

**Moving Out and Moving On:
School Closure and Transition Experiences
of Students, Teachers and Parents**

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Abstract

While there is a large body of research focused on the transition of students from primary to secondary schooling, this is not the only major shift that groups of students may encounter. School closure and amalgamation appear increasingly on the agendas of Australian state governments. It is our contention that it is highly inappropriate to assume that the issues associated with closure simply parallel those associated with transition. However, in the absence of research into the impact of closure, educators and administrators are forced to fall back on existing transition practices and the theories that underlie such programmes. While the literature focuses on issues of continuity and discontinuity between sites, primary to secondary transition has a long tradition as a positive rite of passage into adolescence and early adulthood. Closure, however, raises highly specific and often negative emotive issues for staff, students and families. Based on the results of a number of semi-structured interviews with members of each of these three key groups of participants, this paper reports on the impact of one instance of closure of a Tasmanian secondary school. The paper draws conclusions related to the effects of the closure on those involved at both the closing and receiving schools and examines the efficacy of elements of the transition programme employed by the receiving school. Implications for school communities relating to planning for and coping with the processes and pressures of school closure and transition are addressed.

Introduction and Background - Transition versus Closure

Transition is understood, in educational terms, to indicate the shift from one level of schooling to the next. In the Australian context it is most usually discussed in relation to the shift from primary to secondary school. In this, it is generally seen as a positive move, as a 'rite of passage' that marks a normal movement towards increasing maturity. In Australia this transition to secondary school coincides with the developmental stage known as 'early adolescence'. Formal transition programmes, then, have drawn heavily on the available literature regarding the needs and abilities of this group. The emergence and ongoing evolution of middle school programmes in this country is associated closely with the recognition of this particular group and its needs, socially and educationally. As a result, there is a well-developed body of research related to the process of transition and the development of appropriate Transition Programmes. The receiving school in this study, Cascade High School, has an established transition programme that is applied to the arrival of students from primary feeder schools each year.

What happens, however, when students arrive at a new school *en masse*, not as part of a 'traditional' transition from primary to secondary school but rather, as the direct result of closure of a neighbouring high school? While in primary to secondary transition, students arrive anonymously on the first day from a number of feeder schools, in this case, a large group of students arrived from one school. This, along with the fact of closure presents a number of relatively unrecognised challenges for educators and administrators. This paper seeks to highlight some of these and argues that the application of normal transition policies and procedures may not be adequate for incoming students or staff in these circumstances.

Key Themes in the Literature

While this study and the research associated with it began with issues related to identifying the needs of early adolescents (see, for example, Cormack 1991; Kenway 1995; Keddie 1999; Petersen 1996; Braggett, Day & Morris 1999), and consequent formation of transition and middle school programmes (which characterized both the closing and receiving schools) this paper will focus most closely on school closure and the migration of teachers and students from one site to another.

Student Transitions

During their experience of schooling, most students will experience at least three main transitions, all of which are viewed as moves toward greater maturity:

- at the beginning of school or kindergarten, where separation from mother as well as coping with a new environment are issues (Yates, 1999);
- the move from primary education to secondary education; and,
- the move from secondary education to the workplace or university.

Regardless of how socially valued the shift from primary to secondary school might be, this traditional transition does not occur without impact on individual students. Several factors associated with this shift have been identified (Ferguson, 1998; Churchill, 2000) as having an impact on students in transition, particularly:

- a loss of a role model or key adult with whom to identify;
- loss of trust and diminished responsibility in the move from the most senior to the most junior in the school;
- decline in attitude and levels of motivation and interest in school and schoolwork;
- loss of sense of belonging and status through changes in established peer relationships; and
- the environmental changes from the closeted "childish/ feminine" environment to an independent "adult/masculine" environment.

Thus the primary to secondary transition constitutes a significant challenge for young adolescent students. Given this understanding of the impact of transition on students at a crucial period of their lives, it has become common for secondary schools to employ formalised 'transition programs' to facilitate the process of shifting from one educational environment to another.

