The Social Transition of Behaviourally Disordered

Students from Year 8 to Year 9

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Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Masters of Teaching and Learning Christchurch College of Education

July 2005
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Abstract

Transition to high school occurs for most students in New Zealand. In transition students face new experiences and their ability to cope is dependent on their personal skills as well as the preparation they receive from their primary/intermediate teachers. The students who are behaviourally disordered already experience difficulties in primary/intermediate school and their teachers suggest that they will not cope at high school (Hawk & Hill, 2000). Three primary/intermediate teachers and a high school Dean were interviewed to determine how Year 8 teachers prepare behaviourally disordered students for social transition to high school. The findings show that there is no consistent approach used and the strategies employed are dependent on the experience of the teacher as well as his/her personal philosophy along with his/her school’s philosophy. The teachers and the Dean suggest that some strategies used enhance the opportunities for pro-social interaction and others inhibit it. They also suggest that the transition process used does not allow time for dialogue between the sectors, which McGee (1987), MOE (2004) and Sutton (2000) suggest would be appropriate for the behaviourally disordered students entering high school.
Introduction

Literature has been reviewed in this section to highlight the process of transition from primary/intermediate schools to high school. First the review examines the broad issues faced by students when they transition to high school. This is followed by an examination of the social issues associated with transition. Finally the review focuses on students who are behaviourally disordered and seeks to determine the ways their social transition to high school is managed.

Transition in Schools

Each year, children in schools change from one year level to the next. Transition is the period of time that encompasses a change in some aspect of the delivery of education (Education Review Office (ERO), 1994; 2000). This transition is usually associated with a change of teachers and a change in classrooms, but can also be associated with a change in the location of the school (ERO, 1994).

The change in location (such as to high school) can be traumatic if not managed well. Children in area schools are often able to complete their education on the same site because their school ranges from Year 1 to Year 13. Their experience of transition is encompassed by a natural progression through the school. However, in other areas, children must change the school site at least once (ERO, 1994). Some Year 6 students have a change in location if they transfer to an intermediate school. These students, and others from full primary (Years 1-8), must then transition to secondary schools. In transition, students are faced with new schools, new teachers and new routines. Any break in routine or coming to terms with a new situation can cause anxiety for some students (anxiety is a state of ‘uneasiness of mind’ about future uncertainties). The provision for continuity in some form can help ease the impact of this transition process (Galton, Gray & Ruddock, 2003).

Curriculum continuity

In New Zealand a national curriculum provides learning continuity throughout school years (Ministry of Education (MOE), 2004). Continuity in learning can help reduce the level of anxiety experienced by students as they make the transition to high school (Galton et al., 2003). However it has been shown that the existence of the national curriculum has little impact on achieving continuity in learning (Sutton, 2000). Hawk
and Hill (2000) also suggest that the potential to provide a ‘seamless’ educational experience is not realised for students. It is suggested by their anecdotal evidence that teachers perceive there are separate primary and secondary curricula (MOE, 2004). These views indicate that teachers in each sector may have little understanding of each other’s role in delivering the curriculum.

Attempts have been made to achieve curriculum continuity. A strategy of ‘bridging units’ has been utilised to ease the transition process where teachers from each sector plan units of work that begin in the primary school and continue on during the first part of the secondary school year. Perhaps the most valuable by-product of the process is that the teachers from each sector work together to develop units, giving an opportunity for cross sector dialogue (Sutton, 2000). This dialogue provides an opportunity for teachers to relate their perspectives on transition matters to each other.

**Impact on students**

Although transition from primary/intermediate school to high school is done en masse, it still has repercussions for individual children. For example international research indicates there is a decline in academic achievement when students transition between schools (Akos & Galassi, 2003; Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis & Trickett, 1991; Mizelle, 1999; MOE, 2004). In New Zealand, some students have the choice to complete their primary education in a full primary school; others may choose to attend an intermediate school for years 7 and 8. Of note, those students who make two transitions prior to entering high school seem to experience two drops in academic achievement (Alspaugh, 1998, as cited in MOE, 2004).

Some children experience a change in attitude towards school after a transition has occurred, which is coupled with an increased interest in non-academic activities (Eccles & WigField, 1993; Wylie, Thompson & Lythe, 2001). Longitudinal studies conducted by Galton et al. (2003) used a Likert scale to determine students’ change in attitude to school. Students were asked to rate their enjoyment of school (whether they looked forward to coming to school), liking of some subjects, motivation (whether they intended to work hard in class) and satisfaction with their relationships with teachers and students. The students’ ratings were compared between the time they were in primary/intermediate school and after their transition to high school. The
results indicated a trend that the students found their experience of secondary school to be a less enjoyable experience than primary/intermediate school (Galton et al., 2003). The data revealed that their enjoyment stayed about the same at the initial stages of transition but dipped afterwards however the students continued to study for reasons of future employment as adults.

Another anxiety factor that impacts on students’ transition is the adjustment required to be made to the new learning environment. They face social and environmental changes (Sutton, 2000) during and after the transition process. The changes include the size of the school, which can affect the well-being of the student by being less personal (Barber & Olsen, 2004) and the fear effect of getting lost when moving between classes. Students also need to adapt to new routines and systems and go through a period of redefining their roles and expected behaviours (Hawk & Hill, 2000; Sutton, 2000). Students also have to manage their belongings and time in a different way (ERO, 1994; Hawk & Hill 2000).

Some successful strategies employed to alleviate the anxiety associated with transition include prior student visits to the high school during their primary years, orientation programmes, peer support programmes and letters home about the high school (Sutton, 2000). Orientation programmes are commonly employed to introduce and help alleviate the anxiety experienced by some students as they make the transition to the new environment (ERO, 1994; McGee, 1987; MOE, 2004; Sutton, 2000).

Setting up orientation programmes involves communication between principals, teachers, parents and students (ERO, 1994; McGee, 1987; MOE, 2004; Sutton, 2000) and enables students to spend time in the new environment prior to transition. Akos and Galassi (2003) found these sorts of support structures can have a positive effect on how students approach their time in the new environment. Some orientation programmes start during the year prior to transition while others focus on the first few weeks of high school (MOE, 2004).

Peer support programmes make use of senior high school students, who are assigned to a group of newcomers and act as leaders for an introductory period (ERO, 1994). Senior students undergo leadership training and receive ongoing support from the
teacher responsible for the programme (MOE, 2004) to foster relationships between
the seniors and the new students. The idea of the programme is to help year 9
students adapt to high school life, gain learning skills for academic success and gain
the skills, knowledge and confidence to interact with their peers in a positive way.

Cross sector communication
Cross sector communication is vital not only about curriculum content and pedagogy
but also about the individuals and their learning (Sutton, 2000). Primary and
intermediate schools that have students transition to high school are often referred to
as feeder schools. Sharing information between the feeder schools and the new high
school is an important factor in making a smooth transition (McGee, 1987; MOE,
2004; Sutton, 2000). Sutton (2000) emphasises that communication is more
productive where the number of feeder schools is less than a dozen.

Through shared information, a conscious effort can be made to address individuals’
transition issues. Their educational and social needs can be conveyed along with any
strategies that work with a particular student. Although there are a variety of ways in
which such information is used, teachers from both sectors value the liaison between
the schools (MOE, 2004).

The way information is used can also cause cross sector tension (McGee 1987;
Mizelle & Mullins, 1997; MOE, 2004; Sutton, 2000). The tension arises where the
information supplied by the primary/intermediate school is not utilised by the
secondary teachers due to it not being received, being ignored (Mizelle & Mullins,
1997; Sutton, 2000) or being distrusted (MOE, 2004). How that valued information is
shared and treated is a source of speculation for primary/intermediate teachers
(Sutton, 2000). McGee (1987) comments that contact between the two sectors is
often lacking and at times superficial. As part of the transition process the
primary/intermediate teachers are convinced that the secondary teachers do not read
the information (MOE, 2004). Also it was reported that primary/intermediate teachers
rarely sought feedback about the success of their students at high school (ERO, 1994).
These issues show a mismatch in perceptions that could be solved through cross
sector communication. For any continuity of curriculum and pastoral care,
communication is essential (MOE, 2004). A number of barriers make this communication difficult.

