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## **Transitioning Year 7 Primary Students to Secondary Settings in Western Australian Catholic Schools: How Successful Was the Move?**

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### **Abstract**

*After much preparatory work, the Catholic Education Office in Western Australia determined to move Year 7 students from its more than 100 primary schools to secondary schools in 2009. This was the first time in the state's history that a major education system had embarked on such an undertaking. This system-wide shift presented a unique opportunity for investigating the degree of success experienced when viewed through the eyes of relevant stakeholders. This paper reports second phase results (stakeholder perceptions) of a prior study that reported details of the preparation undertaken in anticipation of the move. Issues identified here have clear implications for other systems that may be contemplating the creation of a six plus six primary-secondary schooling structure.*

### **Introduction**

In our previous paper (Coffey, Berlach, & O'Neill, 2011), we reported on the preparation undertaken by Catholic secondary schools in Western Australia for the reception of Year 7 students from primary schools. Prior to 2009, schooling systems statewide operated on a model of seven years of primary schooling (students commence Year 1 at six years of age and complete Year 7 at 12 years of age)

followed by five years of secondary schooling (commencing at age 13 and finishing at 17 years of age). From 2009, the scene has changed significantly. The remainder of this section provides a brief background of what occurred in that year that would change the profile of education across the state.

In 2002, the federal Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs agreed that it was desirable to strive for schooling uniformity across all Australian states. At that time, the 12 years of compulsory schooling in Australia were structured differently across the different states, with Year 7 students variously located in primary or secondary school settings. In Western Australia, South Australia, and Queensland Year 7 students attended primary schools, while in New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, and the Australian Capital Territory Year 7 students had always been situated in secondary schools. Creating further variation, in the Northern Territory, Year 7 students had been moved to middle school settings in 2008.

State ministers agreed that national uniformity ought to be considered for implementation by 2010. Western Australia's response was, in part, to determine the

feasibility of moving Year 7 students from primary to secondary school. To facilitate such a move, a report was commissioned by the State Department of Education and Training Western Australia (2007) entitled *The Future Placement of Year 7 Students in Western Australian Public Schools: A Study*. The report concluded that, for various reasons associated with cost, incapacity of the Department to provide sufficient teachers to facilitate the change, and concerns of rural and remote communities, the move was not desirable at the time.

The Western Australian Council of State School Organizations (WACSSO, 2009), the primary body representing parents of students in the government school sector, together with the Western Australian Primary Principals' Association (WAPPA, 2006), supported the government's decision. The Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association (WASSEA, 2009), however, did not, preferring to see Year 7 students move to secondary schools.

Although the government system had decided not to pursue the matter, the Catholic system, for reasons discussed in our previous paper (Coffey, Berlach, & O'Neill, 2011) had committed itself to transitioning to a six plus six primary-secondary model. The decision of the Catholic system to move Year 7 students to secondary schools resonated through to 2009, when the first group entered Catholic secondary schools. The move was not random in its execution but a carefully orchestrated endeavor facilitated by each receiving secondary school.

The Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA) is the central authority governing all Catholic schools. The office addresses the educational needs of more than 70,000 students across the largest state in Australia, in terms of land (more than 1,000,000 square miles), and is the executive arm of the Catholic Education Commission, a body appointed by the bishops of Western Australia. While a centralized bureaucracy, it delegates financial management as well as decisions related to staffing, capital infrastructure, and curriculum delivery to the principal at the school level. In preparing for the move, the CEOWA supported schools in terms of advice about capital infrastructure and design, professional development on learning in the middle years, and approaches to pastoral care. The CEOWA was not prescriptive in terms of how the move was to be managed but acted more in an advisory capacity. Schools thus had autonomy in preparing for and executing the move. The CEOWA also held a number

of public meetings for parents to inform them of their system-wide decision.

How successful was the move? Did the concerns of both WACSSO and WAPPA materialize? This inaugural move of Year 7 students to secondary schools provided a unique opportunity to obtain data that would help answer these important questions.

## Literature Review

The importance of promoting and maintaining school engagement during the critical early adolescent years is one of the motivating factors framing transition studies. The academic, social, and emotional well-being of young adolescents along with their concomitant declines during transition have been investigated by numerous researchers (Dinham & Rowe, 2008; Letrello & Miles, 2003; Midgley & Edelin, 1998; Reddy & Mulhall, 2003; Roeser & Eccles, 1998; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). Findings suggest that, while for many students, the transition from primary to secondary school is straightforward, for others, this move can challenge their capacity to manage change, which can lead to a decline in self-esteem and academic underachievement (Ashton, 2008; Letrello & Miles, 2003). The relationship between perceived levels of support from parents, teachers, and peers and school competence has also been documented (Daly, Shin, Thakral, Selders, & Vera, 2009; Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, & Sawyer 2003).