Middleton and Hill (1996) suggest five separate initiatives that could be used in order to counteract some of the problems that students may experience during transition. These initiatives vary from the shared teaching of classes in the upper grades of primary school, to team teaching in the junior years of high school, to teacher team planning, through to the creation of a middle school programme (Middleton & Hill, 1996). Common to these approaches is the familiarization of students with more than one teacher and teachers working more closely with a smaller number of students. The benefits of these initiatives are said to be:

- the teachers get to know the students so that they can plan and cater for individual learning needs;
- students can build personal relationships with adult role models;
- students develop a sense of security and belonging while being able to take on the responsibility for their own learning (Kruse, 1996).

Given this context, an appropriate transition program should provide a sense of continuity, a 'bridge', from the primary to the secondary school system. Early research into the development of these programmes suggested that transitions can best be carried out in stages--from orientation tours to curriculum sessions to discussion groups--through which the

student moves progressively (Cotterell, 1982, in Ferguson, 1998, p. 53). As noted earlier, the breadth of research into transition and the needs of early adolescents have meant that many schools have established Transition Programmes to ease the shift from primary to secondary school. What happens, then, if the shift is the result of closure rather than a maturational movement? Can we assume the same needs and process? Given the limited research base surrounding closure of schools outside administrative/economic it is problematic to assume that the same programmes can be stretched to deal with this new form of transition.

School Closure and Loss

Certain forms of transitions, particularly those not considered 'expected' or 'normal' often cause conflict and stress for those involved (Rice, 1999). The event of school closure precipitates such a transition - students and staff must move from an existing school as the direct result of the closure of that school. The involuntary and unexpected, almost 'unnatural' nature of this transition, can be the cause of stress for students and school communities. While traditional transition is a positive marker, this is not necessarily the case with closure. Thus, it is unclear if traditional transition programs constitute an appropriate response to the types of issues that students and teachers encounter when forced to shift from one school to another.

School closure is less and less an isolated occurrence. Justifications include cost and resource efficiencies, declining enrolments and curriculum decay. Between 1992 and 1994, for instance, the Victorian government closed 230 schools and annexed or amalgamated another 30 educational institutions (Marginson 1994); in 1999, the South Australian government targeted up to 34 schools for either closure or amalgamation (AEU 1999).

Closure, however, involves more than economic rationalism or curriculum rationalization. Lives are affected. Closing a school and moving students from the site where they have a sense of belonging and community to an alien environment has varying effects on the lives of individuals and on the communities in which the school was located. Within small rural communities, the closing of the school can have a marked negative impact on an entire town and 'will exacerbate existing disadvantage' (Graham, 1987, p. 79); families within communities in decline can become displaced and isolated (Bowie 1994). The available research reports that individuals are likely to experience loss, displacement and various degrees of difficulty settling into a new school environment (Kronemann 1993; Woodhouse 1997).

Grief is experienced as a consequence of loss of some type and there is a well established literature that deals with issues surrounding grief as a process (Leick & Davidsen-Nielsen 1991). As a process, grief includes a number of identifiable stages: disbelief and denial; anger and depression; confusion and disorientation (McKissock 1998). For the grieving process to be successfully negotiated the individual must come to accept that a loss has occurred and that there is a finality involved. This relates to the loss of objects, persons, or places to which an individual has been attached. Thus, it can be argued that how the closure and consequent *loss* of a school is handled will impact upon the grieving process of former students. Other research indicates that there are steps that can be taken in the case of closure to facilitate successful navigation of whatever grief occurs. For example, Moray (1985) suggests that official celebrations and commemorations that allow the sharing of memories and feelings amongst students, staff and community (McKissock 1998) can be beneficial. This research would suggest that a transition programme that caters to these needs will be ongoing, beginning well before the event of closure and continuing for some time thereafter. Such a transition will, in fact, be seen as a *process* rather than a single event.

Before proceeding further, we turn to a description of the two schools reported in this study: the closing school, Davidson High School and the receiving school, Cascade High; and to an outline of the transition programme which was designed to facilitate the relocation of students from the closing school.