One barrier is where the high school has a large number of feeder schools resulting in a lack of time to communicate effectively. The number of school personnel to meet with and geographic location (Hawk & Hill, 2000; McGee, 1987) can also impact on the time needed for good communication. Sutton (2000) also suggests a barrier where the high school sees a need to boost student numbers. This ‘marketing’ intention hinders communication as recruitment takes priority rather than focussing on students’ need expectations and practice.

**Strategies for enhancing cross sector communication**

Hawk and Hill (2000) describe a positively received strategy when students wrote a letter to their previous teacher and described the new environment and acknowledged the help from their previous teacher to prepare them for the next stage in their learning. Hawk and Hill (2000) suggested that another strategy would be for high school teachers to visit and spend time in the primary/intermediate school classrooms and reflect on the learning programmes. McGee (1987) also suggests that the success of a transition programme is enhanced by activities that bring personnel from each school together to learn requirements concerning programmes, curriculum and courses. By gaining a mutual understanding of the curriculum requirements as well as the students involved in the transition, educators from both sectors would be able to develop jointly designed transition programmes. When transitioning, the more familiar teachers are with the previous and future systems the better able they are to prepare students for transition to high school.

In the United Kingdom, standardised transfer forms are used to record data about the students. No such forms are used in the New Zealand context, where there is variety in the type of data collected, how it is used and who sees it (Smith, 1999, as cited in MOE, 2004).

There are a variety of ways that information supplied by primary/intermediate teachers is used; some make use of the information combined with assessments to establish class placements, while others use a ‘fresh start approach’ where the
information is only used to identify ‘at risk’ students (MOE, 2004). The debate about information sharing is highlighted in international research by the popular concept of a ‘fresh start’ (Huggins & Knight, 1997; Waslander & Thrupp, 1995). A number of teachers prefer to find out for themselves and give the students a ‘fresh start’, rather than be influenced by past information. However a ‘fresh start’ alone, does not help and support students experiencing academic and social problems (‘at risk’ students) because ignoring the issue does not help the student learn academic and social skills (MOE, 2004).

**Teachers’ messages**

Some children come to high school with formed preconceptions based on information given by their primary/intermediate teachers (Hawk & Hill, 2000). At times the information can be misleading because the contact between the sectors is not as strong as it needs to be. These preconceptions about the high school environment can increase the levels of anxiety that students experience. Data collected from interviews and groups discussions with over 1000 New Zealand students revealed that teachers in primary/intermediate schools told their students that at high school the pace of work was faster, the work harder, there was more homework, the teachers would be less forgiving and that they need to improve their organisational abilities to cope at high school (Hawk & Hill, 2000). Contrarily to these messages, in Australia, Kirkpatrick (1992) used questionnaires with follow up interviews of 24 students during their last year at primary school and followed them to their first year at high school. He found that students perceived there is an increase in the volume of work but not an increase in the difficulty of the work. These perceptions led these students to believe that their success was attributed to the ease of the task and that their teachers assigned easy tasks because they had low expectations of the students’ ability. Other sources within New Zealand support the view that the work is not harder. Students find there are different expectations about their school work and some work is a repetition of what they have covered in previous years, making them feel that their capabilities are underestimated (ERO, 2000; Sutton, 2000).

One way to avoid preconceptions or misconceptions about a high school is for primary/intermediate teachers to give out positive messages about the environment rather than use “the next school as a threat or a means of controlling their behaviour”
(Hawk & Hill, 2000, p.8). The primary/intermediate teachers should be well-informed about various high schools if giving advice to parents about the high schools’ suitability. Hawk and Hill (2000) say the “teacher should not give advice about a school unless they have visited and spent time in it” (p.9).

There is also a reported alteration in the care provided, from a nurturing atmosphere in the primary/intermediate sector to a more mature one which emphasises independence in the secondary sector (MOE, 2004). During interviews and group discussion with over 1000 students, Hawk and Hill (2000) found one of the messages given by some primary/intermediate teachers is that the secondary teachers don’t have the time to care about them the same way that a primary teachers do. This affects students’ social transition.

**Social Transition**

Apart from academic issues, transition also has an impact on the child socially and attitudinally (Wylie et al., 2001). Relationships with others form the basis of social interactions (Dishion, French & Patterson, 1995). Social relationships are central to human existence and are fundamental to human development and a meaningful participation in the community (Meyer & Bevan-Brown, 2000). Pellegrini and Blatchford (2000) emphasise that children’s social lives in schools are very important and that they need to be socially competent to adjust to a new environment. Within the school context, this includes interacting with peers and adults as well as coping with the curriculum demands.

Social skills are a “set of competencies that (1) allow an individual to initiate and maintain positive social relationships, (2) contribute to peer acceptance and to a satisfactory school adjustment and (3) allow an individual to cope effectively and adaptively with the larger social environment” (Walker, Colvin & Ramsey, 1995, p. 227).

A sense of belonging, which comes from the social ability to initiate and maintain relationships, has been illustrated as being a protective factor towards the development of antisocial behaviour (Walker et al. 1995). The attitude of the teacher towards students in his/her care plays a pivotal role in endorsing support and
friendships among students and developing a sense of belonging. Therefore the teacher can play an important part in modelling acceptance and tolerance towards a diverse range of students. When a teacher acts in a positive way towards a student, other students will emulate that (Stainback & Stainback, 1990). A student who feels they belong will continue to be engaged in their schooling experience.

Disengagement with social and/or academic dimensions of school are precedents to dropping out of school. A strong correlation has been found between the likelihood of dropping out of school and experiencing difficulty with the transition to high school (Roderick & Camburn, 1999, as cited in MOE, 2004). Besides peers, social skills that are important to develop are relationships with high school teachers (Cocklin, 1999).

*Relationships with teachers*

Relationship building is a key to successful social transition and the inability to form these relationships can influence learning negatively. Cocklin (1999) conducted follow up case studies with students after they transitioned to high school and found that students noted a change in their relationships with high school teachers in comparison to the primary/intermediate school setting. The students said the teachers at high school think ‘you’re just a student’ whereas at their primary school their relationships with teachers were more like being a ‘friend’ (Cocklin, 1999, p.7). The students indicated that their liking of a subject was influenced by their liking of the teacher, eg. “I used to like English because the teacher was great fun” (p.10). Cocklin (1999) indicates that the students’ past experiences led them to have certain expectations about teachers and the learning and teaching processes. The students expected the environment to be a continuation of the experiences they had in primary/intermediate school, for example they expected the teachers to “go around and help everyone understand” (p.5). However, once at high school, the students noted a change in the nature of the teacher and the teaching style. The students noted that relationships with teachers were more hierarchical, focussed on issues of control and learning was more compartmentalised (Cocklin, 1999). A child’s failure to establish relationships with teachers can be a predictor for later school failure (Forness & Kavale, 2001).
Students transition from having a primary/intermediate school teacher who takes them for most, if not all, subjects to having up to six different teachers in one day at high school (Bates, 1998; Hawk & Hill, 2000) which means the time to get to know the teacher is sporadic. Relationships develop through continued exposure and interaction. However students do not have daily contact with their high school teachers and may only see them for three periods in a week. Secondary teachers also have the barrier of having a hundred or more new pupils to teach from different levels. Hawk and Hill (2000) comment, that high school students do not have one person who can actually get a view of them as an individual.

