

## Practitioner Perspective

# Anxiety and stress in the transition from primary to secondary school

## How lasting psychological impact can be avoided.

By *Maretta Byrne*



### Areas of anxiety around school transition

*Coping theorists recognise that loss is central to any concept of stress, and while there can be loss or gain from a stressful situation, loss is more severe. Transition from primary to secondary school is seen as stressful and this could be because of the perceived academic and social losses associated with this period (Mackenzie, McMaugh & O'Sullivan (2012) cited in Frydenberg (2008), p.300)*

Anxiety is a term generally associated with adults but in a survey conducted by UCD School of Psychology and Headstrong (2012), it found that “1 in 3 of our young people had mild to severe feelings of anxiety” (p. 55). In relation to the transition to secondary school I group the areas of concern for students under three headings, social and emotional, curriculum and learning and bureaucratic.

### Social and Emotional

Social and emotional relates to perceptions and feelings and can be summed up by the term ‘mental wellbeing’. While social and emotional relates to an individual’s own perception of themselves, it is significantly influenced by their outside social world and how they relate to it. Symonds (2015) notes that “when people experience a significant life event such as changing schools, it can have a profound effect on how they feel

### Introduction

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

Adult clients suffering from stress and anxiety continuously present themselves in the counselling space. Counsellors spend a great deal of time with these clients trying to get to the cause(s) of their anxiety. The origins of anxieties vary greatly but in some cases it relates back to events in a person’s early life. Disord (2014, cited in

Pine et al., 1998) stated that “the presence of anxiety disorder during adolescence also predicted a two-to-threefold increased risk for anxiety in adulthood”. Transitioning from primary to secondary school is one of the first major transitions for adolescents. Clearly, this transition can present physiological, academic, social and emotional challenges for adolescents which may result in long term negative consequences for their mental wellbeing.

In this article I first look at the anxieties for students around the transition to secondary school. I then identify the students most susceptible to these anxieties. Finally, and most importantly, I look at what can be done to alleviate the potential long-term psychological impact on students.

about themselves and who they think they are” (p. 98).

The most important outside influences include peers and friends. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) note that “nothing seems to be of greater importance for the self-esteem and well-being of the adolescent.... than to be included and accepted in some social group and nothing is more devastating than exclusion.” (p. 57). Most students have been in the same school and in the same class since the age of four or five. Then at around twelve years of age they separate from their friends since childhood.

Bullying can often be considered the flipside of having friends and being accepted by peers. Bullying occurs in all aspects of life but is particularly prevalent in schools. Lester, Cross, Shaw & Dooley (2012, in Cross et al., 2009) state that “...an increase in bullying behaviour appears to occur at age 11 and in the immediate transition period from primary school to secondary school.” (p. 215). A recent development is the role that social media is playing in bullying. What was once the security and safe space of home is no longer the case, as the bully cannot be left behind in the classroom. I have seen first-hand the impact of social media on one of the students in the school where I work. A picture was taken of the student sitting alone at lunch and posted on social media with the phrase ‘loser’. She had no idea until another friend drew her attention to it. She spent the next few hours in her room on Facebook/Snapchat, checking the comments posted about it. It’s easy for adults to say “ignore it or switch it off” but for young people, switching off, is breaking off communication with their outside world.

Another less obvious social and emotional issue is having to contend with teachers, personality differences. In the eight years

of primary school students have had no more than eight different teachers; in secondary school they can have up to eight teachers in the one day! Claire Redmond in her article in the Irish Independent acknowledged “Sometimes teachers may not be aware that their actions are causing genuine distress to the student. In their efforts to maintain order and effectively manage the classroom, teachers may terrify students” (Redmond, 2010).

### **Curriculum and Learning**

“Curriculum and Learning” relates to the academic side of secondary school and includes; homework; exams; subjects and a student’s academic ability. Research has shown that where students are weak academically they have significantly greater concerns about the transition to secondary school. Maguire and Yu (2014) found that “Specific academic abilities (e.g. spelling ability), among other variables, predicted the success of adolescents’ transition to secondary school” (p. 84). They also reported that “... children’s numeracy performance continued to show a significant association with child-reported difficulties with the transition to secondary school” (p. 95). Anxiety in this area is often related to the prospect of having thirteen subjects and facing state exams.

The area of class streaming (separating students by academic ability) is particularly relevant and contentious. Schools that stream students entering secondary school, end up segregating pupils based on a subjective assessment. This can have the effect of differentiating students from one another in first year. Smyth, McCoy and Darmody (2004) found that “where streaming does occur, it tends to result in the labelling of students as ‘smart’ or ‘stupid’ .....students in streamed schools, especially those in the lower streams, make less progress

in reading and mathematics during first year.” (p. 6).