The Schools - Cascade and Davidson High Schools

Both schools are located in the regional city of Launceston, Tasmania. Launceston is the second largest Tasmanian city with a local area population of around 90,000. As a large regional centre it boasts a relatively diverse economic base, however, characteristic of Tasmania and rural Australia in general, unemployment (and particularly youth unemployment) is high in some localities. The two schools featured here are situated in areas of high unemployment. The main catchment areas for both schools are located in the lower socio-economic regions of the city, though Cascade also has a localised area of middle-income families.

Davidson High, the closing school, was located in a residential/commercial area on the Eastern fringe of the city. At the time of closure, enrolments had been declining for some time. In 1999, enrolments totalled 221 students from Grade 6 through to Grade 10 however, this was anticipated to fall to 120 for 2000.

Cascade High School is located on the northern fringe of the city and at the time of writing had an enrolment of around 560. Both schools operated a middle schooling programme and, as part of this, Cascade has a well-established transition programme designed to cater for the needs of students making the traditional shift from primary to secondary schooling. This programme draws from the available research relating to the needs of early adolescents. Cascade High, then, took an existing transition framework and extended it to embrace students and staff experiencing closure related transition.

The Receiving School's Transition Programme

In addition to the existing elements of what Cascade might describe as the procedures and structures inherent in its "supportive school environment", the main elements of this particular transition programme were:

- Visits to Davidson by groups of Cascade students and teachers for low-key social functions such as barbecues.
- Orientation days at Cascade High where Davidson students spent a day with their projected next year's peers and teachers.
- Opportunities for parents of Davidson High students to meet with Cascade High staff, to tour the school and to discuss issues of interest or concern.
- Consulting ex-Davidson staff in the assignment of ex-Davidson students to new classes at Cascade, in order to ensure that each student had access to a friendship network, potentially negative groupings were avoided, no single ex-Davidson student would be isolated.
- Assigning ex-Davidson staff to key pastoral roles in the Cascade High structure so that students in each year level had access to a familiar teacher.
- Ensuring that the 1999 elections for the 2000 SRC executive membership featured a place for an ex-Davidson student.
- The wearing of the school uniform to promote identification with Cascade High and to make students' previous schools "invisible".
- Decision to treat all students as Cascade students from the first day of the school year - not to identify individual students or groups of students as ex-Davidson students.

In addition to Cascade initiatives, state education authorities supported the processes of relocation in a number of ways:

- Appointment of a transition co-ordinator
- Provision of a school bus service from the Davidson community area to Cascade High.
- Provision of financial assistance for ex-Davidson families in the purchase of Cascade High school uniform.
- Ex-Davidson staff were guaranteed employment and offered a choice of schools in the District.
- Relocating staff were able to visit their potential schools late in the 1999 school year and were appointed ahead of other categories of teachers to the schools they selected.

In what was later to emerge as a significant issue, Cascade High had no school-based transition programme for relocated staff beyond an existing (and only notional) induction process.

To this point, we have focused predominantly on issues relating to students. But they are not the only people affected by the shift to a new school culture. Teachers, too, are at risk of experiencing culture shock in new locations. We turn now to a discussion of the issues related to teachers who are required to shift from one schooling environment to another.

Teacher Culture, Relocation and Teaching Quality

Perhaps the single most important element in coming to an understanding of teachers' thinking about their work is the perception of teaching as a "moral craft" (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992, p. 5). Thus, many teachers see teaching more as a vocation than as mere work. Of all the factors that contribute to teachers' views of their work and of their workplace contexts, students and their characteristics are the most significant (McLaughlin, 1993). Teachers' current perceptions of their school, their colleagues, their classrooms and even their commitment to the teaching profession are all affected deeply by the needs, abilities, backgrounds and behaviours of their current groups of students.

Somewhat perversely it has long been accepted that individualism is a strong element within teacher culture. In this sense, teachers are understood to "bring to their work a sense of self, the preservation of which is of prime importance to them" (Nias, 1987, p. 1). Despite this individualism, there are clear workplace cultures in teaching, with such cultures being revealed in schools by the phrase "the way we do things around here". Some school workplace cultures are particularly strongly entrenched, functioning to preserve the interests of those who are part of the particular school culture and to either resist or absorb outsiders, whether these outsiders be policy changes (Churchill, 1998) or incoming students and staff.