The student-teacher relationship makes a difference to what a student learns in class. If the student is behaviourally disordered then his/her relationships with his/her teachers are likely to be affected. The importance of the student-teacher relationship mentioned by Cocklin (1999) has been highlighted by a study in New Zealand, where Maori students are shown to be over-represented in suspension and expulsion statistics. Students who are suspended or expelled usually have a history of behavioural difficulties during their time at school (Church, 2003). Bishop, Berryman, Richardson and Richardson (2003) interviewed a number of Maori students and their teachers and asked what made the biggest difference to the learning process. The students answered that it was the interactions in class with their teachers as well as the face-to-face relationships they had with them. They liked to gain respect and get on with the teacher. They said they did well when the teacher had high expectations of their ability, and challenged and valued them. They enjoyed an environment where there was more interactive discourse, where the teacher “focussed less on student behaviour and more on student learning and their learning how to learn” (p.200) as opposed to the “dominant traditional pattern” (p.197). However Bishop et al. (2003) found that teachers did not see the relationship between student and teacher as being influential. They placed the influence with the child and his/her family circumstances. This is contrary to the students’ views expressed by Cocklin (1999) where a lack of time to develop relationships with the variety of teachers at high school, makes the transition to high school problematic.

During transition to high school students need to form many new relationships. There is interaction between students and teachers and between peers. For the relationships
to be successful students need socially based skills. With transition the students’ social networks are interrupted and this results in needing to form new friendships as they arrive from various primary/intermediate schools and are assigned to a class where they may not know any other class mates.

*Relationships with peers*

Having friends and a social group to mix with is essential for children developmentally. Acceptance by one’s peers influences a child’s feelings of self esteem and this peer acceptance can be a predictor for success at school (Felner, Primavira & Cauce, 1981, as cited in MOE, 2004). Furthermore, a sense of belonging and positive relationships impact on students’ self esteem, and their attitudes concerning school. A person’s self esteem develops from experiences and interactions with others. Self esteem is the way a person values their strengths and accepts their limitations whilst maintaining self respect and personal pride (Walker et al. 1995). Low self esteem can cause anxiety and relationship problems. Low self esteem correlates significantly with conduct disorder and antisocial behaviour patterns (Walker et al. 1995). If a child is experiencing social problems this can be a source of anxiety (Midgley & Macher, 2000).

Transition to high school comes at a time of change, teenagers are coping with the social and emotional aspects of puberty as well as establishing their identity as a young person (Berliner, 1993; MOE, 2004). The time of transition has been identified as being socially traumatic (Hawk & Hill, 2000) and upsetting (McGee, 1987). During adolescence, peer groups and social interaction become a more important focus for young people and the transition to high school can disrupt existing peer friendships (Barone et al. 1991). Settling socially into high school can take up to six months (Sutton, 2000). Anxiety can be a reaction to change and during transition it has been found that students are anxious about friendship and bullying issues, their school work, the size and complexity of the new school and new forms of authority and discipline (Measor & Woods, 1984, as cited in MOE, 2004). One of the fears faced by the students is about their participation and position in social networks (Berliner, 1993) for example losing and making new friends (ERO, 2000; Measor & Woods, 1984, as cited in MOE, 2004; Sutton, 2000). Behaviourally disordered
students are already experiencing friendship difficulties and the lack of a sense of belonging can have far reaching effects.

**Dropping out**

Disengagement with the social and/or the academic dimensions of school are precedents to dropping out of school. A strong correlation has been found between the likelihood of dropping out of school and experiencing difficulty with transition to high school (Roderick & Camburn, 1999, as cited in MOE, 2004). Their research used student records to determine the time during transition that could predict the likelihood that a student would drop out of school. They found that the students who experienced difficulty in their first year of high school had a greater risk of dropping out.

School failure or dropping out has been shown to impact negatively on their future career prospects (Conchas, 2001). Lashlie (2004), through her experience with the penal system, makes a personal prediction and suggests that for every extra month the school manages to hold onto the student, there is a reduced risk of that student ending up in prison. In many cases it is the group of students who are behaviourally disordered who leave school early (Church, 2003).

**Behaviourally Disordered and Social Transition**

In the New Zealand context, an ERO (2000) report on students in Years 7 and 8 highlighted the need to study “the progress of students identified as most at risk of not making a smooth transition to secondary school” (p.11). ‘At risk’ students have been identified as those students who perform poorly academically or display behaviour that is anti social and disruptive (Galton et al. 1999). Someone who is behaviourally disordered can also be termed ‘at risk’. Children with behaviour disorders display antisocial behaviour which inhibits the process of building relationships (Kazdin, 1997, as cited in Church, 2003) often resulting in rejection by the peer group and social isolation.

To be classified as behaviourally disordered in schools, children need to display the following criteria:

- the problem behaviour lasts over a long period of time,
• the behaviour can be externalised and take the form of aggression (these are signs of defiance or temper tantrums) or it can be internalised and present as withdrawal (people show signs of anxiousness or depression),
• the behavioural symptoms are outside what is accepted for children of a similar age,
• the behaviour has an impact on the child’s development and learning (Gorman, 2001, as cited in Westwood, 2004), and/or
• the behaviour is exhibited consistently in two different settings one of which is related to school (Forness & Kavale, 2001).

Dishion et al. (1995) highlight the interactive nature of antisocial behaviour displayed by behaviourally disordered children, “in childhood and adolescence, relationships with parents, siblings, peers and teachers are the basic ecologies within which antisocial behaviour is displayed, practised, learned, accelerated or suppressed” (p. 438). So it is these relationships and interactive experiences that help to shape social or anti social behaviour. Students who lack social skills have an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with their peers and teachers therefore they became isolated socially. This situation gives them minimal opportunity to interact, learn and practise appropriate social behaviour (Church, 2003).

The social skills of behaviourally disordered children are frequently poor and they experience difficulty in being accepted by their peer group and have trouble establishing positive relationships with their teachers (Heward, 2003). This tends to disrupt the development of friendships and a child’s antisocial actions result in rejection by the peer group (Church, 2003). A study of Caucasian and African American students reinforces the effects of antisocial actions (Murdock, Anderman & Hodge, 2000, as cited in McGee et al. 2003). These researchers concluded that students who were lacking in commitment to school and considered ‘at risk’ prior to transition, continued to present the same way two years later. Kazdin (1997, as cited in Church, 2003) concluded that children with antisocial behaviour can be permanently affected if the issues are not addressed by the time of adolescence. Therefore the last year of primary/intermediate school can be a vital time for intervention with these students.
School based intervention for behaviourally disordered students

Church (2003), after an extensive review of the literature, summarised common components needed for successful interventions with behaviourally disordered. The interventions for a smooth transition are listed below:

- Interventions should operate in all settings, including the home, school and peer group. The child should be in an inclusive environment where they are presented with socially appropriate examples in context.
- Any plan should operate school wide with the aim of preventing the child from being excluded from the peer group and
- There should be a reduction in the frequency of punishment because this is one main factor that drives antisocial development.

McGee et al. (2003) suggested “prior to transition, students need to be held more responsible for their learning, to be taught strategies for learning on their own, and to be provided with a more challenging curriculum, with clear goals of academic achievement” (p. 32). Students who are at risk require extra support. The indication is that intervention for ‘at risk’ students needs to be put in place prior to transition (McGee et al. 2003) and continue on after the transition occurs.

Extra support is available to teachers when dealing with students who have learning or behaviour problems. With the introduction of Special Education 2000, the New Zealand government provided Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) to all state schools (Glynn, 1998). These resource teachers work in a collaborative manner with the teachers to plan strategies that will enhance students’ educational outcomes, in an inclusive environment. In the strategy planning process, an individual education plan (IEP) can be created where the parents are included in the planning meeting and all parties agree on the strategies employed and their role in carrying out the plan. The RTLB work in a local cluster of schools with the Year 1 to 10 levels, thus are unique in that they work in both the primary/intermediate and secondary school sectors. Therefore the RTLB can help achieve the use of an ongoing approach beginning in primary/intermediate school and continuing on into the high school recommended by Galton et al. (2003) which could aid the transition experience for the students that are the focus of intervention.
Summary

Peer group and social interaction are important to adolescents (Barone et al. 1991) and peer acceptance can be a predictor for school success (Felner et al. 1981, as cited in MOE, 2004). Transition can disrupt existing friendships and for students who already have problems forming and maintaining friendships, this disruption can add to feelings of anxiety that transition can cause (McGee, 1987).

