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TRANSITIONS AND THE YEAR 7 EXPERIENCE

A report from the 12 to 18 Project

LYN YATES

Address for Correspondence: Associate Professor Lyn Yates, Graduate School of Education, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Vic 3083. Fax 9479 3070.

Email: Lyn.Yates@latrobe.edu.au

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Transitions and the Year 7 Experience
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Lyn Yates
La Trobe University

Abstract

This article discusses students' comments about the experience of shifting from primary to secondary schooling, and of their first year of secondary school. The material was gathered from research carried out in three Victorian primary schools and four Victorian secondary schools in 1993 and 1994 as part of an ongoing qualitative, longitudinal study which is following students through each year of their secondary schooling. This article discusses the meanings students give to their experience of transition against earlier research and policy documents which use different methodologies and which talk of different cultures of primary and secondary schools. It argues that student reactions are more complex than are indicated by methodologies which take comments at face value and that their concerns challenge some common assumptions about the problem of disruption in the break between primary and secondary. The article also notes widespread changes in students' lunchtime activities compared with primary school and discusses ways students assess the new curriculum and teaching styles of the secondary school.

Keywords: secondary transition qualitative curriculum pedagogy gender

Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed a large body of changes to the organization of Australian secondary schooling: curriculum reforms, gender policies, drugs policies, changes to school organization, and governance. How are young people today experiencing what schools now do? In 1993, (together with Julie McLeod), I began a qualitative, interview-based, longitudinal study, the 12 to 18 Project, which is following students at four Victorian schools through each year of their secondary schooling.¹ This paper reports on findings from the first full year of the study, with grade 6 students in late 1993 and year 7 students through 1994. It focuses on what students are saying about their experiences of transition to secondary school, both directly, and indirectly.

Other researchers have reported that in the past two decades Australian literature on the middle school years, and on students' perceptions of the transition from primary to secondary school, has been relatively sparse (Hallinan & Hallinan, 1992; Cumming, 1994). (Hargreaves, 1986 and Hargreaves & Earle, 1990 provide a more substantial background outside Australia.) The literature that does exist is different in methodology from the current project, and the findings, as well as discussion in the present paper, may contribute to debate about the relative value of the different approaches (see also Yates & Leder, 1996). Other research has used larger scale survey methods and attitude scales to draw conclusions about students' reactions to the quality

¹ The 12 to 18 Project is designed by and the empirical research is all carried out jointly by the two principal researchers, Lyn Yates and Julie McLeod,. Ancillary research assistance has been provided at different times by Karen Halasa, Esther Faye, Geraldine Ditchburn, Malcolm Turnbull and Kathleen Orr. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support from La Trobe University for the initial stage of the project, and from the ARC for the major funding of the project. The present paper was written while the author was on OSP leave and a visiting scholar at the Youth Research Centre, University of Melbourne. She wishes to express appreciation both to La Trobe University for the leave, and to colleagues at the Youth Research Centre for their discussions and generous facilities.

of school life and their self-esteem in their new school (for example, Poole, 1990; Ainley, 1995; Hill et.al., 1994); or to trace more closely the effects of the change on a particular subject or area (Truran, 1990); or has taken a more action-oriented approach (Cumming, 1994; Hatton, 1995). Kirkpatrick's study of students' transition experiences at a high school in WA (Kirkpatrick, 1992, 1995) covers some comparable ground to the present study, but within a psychological tradition which is focussed on students' attributions of achievement.

Green's recent intensive study of ten students and their literacy experiences during the grade 6/ year 7 transition (Green, 1997) has more in common with the methodological perspectives of the present project, though it was smaller in scale, focussed on a particular dimension (literacy), and not offering the comparative and (eventual) longitudinal scope of the 12 to 18 Project. Green's study offers a case study exploration of the experiences of ten different students, and in doing so moves on from narrowly defined 'literacy practices' to uncover a number of broader issues which make up those students' school literacy experiences, particularly peer relations, friendship, bullying, and homework. These are all issues also emphasized by the students in the four schools studied by the 12 to 18 Project, and are discussed further in the present article.

The 12 to 18 Project is concerned with the development of individual biographies in the context of schooling; the meanings students construct in particular contexts; and the ways their situations and their thinking about themselves and their future change as they go through school (and the effect of different schools on these processes). It is a study that develops out of sociological and feminist questions about education, identities and pathways. In earlier papers (Yates & McLeod, 1996, McLeod & Yates, 1997) we discussed the methodological stance of

the project, particularly in relation to the contemporary poststructural scepticism which calls into question all empirical research claims. In relation to the current topic² it appears I need to address other questions posed by more traditional researchers: what might the evidence from the grade 6 and year 7 phase of a more general longitudinal project add to the existing literature on year 7 students? and what weight should be placed on 'findings' based on interviews with students at only four schools and presented through quotations and qualitative reportage rather than tables?