Despite the extensive literature on teacher expertise (see, for example, Berliner, 1992) and a contemporary focus on teacher quality (see, for example, Williamson, 1994), little research has been published on the effects that relocation from one school to another may have on teachers. One recent Australian study (Cowley, 1999) found that relocation following transfer impacts on teachers, their work and the quality of their teaching in various ways. Relocation generates changes in context for teachers, including:

- Changes in school environment and culture (location, school ethos, student population);
- Changes in teachers' professional activities (grades and subjects taught, roles and responsibilities within the school); and

- Changes in teachers' personal lives (travelling times and distances, residence).

Cowley suggests that relocation (which must include reassignment following school closure) produced changes in self-confidence, self-esteem, family harmony, stress levels and health for teachers, with these factors being more negative and problematic when the relocation was forced on the teacher by external circumstances or policy. Professionally, relocated teachers required some time to establish themselves in their new schools, with many experiencing an initial decline in teaching performance. According to Cowley, the provision of appropriate support structures and procedures in the new host school was the key factor in ameliorating the negative effects of relocation on the personal and professional lives of reassigned teachers.

The nature of work conditions means that teachers are often transferred without consultation or negotiation, so these are not issues that are confined to this single incident of closure. However, added to this involuntary migration was the experience of school closure that was apparently as much a difficult experience for the teachers as for students. Teachers are not immune to, or isolated from, the culture of the school - they contribute significantly to its development and maintenance. To have it unceremoniously taken away and dismantled by an outside force is no doubt disturbing and upsetting. To then be moved to a school with a very well guarded sense of 'this is how it's done here' was doubly difficult. While there is no solution to these difficult human issues, there is obviously a need for a more systematic and well-constructed induction process for incoming teachers when and wherever they move. There has always been the view that teachers can shift with minimal disruption from site to site, unpack their books and automatically deliver their teaching at optimum level. This is a patently dehumanised view and must change. For this change to occur, there must first be understanding of the degree of difficulty which incoming staff and students may experience.

Amalgamation and Culture Shock

In order to describe the experiences of incoming students and staff, it may be useful to consider the impact of closure and subsequent transfer or transition to a new school in terms of the experience of cultural shock (Hodge 1997), particularly as this relates to unexpected or unwelcome change. The case of involuntary immigration is somewhat analogous, being not unlike the experience of students and teachers as they move from a known socio-cultural setting into a new and partly alien school context.

Culture is the shared system of "values and beliefs of members of society and includes patterns of behaving, feeling and reacting; and the premises underlying behaviour and ways of thinking" (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, in Rao & Swaminathan, 1995, p. 3). Each culture has its own system and, within a society, many systems may exist. Both voluntary and involuntary movement between cultures, or changes in an individual's environment, can result in conflict. This conflict is known as 'culture shock'.

Culture shock has several identified stages moving from a 'Honeymoon' where all seems new and exciting, thru the emergence of coping difficulties, loneliness and frustration, onto rebellion, hostility and, finally, the achievement of 'Autonomy' where the individual is either integrated or assimilated into a new culture (Hodge, 1997):

In cases of school closure students and staff are often dispersed between receiving schools thus disintegrating friendship groups and patterns of collegiality. In effect, the culture in which these individuals have been successfully operating is dissolved. Furthermore, such students and staff come into environments where the culture is both firmly established and different to the culture they have known. In transition, therefore, it is clear that both students and staff may experience culture shock as they move from one school culture to the next.

Having established the theoretical background of this paper, we now turn to a description of the methodology and data analysis before giving consideration to the key themes identified from the research and their implications for school administrators and teachers.

Methodological Issues

This project was conceptualised and operationalized as a qualitative case study. A single case of school closure with multiple semi-structured interviews of the three key groups - parents, students and teachers of both the closing and receiving schools. The data were collected by an honours student who focussed on the experiences and perceptions of students, and by the key researchers who worked together to interview staff and parents as two distinct groups. Throughout, a continual dialogue between the student researcher and key researchers was maintained, allowing development of an overview of the key issues arising from school closure and transition for these groups.