Despite the variations in school systems around the world, there is remarkable similarity in the features of transition (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006). Transition requires that students move from a familiar environment, in which they are likely taught largely by one teacher and spend the school day in the same classroom with the same group of peers, to something vastly different. The secondary school environment is inherently larger (both from the perspective of buildings and school population); unfamiliar; and more diverse, with students coming from a much wider catchment area (Chedzoy & Burden, 2005; Tobbell, 2003). Students may move from one classroom to another or, one subject to another, and be taught by a range of "specialist" teachers. They may attend each class with a different group of peers. Having been the oldest group of students in the primary school, with attendant leadership responsibilities, the students now become the youngest, sharing the campus with more "adult" students (Pratt & George, 2005). It is not surprising,

therefore, that students report “feeling lost” during the first few months in their new school (Chedzoy & Burden, 2005; Dinham & Rowe, 2008).

The different environment of secondary school necessitates that students learn in and become acclimated to a very different culture (Johnstone, 2001; Pratt & George, 2005). Students need to adapt to a range of different teachers, each with a unique teaching style and expectations. Students may be engaged in subjects not previously encountered, requiring higher-order language and literacy skills. Students also require much more sophisticated organizational skills to negotiate the new world of the secondary school (Elias, 2002; Tobbell, 2003). Further, rather than having all of their books and other items located in a desk in one room, they need to manage a locker and ensure that they have the correct materials for each of their different classes. Finally, time management skills are required to manage the level of homework and assignments given by their various teachers (Dinham & Rowe, 2008).

Adolescence is a time of significant upheaval, physical, social and emotional, and is characterized by striving for a sense of identity and independence (Letrello & Miles, 2003). The challenges presented by school transition can dent the self-confidence of young adolescents as they try to maneuver their way from primary to secondary school, while, at the same time, navigating the journey from childhood to adulthood (Sweetser, 2003). As such, this transition can lead to a loss of a sense of belonging (Dinham & Rowe, 2008) and is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of the students’ passage through the various stages of schooling (Zeedyk, Gallacher, Henderson, Hope, Husband, & Lindsay, 2003). Peer groups formed in primary school can be dislodged in secondary schools. While some students make the transition to a new school environment with many of their peers from primary school, others may make this journey alone. Such changes occur at a time when the emphasis on personal image, identity, and status among peers is of paramount significance (Pratt & George, 2005).

Students do not learn in isolation but in a classroom with peers (Ryan & Patrick, 2001), and adolescents place great emphasis on these peer relationships (Longaretti, 2006). The role of the teacher in creating a safe and supportive learning environment cannot be underestimated in helping to foster new relationships. Teachers also play a critical role in ensuring that students adjust to their new secondary

school environment and successfully meet all of the challenges along the way (Hinebauch, 2002; Reddy, Rhodes, & Mulhall, 2003; Roeser & Eccles, 1998; Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994). Characteristics generally associated with teacher support include being caring, friendly, understanding, and dependable (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). By developing classrooms that foster relationship building between students, establish clear guidelines for behavior, encourage cooperation and use the students’ strengths, teachers can create a classroom environment conducive to learning (Jennings & Greenburg, 2009).

In researching the transition in Catholic schools from a primary to a secondary environment, the present research did so in the light of already available research in the area of transitions in adolescence. What follows is an exposition of how successful selected schools were in their endeavor to provide a smooth transition experience for primary school children. Success was gauged on the basis of opinions provided by students, parents, and teachers in selected schools.

### **Investigative Methodology**

Using deliberative sampling, six large secondary schools were invited to participate in the study. After a meeting with the school principals, it was determined that a key senior manager should be identified in each school to act as the liaison between stakeholder groups. Principal support was high, as these key leaders were keen to gather information about how the transition of Year 7 students in their schools was progressing. Mixed methodology (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006) was chosen as the investigative tool. The quantitative aspect consisted of administering an instrument to gather information along a five-point Likert-type scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree). The survey instrument was created using the expert opinions of the school principals, researchers within the CEOWA, and the research team. Each participant was asked to respond to a set of fairly consistent themes including commencing secondary school, overall perceptions of the transition process, and teaching and learning programs. The qualitative aspect used interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), in which participants related their own stories regarding how the transition had impacted them personally.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS Statistics version 17.0 software with descriptive statistics being produced. Respondents could also comment

on two open-ended questions, which asked what the most helpful aspects of the transition process were and what could be improved. Qualitative data was captured using semi-structured interviews with focus groups: school personnel, students, and parents. The length of the interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, and the interviews were audiotaped for later transcription and protocol analysis. The focus groups provided the opportunity to examine the themes covered in the survey in greater detail. While the student and parents focus groups were chosen at random and comprised of six to 12 members, only teachers who had direct contact with Year 7 students (i.e., taught in the Year 7 program) participated in the focus groups, with groups varying from two to ten members.