In an attempt to smooth the transition to high school, various strategies are employed; orientation and peer support programmes are commonly used as the transition occurs to enhance social outcomes and alleviate anxiety (ERO, 1994; McGee, 1987; MOE, 2004; Sutton, 2000). However for students who are behaviourally disordered, an ongoing approach is recommended (Galton et al. 2003). Students who lack the social skills required in the school environment are considered at risk to drop out of school. Early and effective intervention can halt the progress of antisocial behaviour, thereby increasing a student’s chances of remaining in school.

There is a lack of New Zealand based research on social transition of behaviourally disordered students. It is timely to examine what is being done in primary/intermediate schools to prepare this group for the transition to high school. There is a need to determine what teachers perceive they are doing, prior to and during transition, for those who have been identified as being behaviourally disordered.

The aim of this research was to describe how Year 8 teachers prepare children for the transition to high school in relation to the issues identified in the literature that are conducive to a successful high school experience. A particular focus was directed towards the teachers’ perceptions of students’ social needs with a special emphasis on those children who have been identified as having behavioural disorders.

The research question is “What do Year 8 teachers do to prepare behaviourally disordered students for transition to high school?”
Method and Sources of Data

This study used qualitative methodology to examine the perceptions held by Year 8 teachers as they prepare their students for the transition to high school. The study drew on a phenomenological perspective and was guided by the theoretical aspects of symbolic interactionism (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The perspective was used to determine the interpretation teachers placed on their actions concerning the social transition process of behaviourally disordered students. Symbolic interactionism examines the way people attach meaning to the social aspects of their world (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) as people’s actions are guided by the way they have interpreted the situation.

Informants

Three Year 8 teachers and one high school dean were interviewed to determine their understandings in the transition of behaviourally disordered students. The female primary school teachers were from different schools feeding into the selected high school and the male high school dean was responsible for the co-ordination of the transition to high school.

To select the informants, a high school was chosen that was outside the area where the researcher is employed but geographically close to the researcher’s home, to accommodate the constraints of time and travel. The process used to select the teachers and dean was:

1) A list of the primary/intermediate schools in the area surrounding that high school and that potentially feed into the selected high school was compiled.
2) The last two digits of the phone number of each primary school were used. The school was selected when those numbers corresponded to a number randomly generated on a calculator.
3) The Principals of the selected primary/intermediate schools were contacted via a letter of approach (see Appendix One) and the Principal then nominated the person to contact for the interviews. Two of the schools initially contacted were subsequently not used as the Principal indicated that the all students from her school went to another high school. The selection process was then repeated.
4) The Dean at the relevant high school was selected as that was the person responsible for the transition process.
Once selected, the informants were given an information sheet (see Appendix Two) and a consent form (see Appendix Three). Ethical issues were carefully considered. The researcher gained the informants’ consent to ensure that they were protected from harm (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) by being fully informed and having their identity protected. Ethical approval was granted from the Christchurch College of Education Ethics Committee.

Interview times were arranged after the consent form had been signed and returned to the researcher. The informants chose the venue for the single interview. The contact with the informants prior to the interview helped to build rapport (Janesick, 1994, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Three of the interviews were conducted at the informant’s place of employment and one interview was conducted at the researcher’s home. In line with the recommendation of Lofland and Lofland (1995) each interview was taped.

**Instrument**

Qualitative research methods were used to enable the researcher to provide a rich description of real life phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Interviews were chosen as this allowed the researcher to gather data that revealed the participants’ perspective (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). In this research, semi-structured interviews have been employed because as Neuman (1997) suggests, it is a way of getting information from a small group of people who currently interact. This method presented the researcher with the opportunity to find out how the participants act, think and feel about the situation (Bouma, 2000). Face-to-face interviews were conducted with four informants because the use of a number of informants means understanding of the topic can be reached (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Also the researcher was able to gather data that could be compared between informants. This is important because with each interview there is the potential for the information to aid the researcher in developing a “theoretical insight” (Bogdan & Taylor, 1998, p. 93) giving the study credibility.

A set of questions for the primary/intermediate teachers was established prior to the interviews (see Appendix Four) and another one was established for the high school Dean (see Appendix Five). The administration of standardised questions allows for comparisons to be made (Silverman, 2001). The questions were carefully designed to
obtain the information that would answer the research question; they were checked by an academic to help establish content validity. During the interviews the researcher sought clarification and asked for explanations to further explore responses as suggested by Neuman (1998). The questions in the interview schedules were mostly open ended.

A pilot study was conducted to test the interview questions (Silverman, 2001). This allowed the researcher to practise interviewing and to establish the content validity of the interview questions.

**Member checking**

Member checking enables the informant to read what has been written and to verify it as accurate thereby adding credibility to the study (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). A dictaphone was used to record each interview. After each interview the tapes were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. After the interview was transcribed the transcripts were returned to the informants within four days of the interview taking place to obtain respondent validation (Silverman, 2001). The informants read the transcripts to ensure that the words were an accurate record of the interview and returned them to the researcher in a stamped self addressed envelope.

**Data Analysis**

Data is interconnected in social settings (Hollday, 2002) and interviews provide thick description of what happens in context and related to the meanings that the informants attribute to their actions whilst working within the system. For this research, the data collected was organised into coding categories to help explain the informants’ meanings (Merriam, 1988).

During the interviews the researcher noted some emerging themes based on the information provided by the subjects. After the data had been transcribed the researcher read the transcripts repeatedly and made note of more emerging themes, concepts and patterns that recurred. These themes and concepts formed the coding categories into which the data was organised. These categories were then analysed to form the discussion (Merriam, 1988) and helped to explain common understandings.
of the informants’ perceptions of the social transition process for behaviourally disordered students.

**Limitations of the Study**

Due to the limited number of informants (four interviews were conducted) it is impossible to generalise the findings across other populations. Also the comparisons that could be made between the informants were limited due to the number of informants.

A dictaphone was used to record the interviews and the informants verified the accuracy of the transcripts indicating this was a true record of what was said. However there may have been some limiting factors due to probing inconsistency during interviews.

A weakness of interviews is that informants may not be upfront as to what they really feel or do and they may give responses more in keeping with what they think the researcher wants to hear. The questions were worded in a controlled manner in an attempt ensure the bias of the interviewer was not revealed. The questioning skills of the interviewer are developing. The first interview resulted in a number of comments that were not pertinent to the topic and the interviewer was inexperienced at redirecting the conversation back to the topic.

In the analysis the researcher’s own bias may make various aspects of the informants’ information more salient than others. Another researcher with a different philosophical perspective may take a different angle altogether. Some of the researcher bias was eliminated as the research was conducted in an area unfamiliar to the researcher. Therefore the perceptions held by the researcher that applied to the transition process in the area she worked in were inconsistent with what was encountered during the research. This added strength to the research.

The study may be prone to bias due to the limitations in the knowledge base of the researcher. In fact this researcher is more comfortable with quantitative research however a qualitative research method was chosen to expose this researcher to a different style of research.
Analysis: Discussion on Themes Emerging from the Interviews

The themes identified are used as headings in the written results and discussion as recommended by Holliday (2002). The data from the interviews are used as evidence for a developing argument. The interconnections between data are highlighted to extract the meaning and the relationship to the literature is made. The data analysis and discussion is combined because the relationships can be directly identified to the theme. Data extracted from the transcripts are identified in italics to ensure the process was transparent (Holliday, 2002). The finding from the analysis of the data, along with reference to the current literature, guides the conclusions and recommendations.

The Informants
The primary teachers had differing degrees of teaching experience as well as experience in teaching the Year 8 level. They all taught in full (Year 1 to Year 8) primary schools and their students fed into various high schools, including the one in this study.

Sally was a second year teacher who had taught in an area school the previous year and at the time of the interview was teaching a Year 8 class for a second year. Diane was an experienced teacher, in a senior management position, who had taught Year 8 for the past two years. Nancy was also an experienced teacher who had taught Year 8 for the past 15 years.