A case study approach was employed to investigate the effects of school closure and transition on students (Waddington, 2000), their parents and teachers. The nature of the study indicated the use of a qualitative design that enabled the participants' own words and perceptions to be foregrounded, with the focus on how these individuals made meaning, or sense, out of their world and their experiences (Merriam, 1998).

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, which were audiotaped and, subsequently, transcribed. All interviews (which ranged in length from 15 to 60 minutes) were conducted individually over a two-month period in the first half of the 2000 school year, involving either one or two interviewers with a single student, parent or teacher participant. The usual conventions of voluntary participation and withdrawal applied. Initial draft transcripts were returned to the participants for verification and only the resultant amended transcripts were used as data in the study.

A total of 35 subjects participated in the study: 14 students, 8 parents, and 13 staff members: 10 teachers, 2 assistant principals and the principal. The sample consisted of two halves of 7 students, 4 parents and 5 teachers: the first half had experienced transition following the closure of Davidson High (these participants were identified as Student D1-D7, Parent D1-D4 and Teacher D1-D5); while the second half of the sample had come to Cascade High through more regular, predictable or voluntary processes (these were identified as Student C1-C7, Parent C1-C4 and Teacher C1-C5). The parent participants were not the parents of the student participants. The principal took up his appointment at Cascade High School at the beginning of the 1999 school year: his prior appointment had been as principal at Davidson High.

Twin versions (one for those who had experienced transition following closure and another for those whose transition to cascade High had been more traditional) of three interview schedules (one for each subset of participants) were employed. At the conclusion of each interview anecdotal notes about the participants' demeanour and any pertinent issues which had arisen were hand-written.

The data were analysed manually at various times by researchers individually and at other times collaboratively. Analysis of the transcribed interviews was undertaken in order to identify the key themes, patterns or constructs that emerged. The remainder of this paper will focus on a number of the key themes and patterns that emerged from this analysis:

- Managing the process of closure (Information dissemination, Process of grief and loss)

- Assimilation into culture of new school
- Implications for educators and administrators for the future design of transition and induction programmes

Impact of Closure and Transition on Students and Families

On hearing the news that Davidson High was to close students exhibited reactions typical of the grief process - initial shock, then some denial, followed by anger. These can be best understood by reference to the transcripts themselves:

I'd heard rumours about it, but I didn't believe that talk - and then they told us in assembly.

(Student D4)

I couldn't believe it at the start. It was like, "Oh my God, I can't believe the school's closing down. Not again. It took a while for it to get in."

(Student D1)

The principal of Cascade High, on hearing the announcement of Davidson's impending closure, felt drawn back to his previous school:

I felt a real sadness at the time. In fact, it was a Friday and I left at lunchtime to spend the afternoon at Davidson.

Parents of students at Davidson High claimed to be surprised by news of the closure:

I knew nothing about it until right at the week that it was announced. No one knew nothing until that week - it was just a real shock.

(Parent D1)

Some parents were angry about the processes involved in the decision to close Davidson High.

As a parent I was disgusted that it went down without any community consultation.

(Parent D2)

Some of the students expressed their anger in acts of vandalism against people and the school itself, the "objects" to which the students felt attached:

A couple of teachers' cars got egged and got done in toilet paper. The school doesn't look like a school any more - basically someone's gone along with a rock and knocked out all the windows that were made of glass.

(Student D4)

There was great sadness on the last day of the 1999 school year at Davidson High. It seemed that this sadness could be shared openly with other Davidson people, but outsiders were not to intrude:

There was a few you didn't want to say goodbye to and it was really sad. Everyone was crying and not wanting to get home very quick. Saying goodbye to the teachers was really upsetting.

(Student D1)

On the last day the paper came and got pictures of them crying. I didn't like what they did. It wasn't fair on the people who were sad and crying and stuff - it was a private thing.

(Student D4)

Issues Related to Transition

Issues related to the transition to Cascade High fell into two main groups: issues which were common for all new Grade 7 students (including those from Davidson High), and issues for the ex-Davidson students who entered Grades 8, 9 or 10 at Cascade in 2000.