**Participating Schools**

Not all incoming Year 7 students and/or their parents chose to participate in the study, although the vast majority were keen to be involved. Table 1 indicates the number of respondents comprising the final sample.

**School A.** This is a gender-based school for boys with an enrolment of 670 students. There are four major feeder primary schools, with students coming to the school from 15 to 20 different primary schools. In 2009, 64 students began in Year 7. The boys were taught by two teachers for the majority of their school subjects; hence, they had limited contact with other teachers in the school. At an induction day conducted just prior to the commencement of Term 1, Year 12 students participated in a variety of activities with the Year 7 students that facilitated the development of relationship between the groups of students.

**School B.** This is a co-educational school with an enrolment of more than 1,600 students from Years 7 to 12. While the school has five main feeder primary

schools, the school has an intake of students from a large number of local primary schools—both Catholic and government. In 2009, 209 Year 7 students commenced at the school. The school is organized in a traditional secondary setting with students moving from class to class for their different subjects. The school operated a peer support program in Term 1, whereby Year 11 students joined small groups of Year 7 students for one allocated lesson per week. The Year 11 peer support program leaders attended a training program on the Sunday prior to the commencement of school. The Year 11 students met each week with the coordinator of the program to discuss and plan the following week’s activities. The program was designed to foster peer relationships within the group and to teach the students about various organizational aspects of the school (e.g. managing lockers, organizing equipment, and other facets of secondary school life).

**School C.** This is a co-educational school serving approximately 1,200 students in Years 7 to 12. Students attending the school are drawn predominantly from five surrounding suburbs. The school operates as a middle school, in which the International Baccalaureate Middle Years program was introduced in 2009, and a senior school, which addresses for the differentiated needs of early and late adolescents. The Year 7 students are taught predominantly by six teachers in the middle school and have limited contact with other teachers in the school. In 2009, 120 Year 7 students enrolled at the school. The school operated a peer support program similar to that of School B but used year 10 students to introduce the primary students to secondary school life.

**School D.** This gender-based school for girls in Years 7 to 12 has boarding facilities and an enrolment of 850 students. The school has one feeder primary school, but

Table 1  
*Schools and Stakeholders*

SCHOOL	TEACHERS*	Yr 7 STUDENTS	PARENTS
A	2	43	39
B	46	190	109
C	6	33	36
D	15	33	41
E	13	156	49
F	4	51	60
TOTAL	86	506	334

\* Year 7 students Numbers vary for each school, as teachers were selected for participation by the principal.

the students attend from a wide geographical area. The school is organized in a traditional setting, with students moving from class to class for their different subjects. In 2009, 68 primary students enrolled at the school.

**School E.** This school is a co-educational school and has a strong focus on the provision of a seamless K–12 education. Four main Catholic feeder primary schools service the school, in addition to the students from the school’s own primary school campus. A new and separate Year 7 building was constructed in preparation for receiving the students. Students stayed within these rooms for the majority of the school subjects and thus had limited contact with other teachers in the school. In 2009, 180 Year 7 students enrolled at the school.

**School F.** This is a co-educational school with campuses on three separate sites divided as kindergarten to Year 3, Year 4 to Year 6 and the Year 7 to Year 12. The school has an overall enrolment of some 1,800 students. The administration of the three sites is integrated. Students access the senior campus from a number of different suburbs. A section of the senior school campus was renovated to provide a Year 7 classroom block. The students were taught by four teachers for the majority of their school subjects. In 2009, 127 Year 7 students enrolled at the school.

## Research Results and Discussion

The following findings represent an amalgam of the data collected from the six participating schools. The responses of stakeholder groups to three key issues were examined: commencing secondary school, overall perceptions of the transition process, and teaching and learning programs. These are considered in detail in what follows.

### Commencing Secondary School

**Student responses.** Understandably, and in line with previous research (Speering & Rennie, 1996; Zeedyk et al., 2003), there were mixed levels of anxiety among the Year 7 students about commencing secondary

school (see Table 2). Some of the students would have made the move to their new school with many of their peers from primary school, while others may have been the only member of their Year 6 class to transition. Some simply moved to a different location on the same K–12 campus site, while others had to travel long distances by bus to access their new school. This is typical of the transition between primary and secondary school as parents exercise their right to choose a school for their child. School personnel were cognizant of the fact that the Year 7 students are transitioning from a familiar, generally smaller primary school environment, to a new much larger and generally unfamiliar secondary school. Students were asked about their levels of anxiety prior to commencing secondary school, during the first few weeks of secondary school, and at the end of the first school term (10 weeks). Results are presented in Table 2.