Their knowledge of high school systems and practices came from varying sources. Sally had attended the high school in this study, for her secondary education. Diane’s perspective was based basing on her understanding of her own child’s interpretation of the high school she attended. Nancy based her understanding from her rural high school teaching experience eight years previously. The results show that these teachers’ perceptions were not based on current high school systems of the particular setting into which their students transitioned.

Each of these teachers was responsible for preparing his/her students for transition to high school however there was no common view from the informants of what students
will encounter. Sutton (2000) suggests that cross sector communication is vital for discussing curriculum content and pedagogy as well as sharing information about individuals and their learning to make the transition smooth (McGee, 1987; MOE, 2004; Sutton, 2000)

John was new to the role of Year 9 Dean and had been in the role for the current year. His understanding of the transition process was guided by the process employed by the school in previous years. From his interview the Dean had minimal experience of spending time in cross sector dialogue.

**Information Gathering**

During the information gathering stage of the transition process, all of the teacher informants said they filled out a form supplying information to high schools. The information sought was regarding PAT scores, reading age, curriculum levels, personality clashes, behaviour rating, attendance, health and medication. Once the forms were received, John scheduled time to visit some schools to collect additional information about students. The primary/intermediate school selects who met with John.

Other than filling out the required form each teacher’s process of preparing for students’ transition differed especially for behaviourally disordered students. Nancy said the information sought concerning students with behavioural issues was about their behaviours, “What sort of behaviours they have been in trouble for – vandalism/straight naughtiness or graffiti, bunking... truancy they worry about because we have a truancy officer”. Diane supplied information about interpersonal relationships, “Information about social and those sorts of skills and people they shouldn’t be put with”. Interestingly, Sally was unsure of the transition meeting process for behaviourally disordered students, because in her school the senior teacher met with John and Sally had no input.

John’s view of the data he gathers was more in-depth than what the primary teachers reported they had supplied. He viewed that the data gathering process was used to identify academic levels, special needs, learning disabilities, behavioural issues, attendance, work ethic, and relationships with staff and peers,
...and any other concerns positive or negative they've got. So with that information we go through all that and it helps us with the classes and it helps us with picking up those that need teacher aide hours or need support in classes... it's trying to pick up who has learning difficulties or low reading age and things like that.

John suggested that the information supplied about behaviourally disordered students was generally about social interaction, “The primary schools obviously give their [opinion of] desirable and undesirable student. Who they should be and shouldn’t be with.” The information collected by John is used to identify the behaviourally disordered students and the behaviours they are exhibiting with no mention of strategies to deal with students. This use of limited information is highlighted in the literature as well (MOE, 2004).

There was no evidence of a systematic provision for an ongoing approach for behaviourally disordered students as was recommended by Galton et al. (2003). Galton et al. (2003) suggest starting interventions in the primary/intermediate school and continuing into high school. The data revealed that the only information gathered about behaviourally disordered students was identifying who they were and with whom to place them in classes.

**Contact Experiences**

The data suggested a contrast in how the information collecting process was conducted. Each teacher experienced differing levels of contact with John. In Sally’s school, she filled out a student information form and her senior teacher met with John when he visited. Sally expressed her frustration,

*The Year 9 Dean meets with the senior teacher at our school and she talks about the extra added things that you can’t really write down...I couldn’t get across what my kids [were like] on that form, it was a little tiny form ...but he basically expressed that he didn’t have time for [one to one] oral discussion*

Diane too conveyed her frustration of not speaking with John,

*I’ve never seen any of them I don’t expect it but there is opportunity to write things down you always get a form ... I would like to know where they would place them too.*
Diane rationalised that the lack of contact occurred because of the small number of students from her school feeding into that high school. Diane compared the contact she had with the other local high school and was left feeling she had not had the opportunity to communicate about the students to the school in the study, 

*We are just a small intake for them and as I said even if I have only got four kids going to [the high school] - to me they are as important as the kids going to [the other high school], so I feel we should be able to have a chat about their progress.*

After filling out the required form Nancy said that she was able to speak with John personally. Nancy expressed personal satisfaction with the meeting, “It is very good communication.”

In relation to numbers, John reinforced Nancy’s and Diane’s perception that not all schools receive the same contact concerning transition, “Obviously [we] can’t get around to all the contributing schools so we go to the major contributing schools”. The comment emphasises the point made by McGee (1987), MOE (2004b) and Sutton (2000) where the sharing of information is hindered due to the large number of feeder schools. The lack of contact was a source of concern for these teachers because they believed they had information that they needed to convey. Diane and Sally were especially concerned about the students who were behaviourally disordered, because they didn’t have an opportunity to personally convey their information to John. Sally was concerned that there was not an opportunity for her to share vital information about behaviourally disordered students and that the lack of information sharing would impact on the students, “they will get an idea of where they are academically but I don’t know how well [the form] would tell of their social needs and behaviour needs...the real behaviour ones will find it a struggle I think”.

The above examples emphasise the barriers to cross sector communication highlighted by McGee (1987) where there is a large number of feeder schools. The comments of the informant teachers endorsed that the high school contact is valued (MOE, 2004). The relationship between Nancy’s school which had a large feeder number and the high school was so good, that in the past the primary teachers had arranged meetings with high school staff to ask how they could prepare primary
students for high school. Nancy’s summary of those meetings was that the high school teachers wanted students to come to high school with the following skills, 

...organisational skills and their basic maths skills to be at a reasonable level; ...and to be able to use calculators; they would like them to read and write at a reasonable level, [and have] a 12-13 [year old] reading age; and write coherent sentences with capitals and full stops; and to be able to put things in order of events [sequencing].

It appears in the ‘wish list’ above high schools were not taking into account the diversity of students’ ability. Their focus seemed to be on academics with no mention of the social skills needed, as Sally suggested by behaviourally disordered students. One way the social skills knowledge could be achieved is through visits to the primary schools by the high school teachers as suggested by Hawk and Hill (2000).

John indicated that the transition process used data from the written forms, information from the interviews with the primary teachers he met and information supplied by the student and parents when they attended a one on one interview with the Principal. The one on one meeting is an opportunity to welcome the family to the school and for the family to communicate any relevant information personally.

Sally did mention her support for the one on one interviews as valuable time for the students and their parents to meet the Principal,

The Principal will ask questions and get to know them and the children look forward to that and they are quite excited about that and meeting the Principal. It’s effective in that respect because they probably won’t... unless for their behaviour, get that one on one with the Principal again because it’s such a big system.

Sally says that the only time the students would meet the Principal on a subsequent occasion would be because of their behaviour. The one on one interviews with the Principal are a way to begin to establish relationships between home and school. However if the Principal is subsequently as distant as Sally indicates, this could make the students feel that high school is an impersonal place as suggested by Barber and Olsen (2004) and that the Principal is more concerned about discipline than establishing ongoing relationships with the students in the school.
John also saw the value of developing cross sector contacts,

There's a role developing for more work within the primary schools... which is something we will develop next year. So that will encourage the positive strengths and growth between schools, high school and primary school and as we liaise more we can manage between the staff more and it is also better for the students... It's trying to develop and create those positive networks between schools.

Many researchers highlight the importance of the information sharing process between feeder schools and high schools to make the transition a smooth experience for the students (McGee, 1987; MOE, 2004; Sutton, 2000. The opportunity to share strategies that are already working for behaviourally disordered students is lost when that information is not shared and the data suggest that primary/intermediate teachers are concerned for the future of those students.

Contact after transition

One theme from the informants was that they would also like some cross sector dialogue after the transition. When asked about the contact after transition Sally indicated that the only information she got was from the students, "As far as I know you don't really [have any contact]. Unless you hear through gossip from the kids you don't really hear again." Nancy's statement implies that once the students transition, her involvement on a professional level ends.

Diane indicated, "often I see teachers and say, 'you've got one of mine', I ask how they are going and of course they don't know...I am interested in how they developed as a person and how they are coping with the rigour of high school".