For the new Grade 7 students, the issues mirrored the traditional transition literature. There was anticipatory apprehension:

I was really nervous and scared, 'cos I thought it'd be like off TV - you know, how they have Heartbreak High and all that - like bullies and things.

(Student C1)

There was concern about regressing in status and development:

Going to a new school is like going from the top of the school down to the bottom. Like, I was the oldest in the school and you go to being the youngest in the school - you go from feeling real big to this real little thing.

(Student D3)

Parents of students making the transition from Davidson High were well aware of their children's concerns:

He didn't want to come at all - he was just so upset he cried for three weeks before the first day.

(Parent D2)

They were expecting to get name-called, expecting fights, they were nervous about meeting the teachers and about not knowing where to go into classrooms.

(Parent D1)

The initial apprehension and nervousness passed quite quickly for most students:

It took about a week. It's a little bit weird, but it's cool once you get used to it. It's better than Primary School.

(Student C7)

He was rapt. He came home and said he had a great day and that the kids were terrific. He' come through it with flying colours - not once have I heard him say anything negative about Cascade High.

(Parent D2)

The ex-Davidson students who entered the more senior grades found the first days at Cascade very difficult. They exhibited signs of culture shock:

I just wanted to get out. On the first day I wanted the bell to go at lunch and go home. I took a week off school 'cos I couldn't handle it.

(Student D5)

They chucked biscuits and stuff at us and they called us 'Davo Scrubbers'.

(Student D6)

Many of these students retained their attachment to their old school and some found Cascade wanting by comparison in some areas:

I don't like how they say stuff about how Davidson had all the drug busts and Davo was a really druggy school. It's them that's had the drug busts!

(Student D6)

As time passed, ex-Davidson students seemed able to retain their attachment to their old school while beginning to appreciate some of the perceived virtues of Cascade:

Davidson was very easy-going, like you knew everybody. Teachers were really nice. Nobody was bullying, or not very often. Here you don't know who's who, so you've got to be careful around everybody or they knock your head in. I like it here now. You get more opportunities to make new friends, it's got better facilities and it's got a nice feel.

(Student D4)

Despite the fact that some elements of the transition arrangements actually hindered the process of relocated students identifying with their new school, acceptance and identity were crucial issues in successful transition:

She still thinks like a Davidson student coming to Cascade - because they're on the bus - the bus load of them all come up together as a group and at the end of the day they all go home again.

(Parent D3)

I actually feel like a Cascade student now - 'cos people have accepted me and 'cos of the uniform everyone looks the same as you and you don't feel like a Davidson student.

(Student D2)

Impact of Closure and Transition on Teachers

The interviews with teaching staff immediately revealed two factors: first, that while the transition of students following the closure of Davidson High was seen as important, the issue of staff transition was also in the forefront of the minds of relocating teachers; and second, there were stark differences between the three staff groups interviewed (relocating teachers, established Cascade teachers and the Cascade leadership group) in terms of their expressed views on matters related to staff transition.

Like many of the Davidson High students, the news that the school was to close produced feelings of loss and grief:

I was absolutely devastated, because I was going to stay on. I just hit a niche at that school. I didn't stop fretting about it for all of third term. I loved the place - the way people treated each other was just fantastic - really supportive. It was really hard for me to leave.

(Teacher D1)

The initial period of the school year was a time of difficulty and challenge for staff relocated to Cascade High:

I would get up in the morning and feel like throwing up, because I didn't like this place much. I've got a real hard class, but it's not that - it's just that I didn't feel part of this place and the kids didn't make me feel welcome at all.

(Teacher D1)

At our school, at Davidson, if someone came up with an idea we all just looked at each other and off we'd go. Here it's more about learning the politics of things.

(Teacher D2)

Established Cascade High staff tinged their appreciation of the skills and abilities of their new colleagues with some concern for the preservation of existing Cascade High School culture and procedures:

We didn't want to change any of our standards or any of how we did things because that's what we'd worked for - to build up that sort of thing.

(Teacher C1)

There's a couple who have come in full of enthusiasm and they want to do this and this and this. It won't change overnight - it took six years to get right. It's not going to be another Davidson, because Cascade is Cascade and you can't change it.