There were mixed levels of anxiety among the students about commencing secondary school. Student focus group participants consistently reported similar issues that caused them concern about starting secondary school. These included making new friends, getting lost, arriving late to class, having too much homework, adapting to different teachers and their expectations, and remembering their timetable.

The students generally acknowledged that the first few weeks had been difficult but also expressed their high degree of satisfaction with being in secondary school. The change process was initially easier if they had friends from primary school accompanying them. They enjoyed being treated more as adults and appreciated the range of opportunities they had been afforded. Focus group participants were asked about the issues that had caused them concern in their first few weeks. These were remarkably similar across the schools and included getting organized, finding their way around the school, mixing with people they did not know well, leaving friends behind in primary school, more homework, and managing lockers.

Table 2  
*Student Anxiety Rating*

	SA	A	N	D	SD
I was anxious before starting Year 7.	8.1%	31.6%	31%	20.8%	8.5%
I was anxious in first few weeks.	5.9%	24.9%	28.1%	29.4%	11.7%
I was still anxious at end of Term 1.	2.0%	6.8%	16.5%	38.6%	36.2%

Table 3  
*Socialization by the end of Term 1*

	SA	A	N	D	SD
I feel I am fitting in.	41.9%	41.7%	12.3%	2.6%	1.6%
I am making new friends.	74.5%	20.8%	2.6%	0.4%	1.8%
I feel safe at school.	33.7%	52.1%	10.7%	3.0%	0.6%

The issues identified above are not confined to this group of students. Other researchers (e.g., *Moving on*, 2006; Ashton, 2008; Zeedyk et al., 2003) have recognized similar challenges involved in transitioning from primary to secondary school. Such writers have concluded that the dissemination of information about the nature of the move is an important factor in helping to reduce levels of anxiety.

The results in Table 3 clearly indicate that most students in the study had settled into secondary school by the end of the first term. Students in the focus groups generally reported that it had taken them about half the term to feel that they were coping with the demands of their new environment.

Research has shown that bullying is a significant anxiety-inducing factor (Carr-Gregg, 2009; Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Rigby, 2007). Despite the opportunity to discuss bullying, either through the anonymity of the survey or in a focus group, this was not raised as a major issue by the students. Neither was it reported as an issue of concern to them prior to commencing secondary school. While some students indicated they had noted that bullying was evident in the schools, most also observed that it occurred to a lesser degree than what they had experienced in primary school. This

lends weight to the powerful impact of peer support programs which, in part, provided the opportunity for the younger students to strongly identify with their older counterparts.

Midway through Term 2, students were asked to comment on the extent to which they were getting to know their teachers and whether they liked having a number of different teachers. The results in Table 4 indicate that the students quickly adapted to this change aspect of secondary school life.

The students in each of the focus groups frequently used the phrase “friendly and helpful” to describe their teachers. They were very aware that their teachers had “gone easy” on them during the first term and had overlooked issues of lateness to class or forgetting particular books or equipment.

**Parent responses.** Parents were asked to comment on both the anxiety they had observed in their children prior to commencing secondary school and their own anxiety at the end of Term 1. Earlier public community consultation meetings organized by the CEOWA had alerted schools to a degree of anxiety among some parents regarding their children mixing with older students in the secondary setting. These results are shown in Table 5.

Table 4  
*Student Perception of Teachers*

	SA	A	N	D	SD
I know my teachers.	30.8%	54.7%	13.0%	0.8%	0.6%
I like having different teachers.	31.6%	39.7%	22.7%	3.8%	2.2%

Table 5  
*Parental Report on Anxiety*

	SA	A	N	D	SD
My child was anxious.	9.6%	38.3%	18%	24.9%	9.3%
I am currently concerned.	7.1%	24.9%	16.3%	32.3%	19.1%

Focus group participants were asked about their attitudes toward Year 7 students being placed in secondary school. Some expressed reservations about the move, with their child being around older children as their main area of concern. One parent was very apprehensive about her Year 7 daughter being around older boys. However, she was very quick to point out that her concerns had not materialized.