### **Bureaucracy**

There are small differences in secondary school when compared to primary school (which adults either do not consider or are not aware of). However these differences can often create significant issues for students as they attempt to settle into secondary school. These differences include: - (i) timetable stressors (ii) forgetting books (iii) locker issues (iv) getting lost (v) new teachers (vi) discipline (vii) new subjects and (viii) getting to school.

### **Identifying the students most at risk to anxiety during a school transition**

*There are many factors that predispose children to stress at transition. These include being pubertal, being female, experiencing childhood adversity, lacking social support, having had a bad prior transition and viewing change as a threat rather than a challenge. Also, children with existing anxiety disorders may be more vulnerable to the differences in school environment. Teachers can use these characteristics when they think about which children in their care might be more anxious than others. (Symonds, 2015 p. 44).*

Having established the areas that cause greatest anxiety for students, how do we identify the ‘at risk’ students; that is those most vulnerable and as a consequence most likely to be affected psychologically in the transition to secondary school. If we want to help them then we need to know who ‘they’ are. The source for information on students must come from the partners in education, namely family and schools.

### **Parents/Guardians**

Parents know their child’s

personality best. Parents can look back on their school days with 'rose tinted glasses' often remarking to their children about the 'best days of your life'. They forget some of the realities of youth - the fears of rejection, trying to fit in, exam pressure, cliques. Janis Ian's song 'Seventeen' comes to mind "To those of us who knew the pain, of valentines that never came, and those whose names were never called, when choosing sides for basketball" (Ian, 1975, A2).

### **Schools - Primary and Secondary**

Primary schools have been involved in student's growth and development for eight years and know their learning strengths and needs, as well as their peer relationships. Primary schools are also best placed to assess if the needs of a child are being met in the classroom or if extra resources are required such as the help of a resource teacher or a Special Needs Assistant (SNA).

Secondary Schools along with students themselves will benefit most from the transition being a positive experience. As such these schools must ensure that they are pro-active in identifying the students that need support.

Two key categories help identify possible vulnerable students. The first category is the **student groupings** to which the greatest number of 'at risk' candidates belong and the second category is those students with **personality traits** that have a tendency to experience anxiety and stress.

#### **Category One: 'At Risk' Groups**

Emer Smyth in her report "Junior Cycle Education: Insights from a Longitudinal Study of Students" (2009) mentions some of the groups that experience issues settling into secondary school. She notes "girls report taking longer to settle in than boys, newcomers (immigrants)

and traveller students take longer to adapt, and students who were already disaffected by their primary experiences have greater adjustment difficulties" (p. 2).

Ethnic minority groupings are becoming increasingly significant in secondary schools. Children from the Traveller Community, who in the past would have exited education in primary school, are now attending secondary school in greater numbers. Forkan (2006) reports that "the number of traveller children enrolled in mainstream post/primary education has risen dramatically over the last decade or so" (p. 79). Also with the influx of immigrants and refugees in the last 20 years, ethnic diversity in the classroom has expanded significantly.

In her paper Dr. Teresa Whitaker made reference to the Department of Education's statistical findings, "According to the Department of Education's Statistics Office (2011) newcomer children constitute 12% of the primary school population and 9% of pupils in post-primary schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2010, p. 217)".

Another 'at risk' group which warrants particular attention is those students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Each year there are a significant number of these students that make the transition from primary to secondary school. O'Brien (2017) in his article in the Irish Times commented that "It is now estimated that about 25 per cent of school-going children in Ireland have some form of physical, learning and emotional or behavioural difficulty".

#### **Category Two: Personality traits of Students**

It is important to consider each student as an individual. Personality traits and the ability to embrace change are key to the psychological impact that the transfer to secondary school

presents. According to J. Symonds there are two types of anxiety that are particularly associated with school transitions; "The first is children's transition anxiety which can be described as their worries about changing schools. The second is children's tendency to have the symptoms of an anxiety disorder, such as separation anxiety." (Symonds, 2015, p.41)

Also, the ability to make friends is a skill that some people have innately, but others lack. Lyons & Woods (2012, in Rubin et al. 2002) when they

*...found that socially shy or withdrawn children do not lack the social skills ...rather the confidence to act upon their knowledge and skills in social situations appears to hinder their interactions. Therefore, the social/peer dimension of self-esteem may be crucial in supporting children's successful transition to the new social situations of secondary school (p. 21).*

### **Actions to alleviate anxieties around school transition**

Awareness is the critical first step for all educational stakeholders. They need to be aware of the anxieties for students in the transition to secondary school, and of the potential impact these anxieties can have on a student's mental wellbeing. They also need to be aware of which students are most susceptible to these anxieties. However awareness is not enough if positive outcomes are to be achieved.

#### **What can Schools do?**

There are many activities, processes and procedures schools can put in place that would help to alleviate the anxieties surrounding a transition from primary to secondary school.