(Teacher C3)

Established Cascade High staff (described by one of their number (Teacher C4) as "inmates of long standing") wanted to ensure that the achievements resulting from past efforts (particularly those which had resulted in the move to a Middle School structure in 1995) were maintained. To some extent, they recognised that this had led them to be less supportive of relocated staff than might have otherwise been the case:

It's a horrible sort of attitude, but if someone is wussy or is weak or not willing to make an effort, you tend to stand back and think "More fool you". I did it tough, so you can do it tough.

(Teacher C3)

They're great - really good teachers. You can walk through the door and as long as you can toughen up and cut the mustard, survive and walk tall then you're good enough - and that always the way it's going to be at Cascade.

(Teacher C4)

The school leadership group seem not to have recognised that the transition to a new school posed a unique set of problems for relocated staff:

I really think it was just like any new start - just like every other staff member.

(Assistant Principal 1)

There's an induction process for all our new staff and they've just utilised exactly the same sort of things.

(Principal)

Any new teacher coming here, whether from Davidson or not, gets support.

(Assistant Principal 2)

Thus, whether accidentally or by design, there were no special measures taken at Cascade High to facilitate the transition of staff relocated from Davidson High. This left the new staff somewhat disempowered and disoriented in an unfamiliar environment while retaining an emotional attachment to the way things were in their old school:

I wanted, not so much to have information shoved at me, but just someone to sit down with, to talk about what I liked to do, to go for a tour with - you know, the human touch. But there was nothing - it was just, "All right, let's get down to business".

(Teacher D1)

Oh yeah - you're new, you need to learn, you need to fit in with us. I've tried to suggest a few things and they've just been squashed.

(Teacher D1)

At Davidson we were all going through the same thing together - but we moulded into what was probably one of the best teaching teams that I've ever had the privilege to work with.

(Teacher D2)

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on our analyses of the interviews conducted with students, parents and teachers, it is our contention that it is highly inappropriate to assume that the issues associated with closure simply parallel those associated with transition. However, we note that, in the absence of research into the impact of closure, educators and administrators are forced to fall back on existing transition practices and the theories that underlie such programmes.

Efficacy of receiving school's transition programme for relocated students

Transition following school closure is a more complex and emotionally demanding experience than traditional transition. This difference is less apparent if the timing of the forced transition coincides with that of a traditional transition, ie. at the transition from Grade 6 to 7. Transition following closure is not a positive rite of passage. It constitutes a loss: of place, of identity, of future pathways. This is significant, as school closure induces grief reactions in the students who 'lose' their school. The celebrations which were held on the final day at Davidson High brought acceptance of the loss and a sense of closure for some students, but prolonged or delayed grief, combined with the challenges of early adolescence and of transition to a new school severely taxed the coping strategies of some students who experienced a form of culture shock as they struggled for acceptance and recognition from students and teachers at Cascade High.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of relocating students, the transition programme provided benefits which included orientation to the new site and introductions to new subjects and teachers. The orientation visits undertaken late in 1999 were particularly valued by students and parents:

It was good 'cos on the first day you'd know where everything is.

(Student D2)

Oh yeah, really, 'cos I didn't really know the layout of the school. I really wanted to come to see what it looked like and where everything was, so I didn't come in on the first day and think, "Where am I going?" and feel foolish.

(Student D4)

I was very impressed by Cascade. I had already been to see Valley High and I thought - what a difference - this one seemed friendlier and to have a lot more things going.

(Parent D3)

However, this effectiveness was undermined to some extent by the way in which these orientation encounters identified various individuals and groups as Davidson students. In a

traditional transition, all students arrive as 'unknowns' into the new school community. In this instance, the individuals from one group had already been singled out as different. This identification resulted in a difficult transition to the new culture for some students. Some relocating students, particularly those in the senior grades were subjected to a degree of teasing and bullying in first days. Thus the 1999 orientation activities set up to bridge the gap between the two schools both helped and hindered students. For some, the 'insider' information eased the shift, but for others this identification as Cascade students worked against an easy transition.