Parents identified a significant issue around “rites of passage” from primary school. They were concerned that their children would miss out on many of the traditional Year 7 events that had always taken place in primary school. Several parents expressed the view that Year 7 normally provided leadership opportunities that their children now would not experience. In future years, this would cease to be a problem, as Year 6 students would be granted the higher status, but for this inaugural group, rites of passage and deprivation of status was a heightened concern.

The data revealed that parents at each of the participating schools shared similar concerns to those of their children about the move to secondary school. These included whether their child would be integrated with older students, would be exposed to more “adult relationships” (in co-educational schools), would be able to cope academically, would be able to master bus schedules, and would fit in at their new school.

Also related to the problems initially experienced by the children, parents noted the considerable angst that lockers, particularly the locks themselves, had caused their children. It became clear that the children had been relaying their locker-related concerns, *vis-à-vis* being challenged by teachers regarding lateness to class, to their parents.

Parents noted that becoming used to the range of extracurricular activities in which their children were involved had caused them concern during the first few weeks of school. Indeed, a number of parents commented on how tired their children had been. Interestingly, the parents also reported how delighted they were to see their children mingling with older students, together with the positive response of these older students to the Year 7 students, through participation in the extracurricular activities.

The parents in each of the schools also acknowledged the degree to which the teachers had assisted their children during the term. Some parents noted that there was less emphasis on the academic program in the first few weeks, but they understood that this allowed the children to settle in and to get to know each other and their teachers.

Perhaps because the parents were confident that their children had made new friends, had some contact with the older students, and had established good relationships with their teachers, there was an overwhelming sense that their children felt safe in secondary school, as is shown in Table 6. The ability of schools to create a safe and nurturing environment was seen as crucial to the transitioning process, a factor previously identified as significant in the *National Safe Schools Framework* (Australian Government, 2003): “Promoting and providing a supportive learning environment in which all students can expect to feel safe is an essential function of all schools. The framework identifies strategies that can inform practice to enhance school safety and students’ physical, social, and emotional well-being” (p. 1).

The majority of parents (85%) reported that their children felt safe at school. The only concern reported by one focus group was the issue of “bad language” raised by parents who felt the use of such language had increased since the children had commenced secondary school. The parents felt that, although difficult to control, teachers should keep reiterating the unacceptability of “foul language” to students.

**Teacher responses.** As is shown in Table 7, teachers across the schools overwhelmingly agreed that the Year 7 students had settled well into the secondary school setting. In this regard, the key role of the leadership team and teachers in the transition process cannot be underestimated, as has been well documented in the literature (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989; Speering & Rennie, 1996).

A number of teachers commented that they believed the students had appeared very ready to commence secondary school. These views were shared by teachers from both primary and secondary backgrounds. Some commented that the new students were very similar to

Table 6  
*Student Perception of Safety as Reported by Parents*

	SA	A	N	D	SD
My child feels safe at school.	34.9%	53.1%	6.6%	4.5%	0.9%

Table 7  
*Teacher Perception of Transition*

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Year 7 students settled in well.	26.7%	60.5%	10.5%	2.3%	0.0%

Year 8 students but had taken a little longer to settle into their new environment.

The participants in the focus groups agreed that organization had been the biggest stumbling block for the students; some students had felt quite overwhelmed. Again, lockers also were identified as an issue by the teachers at the schools in which lockers were available. The teachers had worked hard to simplify things for the students and to model good organization, however, they realized that more time at the start of the year would need to be devoted to teaching organizational skills.

**Overall Perceptions of the Transition Process**

Of the student respondents, 59.4% had older brothers or sisters at the secondary school, and 78.1% had attended Catholic primary schools. This factor may have accounted for the easier transition experienced by the majority of the children.

**Student responses.** The students were asked to rate how well prepared they felt to commence secondary school at the end of Year 6. Table 8 indicates the students had mixed feelings.

A number of students in each of the focus groups commented that they did not have a graduation from their primary school in Year 6. This was presented as an important event that had been missed. The students also declared that orientation days in Year 6 were of value and that commencing secondary school one day prior to the remainder of the year groups had been very helpful in establishing environmental familiarity.

Each of the schools employed specific familiarization events that had resonated with the students. The selection of these events appeared to strongly exemplify the “culture” of the school and was also indicative of the careful planning undertaken. Students spoke of peer support and pastoral care programs having made a significant difference to the transition. Being

able to establish relationships with Year 11 students who “teach you how to get through high school” was strongly supported by the students. One student recounted her experience of running into her “peer support person” at a local shopping center. Both she and her mother were delighted when the Year 11 student acknowledged her.