Compared with the studies referred to earlier in the article, the 12 to 18 Project is placing more emphasis on setting students' comments about school against broader dynamics of individual, culture and society, and, methodologically with an ongoing reflection about meaning in relation to the micro-dynamics of the interview:

we are interested in kinds of questions that survey methods and statistical deductions do not answer. How is a pattern of thinking about schooling or about the future shaped *within a particular individual biography*? What does the *process* of changing subjectivity over the course of secondary schooling look like? What can a close look at the open responses and the visual record of students over time suggest about issues which are salient to Australian students at this historical moment?

[Yates & McLeod, 1996:91]

² Judging by the responses of the reviewers of this article.

The aim of the present article is to consider what students at four different schools in Victoria today are saying about their secondary schooling in their first engagement with it.³ The focus here is on the students' encounters with the curriculum, pedagogy, organization and physical arrangements of the secondary as compared with the primary school.⁴ The issues discussed in this article have been selected for two reasons: they are matters that were notably emphasized in the interview material we gathered at four quite different schools; and they impact on contemporary policy issues (whether to restructure primary/secondary in favour of a 'middle school' recognition for example) and contemporary curriculum issues (are students in these years appropriately taught? What forms of pedagogical disciplining are at work?) The point of the narrative and qualitative presentation of issues in the article is to depict curriculum and organization questions not as abstract technical ones, but as ones complexly tied up with students' emotional and personal concerns (for example, their concerns about being seen to be older individuals, alongside desires and nostalgia for greater nurturing).

The project is based on twice-yearly semi-structured interviews with students at four different schools. The schools are chosen to offer opportunities for both comparison and contrast: they include a secondary school which was previously a technical school and which is split into a junior and senior school (TSP), a large high school (HSP), a smaller high school which is known for its arts and media studies (HSM), and a large, elite private school (ISM). Two of the

³ As I will note later, one of the four schools in the study is a private school which offers schooling from pre-prep to year 12, and in which years 5-7 are grouped as 'junior school', years 8-10 as middle school and years 11 and 12 as senior school. So some of the students at this school had started at this site in year 5, though the majority had begun in year 7, which is still taken by parents as a common point of transition between schools. But even those students who had started in year 5 experienced year 7 as something of a break given the large influx of students and teachers, and the doubling in numbers at that point.

schools are located in a metropolitan city, two in a large provincial city; and all four schools are co-educational. All interviewing is done by the principal researchers (both of whom are present at each interview), and the interviews are video-taped. In each case the first round of interviews was with an entire class (in small groups), and subsequently between six and eight students at each school were selected as a focus for the ongoing longitudinal study. In the interviews discussed in this article, these students were each time interviewed with two or three friends, so the discussion here is based on 57 group interviews, each 25 to 50 minutes in length, with over 100 students altogether.

In each set of interviews we ask some questions about how the students see themselves and their friends; some questions about what they are doing in school and out of school; and some questions about how they see the future. The material from which this article is drawn is based on answers and discussion which followed quite open questions such as: 'what do you like (not like) about school this year?', 'tell us a bit about each of the subjects you do?', 'what do you think this school thinks is important?', 'how do you spend your time in recesses and lunchtimes?'

The study was designed to be small enough for the principal researchers to do all interviewing and interpretation (to allow us to closely immerse ourselves in the data), but also to have a sample which offered structured points of comparison in terms of schools of different types, and in terms of gender, class, ethnicity. We have written elsewhere at length on reflexivity in relation to what might be said about findings in research of this type (Yates & McLeod, 1996;

⁴ Although this paper will touch on differences related to the gender, class and cultural backgrounds of students, and differences between the four schools, it is not primarily an investigation of those differences, which will be discussed in further papers currently in preparation.

McLeod & Yates, 1997). In relation to the current paper I want to stress the structured comparative design of the study which gives the findings about what students across the sample are saying a greater significance than the raw numbers might suggest.

Watson (1993) has pointed out (in relation to the theorising of class) that the strengths of qualitative, ethnographic work in schools have been weakened by an under-theorization about whether and how far the object of study is representative of others. In this study, because we are each time considering girls and boys from similar backgrounds but in different locations and schools, and also girls and boys and schools that represent very different backgrounds, issues of the meaning and representativeness of particular experiences and quotes are addressed explicitly. Where certain common experiences then are repeatedly noted across the whole range of students in different cities and in different types of schools, I would argue that this is not simply the reportage of a random bunch of comments.

This article then, as qualitative research, proceeds as a narrative, using summary and illustrative quotation, but the processes of interpretation that produced this report took account of all of the following: comparison and contrasts of students within each of the four different schools; comparison of the comments made by an individual over time; comparison of the changing comments made by the whole sample over time; and a careful consideration of the students' perceptions of us, of the effect of particular questions we asked, and of how this may influence what they say.