#### **Gathering Information**

The simplest and most effective use of resources will be the gathering of appropriate information relevant

to each child ahead of transitioning into the school. Sources for such information include: (i) primary schools, (ii) parents, (iii) educational psychologist reports (iv) the children themselves (v) the recently introduced 'Education Passport' reports. A member of the secondary school staff, usually the Year-Head designated to incoming first year students, should visit the primary schools some months before the students transfer. These face to face meetings allow for discussions around specific students and their needs.

### Changing Student Perceptions

Student anxieties are often centred round what they think might happen whereas the reality is generally totally different. Mackenzie, McMaugh & O'Sullivan refer to Lazarus' cognitive-transactional stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) when they say "that the perception of the event changes the outcome of the situation .....if the same situation was appraised as an opportunity for growth, then a positive and well balanced emotional response would follow" (Mackenzie, McMaugh & O'Sullivan, 2012, p.301). Schools can alleviate anxieties by introducing activities and programmes to change the view of transition from that of a threat to a challenge.

### Induction Programmes

Induction Programmes ahead of transition are some of the best ways to help students directly. They give students the opportunity to visit the school and to meet the teachers ahead of transitioning. This helps ease students' anxieties ahead of the move by familiarising themselves with their new school environment.

Another intention of induction days is to reduce student concerns by introducing them to 'new friends' ahead of the transition. As the saying goes 'strangers are just friends you haven't met yet'.

### Class Formation

Having visited the primary schools of the students, the Year-Head should have a 'database' on each student. In forming classes, secondary schools should consider some of the following:

- (i) Placing students with a friend from their primary school in their main class.
- (ii) Explore class dynamics vis-a-vis male : female ratio (if it is a mixed school).
- (iii) Separate students who had issues in primary school.
- (iv) I would also recommend mixed ability classes, thereby eliminating class distinction. A simple dynamic like this can go a long way to help develop self-esteem amongst these young adults.

### Buddy System

Evangelou, Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford (2008), found that "Older children in the school could assume the role of an 'older sister/brother' since children with other siblings adjusted better in this regard" (p. v). The 'Buddy System' allows for peer support from senior students to junior students and involves an all-inclusive approach in schools. I have seen first-hand the success of this small practical approach.

### What can Parents do?

In order for our young adolescents to become independent and accepted by their peers it is important for parents to acknowledge the need to 'step back' from their teenager. However this does not mean that parents have no involvement. Withdrawal can be as detrimental as being intrusive. Rice et al. in their report conclude "Parental expressions of warmth and affection have a long-term influence on how self-controlled children are which in turn affects how well they do at secondary school both in academic and behavioural spheres." (p. 21).

Parents need to be positive and supportive in their attitude to their child's move to secondary school.

Parents are also vital in the process of information gathering. Information such as a one-parent family, siblings, recent bereavements, etc. all give a more complete picture of a student and possible personal issues they are facing at the same time as their transition to secondary school.

### Conclusion and Call to Action

*Life is challenging, especially for adolescents on their way to adulthood. While we can't remove every difficulty from their lives, we can provide them with the knowledge, skills and tools they need to respond to these challenges in a healthy and constructive manner (Pieta House, 2014).*

For most students, the move to secondary school is a positive experience, in that they feel more grown up, have a variety of subjects and have more independence. As they move into secondary school they find themselves challenged emotionally; as their peer situation changes; challenged intellectually; as they face new subjects and state exams and finally; challenged by the bureaucracy of a new school system. For some these challenges can become overwhelming.

As a society we need to ensure that teachers are trained adequately both in awareness around transition and its implications for students and also in terms of best practice in dealing with the process of transition itself. It's a concern that there is neither a standardised approach amongst schools nor proven programmes such as 'induction days' and 'buddy systems'. In recent years, the Department of Education cut guidance hours in schools, which in my opinion, was a backward step. This indicated that academic attainment was the only

focus of education, without room for the equally (if not more important) social and emotional development of students. Thankfully common sense is prevailing and these cut backs are being reversed. A fresh look needs to be taken at the aims of education in our second level institutions and what we as a society consider to be the priorities for our children.

Primary to Secondary school transitions are events which test our coping abilities. Many of us have had first-hand experience of the tragedy that is the suicide of a young person and the question always asked is why? The complete answer we will truly never know. Maybe in part issues of self-esteem, anxiety and coping come together with others in what can be a mental 'perfect storm'. As a Profession of Counsellors and Psychotherapists, we must be a voice for the mental wellbeing of young people. A voice I believe that needs to be heard, particularly at this moment in time. This article is about that 'voice' – what it should say and to whom it should speak. We pride ourselves on our listening abilities but as a profession we must also be heard. The IACP's purpose statement is to create "...wider awareness of the value of Professional Counselling and Psychotherapy" (IACP, 2017) – maybe this is one area in which we can contribute to the wider debate?

**Helping adolescents realise that change is not to be feared, but should be viewed as a positive challenge, is a lesson worth teaching.** 

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