At schools where Year 7 students had been located in a separate building, this arrangement was seen as being advantageous. Navigating a large campus was easier from a secure home base. This “sense of place,” perhaps, contributed to the feeling of safety reported by the students. Across most of the participating schools, the Year 7 students were also permitted to access the cafeteria slightly earlier than the other year groups at recess and lunch. The students acknowledged that this had made life much easier for them and had contributed to their sense of safety.

Induction procedures were seen as being important. In one school, students were welcomed with a “guard of honour” by the Year 12 students on their first day. In another, a sleepover in the school gymnasium was used to facilitate relationships. In a third, a Year 7 camp was a positive vehicle for cementing new friendships. The importance of fostering positive relationships has been highlighted in the joint work of the Australian federal government’s Department of Health and the Hunter Institute of Mental Health through their *Response Ability* initiative (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010). The strategies adopted by the schools reinforce the promotion of social and emotional well-being, which is so crucial to students’ school success.

It was very apparent from the conversations with the students that the year coordinator was someone they saw as being accessible and to whom they could turn for help and advice. They felt strongly that their coordinator knew them well and would provide them with assistance. That the students would speak so

Table 8  
*Students’ Preparedness for Secondary School*

	SA	A	N	D	SD
I felt well prepared.	15%	34.7%	34.5%	12.5%	3.4%



Table 9  
*Parent Perception of Communication Received from School*

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Good communication during Year 6.	29.1%	51.1%	14.1%	4.5%	1.2%
Good communication during Term 1.	30.7%	49.7%	13.7%	4.8%	1.2%
Good communication with my child’s teachers.	24.1%	45.2%	21.4%	8.6%	0.6%

strongly about their coordinator is testament to the considerable effort that each coordinator invested in the transition process.

**Parent responses.** Parents were asked to assess whether they felt there was a good level of communication about the secondary school during Year 6, during Term 1 in the secondary school, and with their child’s new teachers. The results (Table 9) indicated that, overall, parents were pleased with the processes employed.

Being kept fully informed about the school and the transition was cited as a very important part of the transition process; however, parents in each of the focus groups appeared to have differing views about when information ought to be disseminated. While some were happy to receive it toward the end of the year, others commented that they would have preferred to receive the information earlier. In each of the focus groups, the parents, and particularly first-time secondary parents, wanted early advice regarding what their children needed to bring on their first day of secondary school. Some parents commented that information regarding extra-curricular activities (including information about buses) could be improved. This was raised by members in each of the focus groups.

Overall, parents felt generally well informed about transition arrangements. It was apparent from the conversations with each of the parent groups that they had found the schools to be very responsive to their

questions and felt very comfortable in contacting the school should the need arise to do so.

The relational aspect of the transition process was identified as a key aspect for both parents and students. The development of meaningful relationships between parents, students, and teachers appears to be crucial in achieving positive outcomes for students in any transition endeavor.

**Teacher responses.** The teachers were asked to rate how well the students had settled into secondary school and whether there were appropriate processes in place to monitor the transition and provide pastoral care for the students. Results are shown in Table 10.

As with student responses, the year coordinator frequently was mentioned as being the linchpin keeping dialogue and information flowing to and from teachers. The coordinator was also seen as the key information broker between teachers and the other stakeholders.

Teachers felt that they themselves had been pivotal in helping students settle into their new environment. Irrespective of whether they were from a primary or secondary background, teachers appeared aware that the students would experience difficulties in the first few weeks and made necessary adjustments. The peer support programs run by some schools had a significant focus on formally teaching the students organizational skills. At one school, the general teaching program was suspended for the first two weeks of Term 1 as teachers worked to

Table 10  
*Teacher Perception of Overall Transition Process*

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Students settled in well.	26.7%	60.5%	10.5%	2.3%	0.0%
Transition monitored.	18.6%	37.2%	19.8%	19.8%	4.7%
Good pastoral care.	40.7%	46.5%	8.1%	3.5%	0.0%

Table 11  
*Student Perception of Their School Subjects*

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Subjects are interesting.	22.2%	43.8%	27.5%	5.0%	1.6%
I am coping well.	21.4%	56.8%	18.6%	2.2%	1.0%

establish relationships between students and work on the organizational skills needed by the students in a secondary setting. The teachers felt that until these were established, student learning would be hindered. Interestingly, this same school was introducing a laptop program for the students in Year 7, which required additional student adaptation.

It is also important to acknowledge the degree to which the teachers in each of the schools understood and responded to issues with which the students were struggling. As previously mentioned, students frequently alluded to their teachers being “friendly and helpful” and an important factor in cushioning transition-related traumas. Participants in the teacher focus groups also suggested that perhaps there was a need for Year 6 teachers to better prepare the students for secondary school by giving more time to developing the students’ organizational skills.