Disruption - an over-rated issue?

Much is made of the break from primary to secondary as a transition of some moment and some danger for students. The 1993 Australian Schools Council discussion paper on middle schooling noted that there was divergence of opinion as to what form of structural sequence was most appropriate for students, but expressed a strong belief that the different cultures of primary and secondary schooling do create a problem. Along with Hargreaves (1990), that paper portrays primary schooling as operating with key principles of 'care and control', while secondary schools are seen to be driven by 'academic orientation, student polarisation and fragmented individualism' and argues

while it may be a difficult concept to change, there is a need to break down these traditional mind-sets, or ways of doing things, so that a more unified approach to learning and teaching can be developed. *Schools Council, 1993, p.52.*

Other research has suggested that although students are initially optimistic about high school, their enthusiasm decreases with time (Kirkpatrick, 1992; Cottrell, 1982) and that this is particularly due to the academic environment of the school; while Hallinan and Hallinan (1992) report a more mixed pattern of the features of secondary schooling that students found to be better than expected and worse than expected.

In this study, we interviewed the students at the provincial secondary schools in the December of their grade 6 year, and then in June and December of year 7. We interviewed the metropolitan students for the first time shortly after their year 7 began (that is, in February) and then in September of that year.⁵

⁵ The reason for this difference of timing in fact also relates to some difference in the transition experiences of students in the two locations. In the large provincial town it was possible to identify three primary schools whose students would primarily go to the secondary schools which were selected for our ongoing study. For the metropolitan high school and private school we selected, the intake was from a diverse range of primary schools, and we needed to do our initial interviews of a whole class, from which we would select our ongoing sample, in the

We interviewed the provincial students around the time they were going off for their orientation day at their intended secondary schools. This was certainly an exciting time for them, and they were buzzing and largely enthusiastic about it. Certainly there was some reporting of the ‘horror stories’ that circulate in other countries too about initiation rituals, flushing heads in toilets. But generally grade 6 teachers had spent some time preparing students about what to expect in terms of changing classes, expectations of homework, content of mathematics, and the students themselves were looking forward to being considered older, to doing a range of new subjects, to meeting new people. In the first round of year 7 interviews, students at all four schools generally did report feeling anxious and a bit lost on the first day, but said that they were soon on top of the routine of timetable, rooms, lockers. (However, as other studies have also found, in the bigger schools, the sheer size and complexity of the site, and the physical difficulty of juggling books and small, insecure lockers, and the psychological difficulty of being located in a sea of unknown faces, is worse than students had anticipated, and remained an issue for them. See also Hallinan & Hallinan, 1992.)

An unexamined thread in many discussions of the transition to secondary school (for example the Schools Council paper quoted earlier) is a suggestion that breaks are necessarily bad, compared with continuity, and that primary students have been protected to this point from the experience of change. This was not the impression we got from the students in this study. Almost without exception, at least one of the three students in every interview had already

secondary school rather than at any one primary school. So at the first two schools students would continue to be with many students they knew from primary school (though we found that the schools often deliberately broke up students from each primary school into different classes and units). At the other two schools it was more common for students to have only a few or no students from their first school.

changed schools at least once during primary school, and in a number of cases several times. By contrast, during the secondary years of our study, between the beginning of year 7 and the mid-point of year 10, only one student in our sample has changed schools. Many students in our study had moved cities and some had moved states and countries during their primary years. Parents are more likely to change location relatively readily during the primary years and be more cautious about this during the secondary years. So the student may well have had to face already coming to an entirely new environment, where they knew no-one in or out of school.

Moreover, when we asked students in grade 6 or year 7 about the experience of their first day in prep, they frequently supplied vivid accounts of the experience, of the separation from mother, of the strange new environment. When we asked students in year 7 about the experience of their first day, only a few weeks or a few months earlier, many could not recall this in any detail.

*[Grade 6 interview:]*⁶

[Mick] when I was in prep I didn't like school at all, I used to, when I, I used to kick my mum and that and kick me teachers [...]

Q: *Because you were cross?*

[Mick] No, I just didn't want to leave her. And I used to just kick mum and the teachers, oh, not really kick mum but try to get loose and run out to the car and lock myself in and that. Because I didn't like school.

Q: *Do you remember what you didn't like about school then?*

[Mick] I don't know, I think it was just leaving me mum,...