Many elements of the transition programme were not overt to relocated students (including the assignment of Davidson students to new classes at Cascade taking existing friendship groupings into account; and staff adopting a policy of treating all students alike - not treating ex-Davidson students as a group or as different in any way). In a sense this "invisibility" sent a message that any remaining feelings of attachment to, and loss of, Davidson were not legitimate.

Initial parental concerns centred around issues of curriculum and their children's happiness but, four months later, parents of students who shifted to Cascade believed that their children had settled into the new school and were happy with the teachers, the school and the curriculum.

The key aim of the transition programme could be described most simply as "assimilation": indeed, this term was prominent in the discourse of the members of the school leadership group. Hence, the various elements of the transition programme were designed to facilitate the integration of relocating students into the culture of the receiving school. It is reasonable to suggest that the transition programme had been largely successful in achieving this goal.

I guess we expected there to be more hiccups at the start of the year, but it was just amazing - it's the best start to the year we've ever had.

(Teacher C1)

I haven't had one kid come up to me and say, "Gee, I wish we were back at Davidson" - not one kid has said it.

(Teacher D3)

The best thing I saw was that they weren't identified as being any different to the other students.

(Teacher D4)

The dominant discourse which has emerged is one in which the transition is seen as a smooth process through which both relocated staff and students have been effectively assimilated into the existing Cascade High school culture:

I don't know that anything's changed hugely, apart from the fact that we've got some extra staff who really want to be here and kids who have just fitted in really well - they don't stand out at all.

(Teacher C5)

Efficacy of receiving school's transition programme for relocated staff

The reported experiences of teachers relocated from Davidson reveal that their transition to, and reception at, Cascade High called for much more careful long-term attention than it received. Both predictable and unpredictable factors contributed to the need for a staff transition program at Cascade. The most significant of the predictable factors is the increase in the extent to which transferred teachers, in general, suffer a loss of expertise and require extra levels of support in the initial period in a new environment. The research (see Cowley, 1999 for example) is quite clear on this issue: teachers' skills do not automatically or immediately transfer from site to site and are, initially, highly context specific

Most important among a number of unpredictable factors which made an efficacious staff transition programme crucial was the strength of the attachment of the existing Cascade High staff to established patterns of operation and to the shared "corporate self image" they held of themselves as a staff. While the receiving school apparently thought that it had conducted an adequate and effective induction programme, this was not the perception of the incoming staff. The resulting feelings of alienation were magnified by apparent undercurrents of 'sink or swim' expressed by the existing staff, manifest in a strong belief amongst some that new teachers had to prove their worth before being fully supported. It is thus, unsurprising that relocated staff reported various examples of feelings of discomfort in the new school environment, akin to the culture shock experienced by many of the relocated students.

Recommendations

This research has illuminated a number of issues related to transition following school closure, to the extent that we offer a number of tentative recommendations for those involved in such processes.

First, we recommend that relocating students, parents and teachers:

- Understand that feelings of grief are a normal part of forced relocation.
- Understand the grief process.
- Learn how to grieve.
- Be prepared for, and accepting of, an initial decline in performance and competence.
- Be prepared for, and actively seek, the establishment of new relationships with students, parents, teachers and other members of the new school community.

Second, we recommend that receiving students, parents and teachers:

- Be available, welcoming and a friendly source of support and assistance.
- Understand and accept that all those undergoing relocation will require time and support to enable them to flourish in the new location.
- Understand and accept that "the way we do things around here" will not be immediately understood (or automatically endorsed) by new arrivals.

Finally, we make three recommendations to help guide the work of school and district educational leaders in their preparation for, and management of, transition processes related to school closure.

- Relocation and transition are *processes*, not events - hence transition programmes need to be construed as long-term processes with on-going elements, rather than as single events that are 'over' shortly after arrival. This is equally applicable to teachers relocated after school closure and to similarly relocated students.

- The elements of transition programmes should be identified and explained to all participants so that the overall approach and the on-going nature of the programme are perceived as visible, coherent sources of support.
- Current practice in teacher induction should be reconsidered. Induction is traditionally conceived as a need of beginning teachers only. The findings of this project, together with those of Cowley (1999) make it clear that well-considered programmes of personal and professional introduction to new work sites should be available to teachers at times of relocation throughout their careers.

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