**Teaching and Learning Programs**

The individuality of schooling environments is reflected in the range of approaches to the teaching and learning programs. What follows indicates that effectiveness was not negatively affected by the particular program adopted.

**Students.** The students were asked to rate the degree to which they were finding their subjects interesting and how well they were coping with these subjects. Results are shown in Table 11.

In focus groups, students were asked to identify the subjects in which they felt they had learned the most. Across the schools, similar responses were recorded, with the students identifying mathematics, science, society and environment and English as the most academically productive. The students were also asked to identify those subjects with which they had experienced the greatest difficulty. Interestingly, the students again identified mathematics, science, society and environment and English. Focus group participants commented that the pace with which they moved through the content in these subjects was an issue. There appeared to be less opportunity for consolidation of their learning than had occurred in primary school. In addition,

languages other than English (LOTE) and religious education were frequently mentioned by the students as being difficult. For students who had come from non-Catholic primary schools, in particular, religious education was proving to be problematic. The students in the focus groups mentioned the higher standards of work that were expected in secondary school, with most acknowledging that they appreciated being challenged. However, the majority acknowledged that they were still adjusting to a formal exam structure.

Students identified the pace of the work and amount of homework given by their teachers as being an issue for them. It appeared to them that there was little time for consolidation. They felt that they were learning many new facts and some indicated that they had little previous exposure to some subjects in primary school, with particular reference being made to science and society and environment. Student commentary on previously limited exposure to primary science is reinforced in the literature (Angus et al., 2004), which reports that science had only 2.7% allocation of time in the total primary curriculum. Clearly, access to specialist teachers in the secondary school was a tangible benefit of the move for these students. One might speculate that such access to specialist teaching may also highlight differences in Australian national testing results (NAPLAN, 2010) between Year 7 students in the Catholic school system in comparison to their public school counterparts, who have remained in the primary setting.

The move to the secondary setting also offered opportunities for streaming according to ability levels. Students who were streamed appeared to regard this positively and appreciated being in a class in which all students were at the same level, with “no one to hold you back.” However, the notion of streaming by ability is controversial (Berlach, 2008), requiring careful consideration prior to adoption. Interestingly, students in the focus group at a school where students were not streamed commented that sometimes it could be frustrating waiting for other students in their class to catch up.

Table 12  
Parent Perception of Student Interest in and Ability to Cope with School Subjects

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Subjects are interesting.	25.1%	59.6%	12.5%	1.8%	2.0%
Child coping well.	24.9%	55.7%	12.3%	5.1%	2.1%

**Parents.** Parents were asked to rate the extent to which their children were finding subjects interesting and challenging and how well their child was coping with their subjects. They responded positively to both questions, as the results in Table 12 attest.

Parents in each of the focus groups felt their children were academically advantaged by being in a secondary school. They commented on the access to specialist facilities that would not have been available had they remained in primary school. There was also a strong perception that the standard of work expected of the students would be higher. In those schools with laptop programs, the parents were generally satisfied with this innovation but did comment on the weight of the children’s schoolbags.

There were differences in levels of concerns expressed in the parent focus groups about the difficulty of the work the students were undertaking. Some felt the jump between primary and secondary had been difficult. For some, there was also a perception that their children were being taught at a Year 8 level. In discussions with the teachers, there was some apprehension about the level of difficulty of the content. In contrast, other parents felt that the children’s teachers (some of whom were from a primary school background) had a good understanding of how to teach Year 7 students but were not challenging their children sufficiently.

At one school for which the International Baccalaureate program provided the curriculum, parents were a little apprehensive that their children may not be sufficiently prepared for the rigor of the program. However, they did acknowledge that the information provided by the school had been very useful in allaying most of their concerns.

**Teachers.** Teachers were asked about their level of anxiety prior to commencing their teaching of Year 7 students and if, at the end of Term 1, they were still anxious. These results are shown in Table 13.

As would be expected with the range of primary and secondary teaching backgrounds among the teachers, there were varying levels of anxiety about teaching Year 7 students prior to the commencement of the year. In most schools, teachers had been given the choice as to whether or not they wished to teach in the Year 7 program.

The primary trained teachers tended to teach in the “core” areas (English, mathematics, and religious education) in the Year 7 program. The secondary trained teachers tended to confine themselves more to “elective” areas such as home economics, art, health, and physical education. Some secondary teachers confessed that they had found the adjustment to teaching Year 7 students a challenge.

Teachers were asked to comment on their perceptions of programming learning experiences for the Year 7 students *vis-à-vis* workload implications. Responses (see Table 14) are perhaps reflective of the different primary and secondary backgrounds of the teachers.