⁶ Note about representation. The names used are pseudonyms. The codes differentiate the schools and whether it was the first or second round of interviews for that year. Decisions about how to represent speech are also interesting, and often in texts take a middle-class and 'anglo' standpoint which represents that speech in uninflected form, and other groups more phonetically (Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* series is a classic example). In this article I have represented a few common colloquial contractions ('cos, wanna, 'me' for 'my'), and left in the word locutions of a sentence, but not attempted to represent all the 'ums' and 'ohs', or to extensively represent accent. In relation to the arguments that have raged since Bernstein's work in the early 70s, it is interesting to note that the formal structure of the sentences is not noticeably better for the students at the private school, and they have a similar tendency to favour 'like' as a neutral linking word - but in terms of a potential employer standpoint, the impression we had formed in the interviews themselves had been different from this - we had come away thinking how articulate were the students at the private school compared with the others in our study. Accents, eye contact, body language, cultural expectations all affect how we hear the words. So written transcripts are both a form of checking against one's 'subjective' impression, but are also, in some respects inadequate as representations of an interaction and its effects. Neither one is simply the truer or more accurate account.

...

Q: Do you think it's going to be like that in high school?

[Mick] No.

[YPSM.93]

Nor did students talk as if the change to a new environment was negative: both prospectively (in the grade 6 interviews) and retrospectively (in the second round of year 7 interviews) they liked the idea of doing new subjects, of making new friends. Individual students commented favourably on the necessities of more complex travel to secondary school which made them more independent; and on the less close surveillance by teachers of them (though other students complained about both these matters). But equally, one of the problems we find in simply taking at face value comments students make about the comparative qualities of teaching or curriculum at primary school and high school, is that they are so attached to the shift to high school as a marker of their growing maturity, that initially they are reluctant to express approval about primary school and its practices lest it appear as a judgement about their own immaturity.

[Grade 6]

*Q High school. What will be good about it, do you think?*⁷

[John] Oh, um, sort of take care of yourself and not many teachers will come sort of looking after you and that.

Q [to Mick] And what are you looking forward to, or what do you think about high school?

[Mick] Like it's the different things they've got up there, like home ec and sheet metal and that. Like we only sort of do woodwork here...

[YPSM.93]

[Same student, December of Year 7]

Q: Are the three of you looking forward to the rest of high school?

[Mick] Oh yeah, I suppose. I just like the end of the year. And the holidays. But this is better than primary school.

[later in the same interview:]

⁷ I realize this sounds like we are asking highly leading questions, contrary to my earlier comments. However the problem is only being able to quote relatively small extracts. Our approach is semi-structured, and our initial questions about what they are thinking about prep, or high school, or particular subjects are always phrased neutrally. Passages like this one are building on comments students themselves make in their initial answers.

[Paul] It's not as fun as primary school, 'cause you got, in primary school you're sort of running round playing tiggy and stuff but in high school ...

[Other similar examples are given. Later, in the same interview, we asked, 'if you were going round trying to find out more about other people your age, what do you think are the questions we should be asking?]

[Mick]: Oh, probably, I don't know. I don't know really. [...] Oh how they, what they miss and that.

Q: What they miss?

[Mick]: What they miss in the old school.

Q:[...] So what would you say to that? Oh, well you've already said the playground and the sports facilities and stuff.

[Mick] What do you miss from your old school. And you could say like uniform [ie, not having to wear a uniform], teachers, other friends.

[They go on to talk nostalgically about good teachers they had in primary school.]

[TSPM.94b]

The Schooling Experiences in Year 7

Across the four schools in our study, transition to year 7 did produce some considerable changes for the students: changes in their physical activities; some changes in inter-gender and intra-gender relations; and changes related to curriculum, teaching, homework. In the following sections I discuss four areas of school life and the students' comments on these: lunchtime activities; pedagogy; the new range of subjects; and the particular emphasis on mathematics. In each case the interview extracts give a glimpse of interactions between what schools are now doing differently and the agendas students are bringing in their assessment of this.

Lunchtimes and the decline in play and informal sport

For many students the most striking difference in year 7 compared with primary school was not in the formal activities of the school, but in what occurred in the relatively invisible interstices of lunchtimes and recesses. In grade 6, we had been struck by the large amount of sport and physical activities students engaged in, especially at lunchtimes, and frequently in large and mixed groups. In year 7, across four very different schools, students reported again and again

that their most common lunchtime activity now was simply to sit and talk. This was not simply a self-chosen preference; the majority of students still played a lot of sport after school and at weekends, and many of them specifically complained about their current lack of opportunity to play sport or be more active at lunchtime. This finding is especially striking given that two of the schools we are studying have a particular reputation for the breadth and quality of their sporting opportunities, and all schools included physical education as a compulsory unit in the curriculum. The changed patterns were not the result of a single cause.

At three of the schools bullying was mentioned as a factor⁸: older boys dominated sports fields, basketball courts, use of equipment, and prevented the year 7 boys from access to these.

Brian We'd like to play basketball normally, but we get kicked off the courts by the Year 12s...

Andy Like if there's a basketball match on, usually just the year 8s play it, because they're not playing for fun, they just want to win. And they think they're a lot better than us. [HSM.94b]

No school had a policy which organized access and prevented this occurrence.

