been little research conducted in the Canadian or Ontario context. It is time to take stock of what is already in place and what/how it is working for whom.

After viewing the international research on transitions, we suggest that the largest gap in knowledge remains in understanding fully the *meso* level. The *meso* level is where intersections between culture and individual meet and where we can best begin to appreciate and describe the intersections of daily lives of young people with teachers, friends, peers, and parents. It is at this level where the experience and embodiment of social class, poverty, ethnicity, identity and age are played out. While researchers have addressed such issues as important "variables" in quantitative studies, we still need to capture the meaning and experience of the ways in which they work in school. This allows for research which can ask and answer more difficult questions. For instance: How are the problems of transition organized socially? What meanings do young people, parents, and educators make of the transition and why? How do students experience poverty, racism, and bullying in school? How do these experiences organize their learning? What roles do friends and peers play in academic and social support? Is the dip in academic achievement and self-esteem at transition an artefact of assessment and curricular shift? What would it look like if we placed the social, cognitive and physical needs of youth at the centre of transition and classroom practices? What place does

the body and puberty have in making nested transitions? What does it mean to be at-risk? Are labels useful or harmful and why?

A focus on the *meso* level invites a complementarity of multiple-method research strategies (Tilleczek, 2004) which are lacking in this field of study. Since transitions are nested, temporal, and process based, we need to address issues and mechanisms before, during, and after the shift to secondary school. Long-term qualitative research will be an asset in this field as we begin to more adequately map out processes, experiences, narratives, and meanings of transition over time. We need to understand which barriers and facilitators are shorter term, and which are longer term and why. Such momentum will help us to capitalize on *fresh starts* and avoid *false starts* which have long-term detrimental effects for students.





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