Teachers reported that their workload had not been significantly affected. Opportunities to work on the teaching and learning programs had occurred in the year prior to moving the Year 7 students. Teachers in the focus groups generally expressed satisfaction with how the teaching programs had been progressing, with ongoing modifications being made as the year unfolded. The flexibility to make these modifications was generally appreciated by the teachers. It is also indicative of the high level of formal and informal

Table 13  
Teacher Expressions of Anxiety

	SA	A	N	D	SD
At start of year.	2.3%	14.0%	17.4%	26.7%	39.5%
At end of Term 1.	1.2%	4.7%	9.3%	29.1%	55.8%

Table 14  
*Teacher Perception of the Development of Teaching and Learning Programs*

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Programs easy to develop.	25.1%	59.6%	12.5%	1.8%	2.0%
Felt well prepared.	23.5%	41.2%	14.1%	16.5%	4.7%
Workload increased.	9.3%	33.7%	22.1%	25.6%	9.3%

Table 15  
*Teacher Experience with the Year 7 Students*

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Teaching Yr 7s has been very challenging.	0.0%	17.4%	24.2%	39.5%	18.6%

collaboration in which the teachers were engaged as well as their level of commitment to their students. Generally, the primary trained teachers were not consulted to a significant degree by their secondary colleagues for advice about teaching Year 7 students. Such consultation occurred only occasionally and on a very informal basis. This reinforces a perception that, at times, there can be a “silo” mentality between the primary and secondary sectors.

Teachers at some of the participating schools indicated they could identify which primary schools the students had attended by what the students knew (or didn’t know) in the different subject areas. Teachers clearly needed to ensure that all students attained similar levels of skills before moving on to concepts that would be new for all class members. Recent inconsistency across the primary school curriculum (Berlach, 2004) appears to be an issue when students reach secondary school.

When asked whether they felt appropriate strategies were in place to accommodate issues relating to literacy and numeracy, 65.1% responded in the affirmative, with only 7% expressing doubt. The schools used a variety of strategies to support literacy and numeracy. In some schools, a learning support teacher was assigned to address the needs of students with literacy problems, with such students being taught in a separate class. In other schools, specialist support teachers came into the general classroom to assist students.

The lack of age-appropriate resources for Year 7 students was also noted by some teachers and parents. One parent commented that her child was using her older child’s Year 8 text, and some of the

worksheets were marked “Year 8.” While this was an issue, particularly in the first year of having a Year 7 cohort, some schools had invested to a greater extent than others in the purchase of resources and the reorganization of the library to accommodate an additional, younger cohort.

Despite stated concerns, most of the teachers were enjoying the experience of working with this cohort, as is evidenced by responses (see Table 15).

### Epilogue

The move in Western Australia of Year 7 primary Catholic school students to Catholic secondary schools has been, for the most part, a successful and positive experience for all concerned. What has emerged from this research is that many of the issues encountered by students and parents are those that, in the past, had been faced by Year 8 students and their parents. The issues discussed in this paper are, thus, not unique to Year 7 students. Rather, they relate to the transition of any cohort of students from a primary to a secondary school environment. For this reason, if for no other, it is important to remember that Year 7 students are developmentally less mature than Year 8 students, and this needs to be taken into account when transitioning arrangements are considered. This is especially important for students for whom some sort of developmental lag has already been identified in primary school.

In summary, the following points are offered as being worthy of consideration by other systems considering moving to a six plus six primary-secondary schooling model:

- It is often inattention to little things, such as locker and timetable protocols, that causes the greatest anxiety.
- Using primary trained teachers in Year 7 may add a dimension of familiarity and, thereby, make the transition smoother for students.
- Providing a grace period in the early weeks helps students develop greater confidence and settle more quickly.
- Placing children in classes with others they already know helps to reduce the anxiety associated with being new.
- Affirming expectations early (e.g., unacceptability of foul language) has the potential of strengthening appropriate behavior at a later date.
- Realizing that regardless of the feeder school, student ability will differ markedly not just because of general individual differences, but because of current curriculum interpretations in Western Australian primary schools particularly in the emphasis on time allocation as previously mentioned;
- Housing the Year 7 students in a separate block provides them with a territorial home;
- Streaming for Year 7 students may be appropriate, even if the rest of the school is streamed by ability.

This study showed that both students and parents were, in general, highly complimentary of school personnel involved in facilitating the transition. The Year 7 coordinators, teachers, and administrative staff had clearly put considerable time and effort into planning and implementing the transition of the Year 7 students into their schools. The documented success of this move is, in no small part, due to their ongoing efforts and to the devolution of the central authority to the local level.

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