Students at the three government schools in the study all perceived a reduction, in relation to access and numbers of students, in the amount of equipment and facilities for lunchtime use compared with their primary schools.

Lonni I just talk with friends, walk around. There's no games to play here. The basketball courts, they've got basketball courts but no basketball rings. Yeah, so you can't play basketball or anything. [HSML.94a]

⁸ However this is often something that students are more prepared to talk about retrospectively than at the time it is happening, and we hear more about this as the study continues.

At the private school, a school which had extremely good sporting facilities, a problem was the overall pressure of organized activities now to be fitted into the day, and a reduction in the lunchtime to only 50 minutes (including eating time):

Mary I used to have much longer lunch times at my older school so I find that I, 'cos we ate our lunch in the classroom and then we had a whole hour to do nothing outside. We didn't have to get our books and do all that, so, I find that there's never enough time to do what I want to do. [ISMM.94a]

Leah Sometimes with my friends we go up, go into the pool, just, we'll go swimming, but then you have to hurry up and get changed so you're not late for the next period. Or we just sit in the common room and talk [ISMM.94a]

For some, the issue was not so much a lack of physical facilities or opportunities, but friendship issues - and disruption to the social relations that made participation possible:

What are some of the things you do at lunchtime at school, or recess?

Lin Well today we went swimming at lunchtime in the pool.

Jane That's why we're all wet.

Ina Or just walk around. It's boring here.

Lin There's not much to do...

Jane But we don't know many people.

Lin There's not many balls here.

Jane Yes there is, but last year when we knew everyone, we could just go up to them and say, 'could I play?', and you can't do that to anyone here.

[ISML.94a]

Warren Waiting in line at the canteen.

Simon Me and Lionel sometimes play...

Lionel Yeah, like you organise a big game with lots of people and you just play that all around the school.

Mark You never ask me.

Lionel I never ask Mark... [ISMM.94a]

(Mark was the sole student to come here from his previous primary school. Lionel and Simon went to the same primary school.)

In other cases it was the school's philosophy of what was appropriate behaviour for secondary students, that forms of activity approved in primary school were now punished:

[Year 7, provincial secondary, junior school]

[Mick]: You can't do it here, and when you do try to do somethin' you get told off or...

[Adam] Like it's downball or jerks, you get...

[Paul] What?

[Adam] Jerks. That's, don't know what ... game at that name. But you get there, you play it on the wall, and a teacher comes along: "Oh no, you're not allowed to play that here, you'll break a window!"

[Mick] And there's no windows around.

...

[Mick] Yeah, and you play, you start a game of brandy and you're not allowed to play that here. A game of, you know, tiggy or somethin'.

[Adam] No, you're not allowed to run.

[BSCM.94b]

Curriculum and Pedagogy

In all of the four schools in our study, students were doing a large number of different subjects in year 7 (between 10 and 14); had some subjects they liked and others they did not like; talked a lot about individual teachers who were poor; had experienced changes of teacher in the course of the year in some subjects; complained about the new emphasis on homework. Is this a 'finding' worth reporting? I want to make the point that in the contemporary 'competitive schools' context, where much is made of the differences between schools, we should indeed mark as findings such points of commonality being reported by students of schools which differ markedly in wealth, physical resources, physical location, and school ethos.

Compared with two decades ago, subject offerings were not divided by sex, and nor were students' comments on the subjects they liked notably sex-differentiated: girls were as likely as boys to nominate woodwork, metalwork, science as subjects they liked; boys were as likely to express approval for home economics and drama.

Teaching and Teachers

One of the legacies of the primary and secondary division of schooling has been a tendency for policy and research to focus more on process, or how things should be learnt, for the former; and on curriculum, or what should be learnt for the latter. In our year 7 interviews we asked all the students to tell us about the different subjects they were studying and to say a bit about what they were doing in them. Overwhelmingly, what students wanted to talk about was their different teachers, and what they thought about them. At this stage, comments about what they thought about subjects were closely bound up with what they thought about particular teachers.

At one school, for example, every student who was in the class of one language teacher reported favourably on that subject; and every student taking the same language with a different teacher reported unfavourably on it. Again, one might say, this is a banal observation, an example of research which tells us only what we all already know. But given that discussions about subjects and curriculum often take place detached from considerations about teaching quality, it is a useful reminder of the strong impact that teachers have. It is something reinforced as we proceed with the longitudinal study and see students' changing attitudes to subjects and subject-choices as they have different teachers.

Other research (Hallinan & Hallinan, 1992) has suggested that one of the paradoxes of the transition from primary to secondary schooling for students is that it represents both a step up and a step down in terms of socially reflected maturity. In physical size and know-how, they go from being the oldest and most expert to being the youngest and most neophyte. To outsiders and to their families, the new stage is a mark of their growing maturity; but in the internal dynamics of schools, it is common for teachers to apparently treat them as younger and less

independent than they had been treated in grade 6. In this study we found further evidence that these dynamics are still a puzzling part of the experiences of many students; ones they struggle to articulate when they are commenting on what they approve or feel is lacking in the teaching styles of their new secondary school.