This data indicates that the informants do want to follow the progress of their students, in contrast ERO (1994) indicated that the primary teachers rarely seek feedback about the success of their students once at the high school.

The student letter writing strategy suggested by Hawk and Hill (2000) would be an excellent exercise that would satisfy the curiosity of the teachers and aid the transition process for subsequent students. The letter writing exercise along would help the teachers obtain a view of the high school through their students’ eyes and help them become more familiar with the high school system, as approved by Sutton, (2000).
Cross Sector Contact and the Behaviourally Disordered Child

A practice valued by the primary teachers, used by the high school in this study was that after Year 8 students complete the entrance tests, they all return to the high school at a later date and have time with their future form class. Sally says,

They [could] see the classrooms... and what goes on and they get their form class well before...It's good because they know it early and they can get it in their minds and it's not like they are finding a whole lot of information on the first day.

Nancy also values another form of cross sector contact available to her students that was not yet operating for the other two teachers, “The high school has allowed us to use the computer lab down there and we go down once a week for an hour, which means every child gets a computer.”

This type of orientation used in the transition process (ERO, 1994; McGee, 1987; MOE, 2004; Sutton, 2000) is excellent. By meeting their new classmates close to the end of Year 8, some of the information overload that Sally alluded to may be alleviated, as well as some of the anxiety mentioned by Hill and Hawk (2000). By having weekly exposure to the high school during the year prior to transition, as is the case with Nancy’s school, the students become familiarised with the new environment, which can also help eliminate some of the anxiety experienced during transition (Sutton, 2000).

However the students who are behaviourally disordered do not have the same opportunities for exposure to the high school. Nancy says “We only have 28 kids, we leave behind 6, we only take down the kids we can trust which means those kids that misbehave get left behind.” The perception here is that the behaviourally disordered students cannot be trusted. Including them on an outing to high school could result in behaviour that would be inappropriate. Not only are the behaviourally disordered students missing the opportunity to have increased exposure to the new environment, as suggested by Ascher (1997, as cited in MOE, 2004) but they are also getting a message that the high school is selective in who is admitted. They can be left with a sense of not belonging, of being different, which impacts on their self esteem and could build feelings of resentment, to the detriment of making the social transition.
smoother. Excluding the behaviourally disordered students from a class activity is contrary to Church’s (2003) recommendations where he suggests that any plan should have the aim of not excluding a child from his/her peer group.

**School Information Usage**

John’s explanation (below) of how the information is used demonstrates that the high school identifies learning deficits and provides support which is an example of a successful strategy identified by Church (2003). However the information about whom the students should be grouped with cannot always be implemented due to the complexities of the high school systems, as John says,

> It would be nice to have them in this class or with this person or to keep this person away [because] they don’t work well together. We try to do that 90% of the time... It could be their levels are different. It could be they are choosing different subjects ...

Sally indicated that the high school relied more on their own testing than information she supplied and therefore her students put time into preparing for exams,

> I think the real weighting of the streaming is on their exam...I think they do look at the stuff we give them but I think that the test they give them is the real indicator... I don’t know if their English teachers would bother looking at what level they are in literacy I would be surprised if they do.

Nancy seemed quite clear on the value placed on the information supplied by her,

> Quite frankly they don’t want to know what they were like at primary school unless they were a problem. We send our files on to high school and they get shredded. They don’t keep them.

During a student’s time at primary/intermediate school, information is recorded on blue achievement cards. If a student leaves the school, the cards are passed onto the next school. In Nancy’s school the staff decided not to partake in a perceived futile exercise of filling out the blue achievement cards for the high school because,

> ... we do a report for the high school which goes to the high school and they come back and read it with us and we don’t bother filling in the blue achievement cards because they are never used once they leave primary school.
This treatment of the information was also found in the literature where primary teachers believe that the information they supply is neither read nor valued (MOE, 2004).

John implied that based on the information given there was a mismatch of what the primary teachers said about students’ academic levels, “First of all we are looking at the academic level they are operating at or whatever those teachers think they are operating at currently.” His implication here is that the levels supplied by primary/intermediate teachers may be inaccurate, which reinforces the teachers’ perception that high schools don’t fully rely on that information,

_We take note of what teachers say about them but we don’t rely 100% on that, for the fact that they might not get on with that primary school teacher but come to high school and it might be the change they need they don’t want that mill stone around their neck._

Like Bishop et al. (2003), John highlights the importance of positive student teacher relationships. John is fully aware that a relationship that is not harmonious can actually be the cause of behavioural problems. He also indicated that the information about the students’ ability could not be fully trusted, “[The primary/intermediate teachers] are obviously going to be trying to, not exaggerate... promote them so you have just got to take it with a pinch of salt. Most schools will say their kids are the top students.” The primary/intermediate teachers believe that class placement in the high school may be influenced by the information they supply. The examples of the teachers’ views of their contact experiences presented here are mirrored in the research (Mizelle & Mullins, 1997; MOE, 2004; Sutton, 2000). John’s attitude to the information is in keeping with attitudes found in the literature, where usage of the collected information is ignored (Mizelle & Mullins, 1997; Sutton, 2000) or distrusted (MOE, 2004).

‘Fresh Start’

John was concerned about the issue of sharing the information he had received and allowing that information to potentially label the students based on their past behaviour. For high school he wanted to give them a ‘fresh start’ (Huggins & Knight, 1997; Waslander & Thrupp, 1995),
At the start of each year we talk to staff about any particular students we may know to worry about, mainly to be aware of and have a background of. We let staff know that but we don’t want to tarnish the reputation of students coming in too much, by airing all their dirty laundry. Otherwise they don’t get a fair crack at starting fresh, but if there are particular issues then we do sometimes pick those up and talk to staff.

He was aware of the effect certain information may cause. One concern was the negative expectations that could develop and that could subsequently affect a student’s chances for success and the need for confidentiality,

*We don’t want it to be lying around for every one to be known because it’s a confidential situation between the Year 8 teachers passing it through to us. So you don’t want it lying around ...so it is using the information without branding them ...so it’s giving the fresh chance.*

John based his ‘fresh start’ view on his own experience as a teacher, who had been given information about a class prior to meeting them, ”I walked into the class not freaking out but going oh heck I’ve got this bunch of animals- those kids gave me no problems all year. I approached them in a different way”.

Though Nancy was concerned about the lack of use of information passed on to the high school, she too wanted the students she taught to have the opportunity of a ‘fresh start’. She also did not consult the supplied information about her students until part way through the year,

*The card I get for my kids I never read until halfway through the year. At the end of term one, I take them home and read what people have written before...and I tell the kids I don’t look at their cards. I would rather judge for myself and a lot of kids who have misbehaved in the past are fine, it’s like a clean start. You read something it pre-empts your opinion your decision of what that person is going to be like, a kid will live up to or down to your expectations.*

By taking part in some cross sector dialogue, each sector would realise that their actions are guided by similar views. The principle of a ‘fresh start’ or students living up to what is expected of them is something all the informants have in common.
Smith (as cited in MOE, 2004) indicates in the process of transition that there is a variety in the type of data collected, how it is used and who sees it. John seemed to have a dilemma between how he used the data and how it labelled students. John’s dilemma could be eliminated if he changed the focus from identifying the behaviourally disordered students to a focus on strategies that successfully manage them (Church, 2003). It seems that the concept of a ‘fresh start’ as mentioned by Huggins and Knight (1997) and Waslander and Thrupp (1995) where teachers don’t want past preconceived, negative information, is also present in the beliefs held by teachers in the study.

**Teachers’ Messages**

Messages given by primary/intermediate teachers to students have an impact on whether the transition is smooth or not. The primary teachers in this study gave their students a variety of messages. Nancy and Diane alluded to organisational skills,

> I know how independent the kids have to be to be ready, so all year long while I nag them like a mother all the work has to be in and I keep track of it and I keep them til it is done because otherwise they are not learning good life skills...I say to the kids you should be organised, you should have work in by due date, you should be able to think for yourself, you should be responsible for your own learning (Nancy).

Diane’s message (above) to her students contains a prediction that some students will find the demands of high school overwhelming.

Informants in this study indicated that they told their students that they don’t have the organisational skills to cope at high school. Diane felt that the students’ lack of organisational skills hinders them from taking responsibility for their own learning. McGee et al (2003) recommend that the students are taught the strategies for learning on their own as Nancy and Diane try to do.

The informants also gave messages about students’ personal skills and the level of maturity needed in high school. Nancy told one of her students “I said to B., you can’t go to high school because you are too babyish...I warned him over and over about high school and how he had to behave.” These sorts of messages use the high school as a threat as a means of controlling behaviour mentioned by Hawk and Hill
(2000) which could also potentially add to the anxiety the students feel towards the high school.

There are messages given to students about their relationships with teachers as Nancy points out,

[The students] go from having one teacher who controls most of their subjects to [having] eight different teachers... I have said to them I guarantee you will not get on with all your teachers and I say “look in the staff room I don’t get on with everyone on the staff” and “ask your parents they don’t get on with everyone at work either”. But it is a social skill of being able to work with them without actually having to like them and you have to learn to get on with those teachers and cope in their classes without having to like them you won’t be expected to have to like them you’ll only see them four times a week for a 40 minute period and that will be it. But it’s a fact of our schooling system and the way its run.

Here Nancy gives the message that interpersonal relationships are difficult. Nancy is making a general comment to all her students. However for the behaviourally disordered students who are already having difficulty building positive relationships, she is sending a message that they will not cope with a number of teachers.

**Relationships with teachers**

Students in Cocklin’s (1999) study indicate that there wasn’t enough time to develop relationships with the variety of teachers they had at high school. Nancy’s type of message gives the students the preconception that the high school teachers won’t value the relationship building process that Bishop et al. (2003) said were vital to a successful learning environment. The students in Bishop et al.’s (2003) study wanted to get on with their teachers in an atmosphere of mutual like and respect, however if students are getting the message that the teachers won’t value the relationship they are starting off with a misconception that may affect the initial meeting between new students and teachers. The behaviourally disordered students already experience difficulties establishing relationships with teachers and peers so the transition process may be difficult.
Sally perceived that the relationships with teachers in the high school would be an issue for the students going to high school,

*It's less intimate with the teacher* (at high school) — the teacher doesn’t get to know the student until the 7th form but when they are in year 9 it’s like they don’t have that same relationship with the teacher as what you do at primary school... there’s nobody going to be looking out for them at high school the way it happens at primary or intermediate school.

The alteration from a nurturing atmosphere in the primary/intermediate school to a more mature approach in the high school was reported by the MOE (2004). Hawk and Hill’s (2000) research indicated that the primary/intermediate teachers told the students that the secondary teachers do not have the time to care about them in the same way as they do. The messages and attitudes of these teachers could also add to the anxiety and could leave the students feeling anxious about their organisational skills (Hawk & Hill, 2000), class work and homework, as mentioned by Measor and Woods (as cited in MOE, 2004) and Sutton (2000), and also their future relationships with teachers (Cocklin, 1999).

In some instances the teachers in this study highlighted students’ inadequacies and some of the strategies they employed were aimed at developing students’ skills. The informants expressed frustration that the students were not fully prepared for the transition to high school and used the various messages in an attempt to make the students take the responsibility to change the situation. These messages could induce anxiety and be detrimental to behaviourally disordered students.

**Informants Strategies for Social Transition of Behaviourally Disordered**

This next section focuses on informants’ activities specifically related to the transition process of behaviourally disordered students. In preparation for high school it is important to look at different strategies employed for transition of behaviourally disordered students.

**Orientation**

The informants viewed the orientation day as an important part of students’ preparation for high school. At the high school studied, enrolled students meet together for a day and are involved in fun skill building and co-operative activities
with senior peer support leaders. On this day, students meet their future classmates for the first time. Sally says that by having the opportunity to visit the high school, students' levels of anxiety can be reduced,

*They go to that orientation day and they have the assembly and it's effective too. They get to see the classrooms and that and what goes on and they get their form class ... so they feel more comfortable and all that anxiousness is brought down on the first day.*

Diane’s students also went through an orientation, but Diane thought that one visit was not enough,

*I know the biggest thing that kids get frightened of is that they are going to get lost. So I think the best thing is to take them around more than once 'cause you don’t take it in, in one day.*

The informants are fully aware of the anxiety faced by the students which was also mentioned by ERO, (1994); McGee, (1987); MOE, (2004) and Sutton, 2000. They perceive that the orientation process is an effective way of diminishing the anxiety about getting lost which was also mentioned by Barber and Olsen (2004). John explained that he thought the orientation process alleviated some of the anxiety for the new students, he said “they are more comfortable about coming in as opposed to ‘oh I am going to get lost’”.

**Interchange**

Interchange is a strategy that is used by schools in the study where the students from one classroom are taught by another teacher or the students are regrouped, ability-wise, for other lessons. Interchange was seen by the informants as a way to get the students used to having a number of different teachers as in a high school setting. As Sally indicates,

*We do interchange in our syndicate and I think it's good because the children get a real knowledge of changing teachers and what it's like to move around and so we do that and in a sense it sort of a wee bit prepares year 8's for that sort of thing, because they will come to you and say “oh I don't like my interchange teacher” well it's like next year you are going to get 50 different teachers and it's too bad.*

The informants claim interchange helps the students to get an insight into the different ways they will be managing their time and belongings once they are at high school as
agreed by ERO (1994) and Hawk and Hill (2000) and exposed to what it is like to have many different teachers (Bates, 1998). The interchange process helps to identify those students who are struggling to form relationships with different teachers and identify the students who lack the interpersonal skills needed to interact with different teachers. Once determined, teachers could help the students acquire and practise the skills in a naturally occurring situation (Church, 2003).

**Buddies**

The use of buddies, or pairing up with another student, is one type of tutoring that provides one on one assistance within an inclusive environment as is suggested in by Church (2003). Using peers to work with other students helps increase the level of pro-social contact for behaviourally disordered students. They are interacting in the classroom setting with students they may not interact with at other times, thereby giving the opportunity for relationships to develop. The peer is there to support the student and explain things in terms that the student understands.

Diane uses buddies to provide one on one assistant for some students, which addresses social and academic needs at the same time,

> I will put them with a buddy and the buddy has usually finished [his/her] task or on the end of [his/her] task and [he/she] will sit alongside and monitor [him/her] and that way there is more of an interaction between the children – [students] are more likely to ask their buddy things than they are to ask me things and... they can’t ask me all the tiny little questions ’cause I don’t have the time to answer them.

**Organisational and time management skills**

All informants mentioned the need to train Year 8 students in organisational and management skills especially for transitioning students with behavioural disorders. For example Diane says,

> I ask them constantly “are you organised?” “Do you have the right materials?” It’s just training that thought pattern all the time ... all through the year I am giving them tasks that are far more individual so they have to be thinking ahead and planning.
Visual strategies were used by Diane and Nancy to aid the students’ organisational skills, Diane said,

*I do a lot of visual stuff—we talk about step 1 step 2 step 3 this is what you need to do and it’s left as a visual check list – have you done this – if you can’t do this now, go on and do this one but make sure you have done all of them.*

Nancy uses various punishments to get the students to accept responsibility for their learning as a way to prepare them for the expectations of high school,

*I have to get them to stay in. After the due date they lose marks ‘cause that’s what will happen at high school and they are the ones who miss out on their play times, lunch times and yet they have the same amount of time…*

These informants endeavour to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning which is in line with what the suggested preparation of behaviourally disordered students for transition (McGee et al. 2003). However keeping students in and deducting marks are forms of punishment. Church (2003) recommends that the amount of punishment should be reduced when dealing with children who have antisocial behavioural issues because punishment can build resentment. Students do need to see there is a consequence for not completing work however punishment alone will not help the student to develop the organisational skills to necessary meet deadlines. There is a need to empower the students with the necessary skills for a successful transition. The cycle of punishment for incomplete work impacts on the social opportunities for students. If they are kept in to complete work then they miss out on being included in the start of team games and end up having to ask to join in and take the risk of being socially rejected (Church, 2003).