For example, although many schools now try to mitigate transition by reducing the movement between teachers at the year 7 level, many students commented approvingly on the new routines which no longer tied them to one teacher, and which no longer so closely monitored their actions:

Trevor At the end I couldn't wait to go to [secondary school], because I was sick of it.

Jack ... because you just have one teacher every day, and they get really boring.

[HSME94a]

Andrea They just say [now], like give you a page and you do it. Like in primary school they'd sit there for half an hour, like telling you what to do with it...

[HSMN.94a]

Colin I think we get more privacy here than we would at primary school. Yeah, it's much more laid back, you get, you know more free than at primary school. And we went to the zoo just the other day and you, we were allowed to go off on our own.

[...]

Owen Like I was surprised because we didn't see the teachers at all when we were walking around the zoo. Pretty cool.

[They were given an instruction sheet and 10 minutes explanation and then left alone for the day.]

[HSMM.94a]

However, many critical remarks were made about teachers and their practices. In some cases it seems to reflect students experiencing teaching that seems out of keeping with these new modes (being punished as if they were little children; not being believed or trusted). In other cases they begin to talk about things they don't like about the new more apparently independent and

instrumental relationship with teachers: that they are no longer cared about in the same way; or that they really need more supervision than they are getting.

Trent I was really sort of impressed with it at the start, cos it was a lot different to primary school, but as I got used to it, I sort of saw the faults [...] it's a bit hard to work, and you know, if you don't do your work, you know, no one follows up...
[HSMT.94b]

Are you happy with the range of subjects you've been studying this year?

Mick: Well, the teachers,... they should be pushing a bit more. [...]

Pat ... she asks you a question and if you don't answer she'll just go ask someone else...She won't help you in working out or anything like that [...] She's always talking about herself. She says, oh I've got to get home tonight...

Mick: She tells us what she's getting for tea.

Adam Thinks of herself and no one else.

Mick Like, when we ask her to help, she sort of says, yeah, come back later, go home.

Pat She just sits there.

Mick She just sits up the front, you know.

Pat. Watching.

Mick She never walks around.

[Later, at the end of this interview, we ask, ungrammatically, 'if you were going around trying to find out more about other people your age, what do you think are the questions we should be asking?']

Mick What they miss in the old school. [...] What do you miss from your old school. And you could say like uniforms, teachers, other friends.

Pat Teachers, yeah.

[And they go on to talk about particular teachers: 'she was the one got me reading properly'; another one who gave Pat special attention in science; then moving on again to horror stories of teachers they hate] [TSPM.94b]

Others echo this complaint about teachers who talk too much about themselves, who don't seem to care.

Marion ...the teachers think they're more important

The teachers think they're more important, what, than the kids?

Marion Yeah, that's how they seem anyway.

Is that different from primary school, do you think?

Marion Yeah, I reckon. [TSPE.9]

Different Types of Subjects

Year 7, probably more than any other stage of the school curriculum, represents an attempt to give students a broad range of subjects: to give students a taste of mental and manual, technical and humanities, languages and the arts, and personal development. The present study is not designed to offer an intensive examination of different subjects, but to listen to patterns in students' comments as they talk broadly about schooling, themselves and whether and what they are thinking about the future.

First, in terms of broad patterns (and of course there are differences with individual students, and strong differences related to the qualities of particular teachers), there was a lot of enthusiasm for those subjects in which students were clearly learning new skills, and in which there was some concrete outcome or clear measurement of progress: subjects in this category included woodwork, sheetmetal work, systems technology, information technology, home economics, physical education, the instrument learning parts of music, and the experiments in science (other parts of music and science were not reported with similar enthusiasm).

At all four schools there was a considerable breadth of subjects, with all including some form of the arts, of personal development/ethics, of technology, of physical development, as well as of the basics, but the range of subjects offered was not identical, and nor were the students' interpretations of what they were being offered.

Students at the private school saw their school as distinguished by its breadth of options, and it did offer a large range of sporting, music, drama and language activities. However students here did no manual technical subjects, and had only a single period of computer studies each week.

Students commented on how poor the teaching of the latter was ('that was shocking', 'it was like a free period', 'I don't think he's ever like used a computer before'), but not one student commented generally about the lack of technical and manual studies.

At the school which had been a technical school, it was a different story. In addition to English, mathematics, science, social education, languages, physical education and home group, these students, in the course of their first year, studied textiles, home economics, systems technology, information technology, 'keyboarding', 3D art, sheetmetal and woodwork.! Most of these technical-manual subjects were included in students' nominations of their favourite subjects, and when they were asked their views of other schools, they nominated the lack of such subjects as a negative:

Christine and then if it's like in an all girls school you don't get to do the subject like sheetmetal work and all that. And they're some of my favourite subjects, so...

Ellen You don't have like woodwork, sheetmetal and all that.

Christine Like there's a whole tech work you wouldn't know. [TSPE.94b]

On the other hand, in terms of the beginnings of a secondary pathway which will see many more of these students drop out of school, the following exchange, on how technical studies are rated in the education pantheon, is somewhat ominous:

What do you think this school thinks is important?

Keren: Maths [...] kind of science, maths, social ed and English [...] They sort of think them subjects are the main ones, even though, you know, most people don't like the main subjects. [TSPE.94a]

'Relevance'

Just as public documents and debates and school reforms make many appeals to 'relevance', this too was a concept readily used by students as a criterion by which subjects were praised or

criticized - but it was not the transparent category often assumed in public debate. Issues might be seen as 'relevant' by outsiders, but dismissed by students on the grounds that they were learning nothing they did not already know:

Annabelle Like we do things like smoking and all that, but you do that every year in your schooling life. You do smoking and alcohol and drugs and all that sort of stuff. And it's just so boring. Like write down some effects of alcohol and you're like, 'Great!' And you just sit there, and it's just so boring.
[ISMA.94b]

[discussing an English unit on newspapers]

Clara We're working with newspapers, 'cos the teacher doesn't think we're very, like we know...

Aly Cos newspapers are pretty hard to read.

Clara ... and she thinks we need a lesson on them, and so that's what we're doing [...]

Aly It's pretty boring.

Clara Because I already read the newspaper every day, so it's pretty easy.
[HSMC.94b]

Or teachers' ideas of working with 'relevant' materials might backfire:

Kristine Like some subjects when you're older you're not really going to need them. Like... say in science we were doing this experiment on putting like sultanas in vinegar and see whether they rise or sink. Like when you're older you're not gonna wanna become someone that deals with vinegar and sultanas. Some things have like nothing to do with your adult life.

Annabelle Because the sultanas bobbed up and down, and it's like: 'Yeah, I'm so glad I know this.'
[ISMA.94b]

(So much for some of the cruder ideas of what 'gender-inclusive' science should look like!)

A number of students talked approvingly of learning more about their body in health or nutrition in science; and a number too approved of studying friendship and rights and beliefs in variously titled religion or personal development subjects. Much depended on the teacher. While students at two schools were very enthusiastic about cooking (in home economics), and a number wanted to become chefs, in a third school there was a universal dislike of their cooking subject and

teacher. A boy who had migrated from Sri Lanka during primary school, and who did a good deal of cooking at home, departed from his normal extreme politeness about all aspects of schooling when he discussed this subject:

Yanni I hate it [...] most of the time I get so, you know, not understanding, because the teacher wants me to do another one and then I'm not used to doing it [her way] ... I cook at home. Mostly I cook chips and all those fast things, all those sorts of things. And well, some Sri Lanka curry foods and things. My mum mostly teach me a little. [HSMY.94b]

In the context of students' comments about 'relevance', and in the context of their constant complaints about how 'boring' their schoolwork was, some more traditional forms of school work could draw a surprising accolade. One school had been doing a unit on Suma and ancient Egypt, and all students talked about this in some detail. Some had liked it a lot, others had not; but all of them had seen it as something new they had learned. At another school, students in different interviews all spoke approvingly about studies of refugees, endangered species, and food chains.

Mathematics

These students, experiencing Australian schooling at the end of the 20th century, had clearly imbibed the lesson that mathematics was a pre-eminently important subject - and no student in our interviews expressed much enthusiasm about it, or nominated it as their favourite subject. When we asked the students 'what sorts of things do you think this school thinks are important?', most students answered by references to behaviour, uniform, reputation rather than learning and education, but where education was mentioned, in every case the reference was to mathematics. For example:

Jane: Maths ... Cos like if you don't learn maths, when you're an adult you'd just be pretty hopeless, cos most jobs include maths. *[HSPL94a]*

Steve: Like, um, maths and all that. All the major subjects, so it helps us get a start in jobs and all that. *[TSPP.94a]*

Katrina: Well, maths and English, I suppose are the most important subjects, so I suppose they'd think they were the best kind of thing. They should be the most important, I'd say. *[HSPM.94a]*

Keren: Maths [...] kind of science, maths, social ed and English [...] They sort of think them subjects are the main ones, even though, you know, most people don't like the main subjects. *[TSPE.94a]* *[This is an ex-technical school which has extremely good computing and technical and craft facilities, which the students are enthusiastic about - yet Keren still interprets the hierarchy of the school's values in this way.]*

Other comments were made when the students were talking about whether they think about their futures. Here, especially at the private school and at the large academic high school in our study, the story that mathematics will be useful over-rides students' actual current experiences of it:

Leanne (February interview 1994): Well, um, I sort of sometimes like in maths if we are learning like different ways to do counting patterns, sometimes I think what will I ever need this for, I don't want to be anything to do with maths, but then, then if you think about it, maths is part of an everyday life thing. It's going to be useful in whatever I want to be which is sort of a vet... *[ISMM.94a]*

Leanne [September interview 1994] Maths is pretty good.

Susan You sort of have to concentrate in maths because you know it's important.

Caroline For you in life.

Susan You can't muck around in maths. *[ISML.94b]*

Across all four schools, the students reported that most of the year 7 mathematics course seemed to be revision and making sure everyone was a uniform standard:

Simone [my previous teacher] used to give you a sheet and then once you had finished one thing you would go on to the next thing, but [this teacher] always makes you stop and do the same things.

Blanche Yeah. So he holds you back. *[HSPB.94a]*

Monica I think we've sort of really doubled back

Michelle Cos last year we sort of did all our times tables and we just did everything.

Monica And now in maths we're just doing it now. [HSPM.94b]

Andrew: You're working from the same sort of book.

Leonard: Last year in grade 6 at my other school we did pretty much the same stuff, like the year 7 work, so we could get used to it.. [ISMM.94b]

Angela: Like we did fractions, and then it just, we were doing fractions and more fractions. And everyone knew what they were and how to do them. But then we just kept doing them. And it sort of just gets a bit boring after a while. And the same thing in science. You sort of, it just goes on and on and on.. [ISMA.94b]

The examples above represent the most common comments students made about mathematics, but two students (not at the same school) mentioned that they appreciated the revision, and understood the work more than they had at primary school; and one student complained about how hard the work was:

Sam The teachers say it shouldn't be too much harder because it's just a revision on last year, but half the stuff you didn't even do. [TSPS.94a]

Conclusion

In the 12 to 18 Project we are studying the development of individual biographies in interaction with schooling. In these glimpses from students in their first year of secondary school, I have tried to show something of the meanings young people are making of that experience, meanings which are shaped not only by what their secondary school is doing differently than their primary school, but also by broader cultural discourses about what matters, by their comparative perceptions of the possibilities offered by different schools, and by their own concerns and fears about their relations with others.

The article suggests that students' reactions to the changed style of secondary school is ambivalent, as they are both eager to leave behind the closer attention and 'caring' of primary school, but also nostalgic for this. In terms of the 'disruption' of a transition between primary and secondary, it was noted here that many students in this study had moved schools during their primary years, and were retrospectively as well as prospectively approving of the break between primary and secondary. There is little here to support current moves foreshadowed in Victoria to replace the primary/secondary organization with a middle-school phase, and some indication that the problematic issue here is one not questioned in recent policy directions: the desirability of larger schools.

On curriculum issues, the study reiterates findings of earlier researchers regarding some unsatisfactory aspects of the year 7 curriculum: in particular the sense of marking time, repetition, and uninventive approaches to core subjects reported by many students. On the other hand, it reports the enthusiasm of students for many of the new subjects that they do encounter in year 7, particularly where they have a sense that they are learning new skills. But overshadowing these short-term reactions is a broader and powerful message which students today have absorbed from recent reforms: that what matters is mathematics. This powerful belief shapes students' interpretation of their achievements in other areas (here, that technical subjects are not so important), and, as we go on with the study, continues as a theme in students' own evaluations of themselves, of their relations with parents and school, and their thinking about the future.

Across very different schools, the project found a major change in the lunchtime physical activity of students in year 7 as compared with in primary school; and notes that school rules and ethos; school physical facilities; and new peer relations all play some part in this.

In methodological terms, this article has raised the issue of not simply taking at face value what students say about primary school once they are at secondary school but of thinking too about the positioning that they are constructing for themselves in their answers. It raises the issue of not taking terms such as 'relevance' or 'broad range of options' as transparent ones. 'Relevance' to these students had as much to do with the quality of the teaching and the peer sub-cultural attitudes in different schools as with the topic. And what was seen as a 'broad range of options' in the private school entirely omitted the 'broad range of options' valued by students at the ex-technical school. We need to look specifically at how such terms are used by students, at how they are used differently in different sites or to draw different distinctions, at where they are being drawn from, at what distinctions they are setting up.

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Author/s:

Yates, Lyn

Title:

Transitions and the year 7 experience: a report from the 12 to 18 Project

Date:

1999

Citation:

Yates, L. (1999). Transitions and the year 7 experience: a report from the 12 to 18 Project. Australian Journal of Education, 43(1), 24-41.

Publication Status:

Published

Persistent Link:

<http://hdl.handle.net/11343/34786>