Nancy’s perception about the level of support the students might receive at high school guides her actions,

*In terms of getting them ready for high school I do think Year 8 teachers do it better. We teach them independence or try to or we should be teaching them independence and we should be teaching them responsibility for their own learning ‘cause that’s the biggest change when they get to high school.*

Hawk and Hill (2000) also suggest that high school teachers do not have time to care about individual students. It is another example of giving the students the impression that the high school is an impersonal place (Barber & Olsen, 2004). However, this study shows that the informants are attempting to prepare their behaviourally
disordered students for high school, but based on the above example the students are getting a message that they will be on their own thereby increasing their anxiety in transition.

**Parental involvement**

Partnerships with parents are vital when dealing with students with behavioural disorders (Church, 2003) and is an important approach that teachers can take to help improve students’ preparation for transition. Good communication between home and school can mean that any strategies employed are administered consistently in both settings thereby increasing the chance of a successful outcome. Diane felt frustrated with the type of support one of her student’s parents gave,

*His parents support his avoidance by supplying him with notes. I have written that down though I can’t do any thing else but describe what is happening. [This] home is supporting this child’s habit.*

In contrast, Nancy enlisted parental support in a number of ways. She found that by building relationships with parents a partnership could develop to address issues faced by behaviourally disordered students,

*... parents and teachers, working together can make a big difference to a kid and once the kids go- the first step is huge... I contact parents to join the battle and parents are always supportive because they want their kids ready for high school as well... I know the parents really well I can drop in and have a cup of coffee I go to see them at home and be equally comfortable in their home. To me I achieve far more by going sitting and having a coffee and go round after dinner and the kid’s there and they see me there. It’s very good contact with the community.*

For another behaviourally disordered student Nancy set up a successful communication system with the home,

*We rigged up a note book system where I would write very bluntly what his behaviour had been like and how he had coped with things that had upset him and by the end of the year I gave him my blessing to go off to high school.*

Nancy’s concerns about students’ ability to cope at high school were diminished due to the home and school interaction. Church (2003) stresses the importance of home and school partnerships to halt antisocial development, however only one of the primary teachers focuses on developing the relationships necessary. Sally did not
mention any contact with parents at all. Nancy was not only comfortable visiting parents at home she also set up a communication system recommended by Church (2003) to give parents daily feedback on the child’s behaviour. Nancy found the partnership and communication to be a very successful strategy to help prepare the behaviourally disordered student for the transition to high school.

With other students, Nancy recommends to some parents that their child be retained in the primary school, for example,

One, who was young..., I suggested to his dad that we keep him back for a year, at the mid year interview- [the child] threw himself on the ground and stomped his feet and called me all sorts of names.

With another child in the past Nancy said,

I kept him for two years and that was really good because we taught him to use a calculator in Maths and we taught him social skills in terms of getting on with other children learning to say no not just going with the flow, [and to] read at a 7-8 yr level.

This advice given by the teacher is opposite to Church’s (2003) where he recommends any plan should aim at preventing the child from being excluded from the peer group. Here Nancy is recommending a complete removal from the child’s peer group. So instead of transitioning with his peers this child would transition with a group he had only one year to get to know. In this instance the teacher’s philosophy and opinion was used to persuade the parents to take a course of action that is not supported by educational philosophy.

A strategy employed to provide support for teachers and aid links with parents and is the Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour service. RTLB, work with the teachers of students from Year 1 to Year 10. Together the teacher, the RTLB and the parents plan strategies to address the issues presented by students with academic or behavioural concerns (Glynn, 1998). Although all of the informants had students they were concerned about, only one had used the RTLB resource. The RTLB teachers can work effectively in the area of transition, these teachers are in a unique position as they work with teachers of students in Years 1 to 10 and therefore work in both the primary and secondary sectors. If the RTLB is working with the teacher of the
student in the primary/intermediate school, they can potentially continue the work with the new set of teachers as the student make the transition to high school.

Each teacher had an individual style in preparing the students they teach for high school. Sally relied on the systems that were already in place like orientation and teaching the students to take the exam. Diane focussed on work related skills of being organised, managing time and reflection. Nancy employed parental involvement, skill building, the RTLB service, threats, punishment and retention to help prepare her students. The students with behavioural disorders were prepared differently dependent upon the experience and world view of the teacher.

Although the teachers were able to identify the difficulties the students would face as they transition to high school they had a variety of ways address the need. Sally took the view that all students should be treated the same so throughout the year she struggled with developing a co-operative classroom. Diane focussed on skills for academic learning and when there was a conflict where the parents would make excuses for their child Diane would record the lack of co-operation. Nancy readily contacted parents because she believed they had similar goals to her own.

Some strategies that are employed are in conflict with the messages from the literature for example the use of retention and leaving students out of a class activity which exclude the students from their peer group. This exclusion affects the students’ sense of belonging and impacts on the behaviourally disordered students who are already experiencing socialising problems (Church, 2003). Other strategies that were used like co-operative learning and the use of buddies can promote inclusion and assist in developing social skills.

**Relationships with Peers**

Diane predicted that the students who had social problems in the primary/intermediate school would end up being friendly with students with similar issues once they had transitioned to high school,

> They won’t make friends easily unless they are people doing similar behaviours they won’t see past the behaviours because they will akin themselves to those sorts of kids...kids who opt out really.
Nancy agreed and commented that,

_They become social outcasts, the adage birds of a feather flock together, the social misfits fit together which is bad because they get a gang mentality, unfortunately that’s the beginning. when they get support in the bad behaviours the bad behaviours continue – they are all losers together because that is seen as their label they all live up to that label._

These comments are indicators of the rejection behaviourally disordered children face. As Kazdin, (1997, as cited in Church, 2003) states children with behaviour disorders display antisocial behaviour that inhibits relationship building which subsequently results in rejection by their peers and social isolation.
Conclusion

Successful transition for behaviourally disordered students is dependent upon the strategies employed by teachers. The way behaviourally disordered students are prepared for high school is dependent on the teacher’s experience and philosophy. Some strategies like co-operative learning and the use of buddies can address social and academic issues in a positive manner. Whereas other strategies like punishing and excluding students can build the students’ resentment and inhibit their opportunities for social interaction (Church, 2003).

The information sharing during the transition focuses more on identifying the students who are behaviourally disordered than learning about and continuing with the strategies already in place. There is little opportunity given for cross sector dialogue (McGee, 1987) to discuss and transfer the information about interventions that are already in place. Primary/intermediate teachers value the opportunity to ‘hand over’ their students. However they find the passing of information via a form alone is unsatisfactory. They feel that a personal meeting enables them to pass on important information about the management of behaviourally disordered students. The lack of time is a barrier to successful information sharing, which impacts on the successful social transition of behaviourally disordered students.

The high school in this study is actively attempting to make the social transition of students smooth, by reducing students’ anxiety. The students visit the high school on a number of occasions and meet their class at the end of the year prior to the transition. Some primary schools have the opportunity to have regular exposure to the high school during the year prior to transition. However the behaviourally disordered students who would benefit most from this exercise are excluded.

Primary/intermediate teachers have perceptions about the high school and they give their students messages that increase their anxiety. The messages portray the high school as an impersonal place and imply that teachers will not care about the students in the same way nor value the student teacher relationship the same as primary/intermediate teachers do (Hill & Hawk, 2000). Primary/intermediate teachers need to be made aware of the importance of addressing antisocial behaviour prior to adolescence (Church, 2003) and ensure that their actions don’t increase the anxiety.
experienced by students as they transition to high school. Some of the strategies like interchange help simulate the high school setting and the difficulties the students will face. However the opportunity to teach relationship building skills is not taken and the students are left with the message that they will not cope at high school (Hawk & Hill, 2000).

John also held perceptions that the primary/intermediate teachers were actively vying to get their students a place in the top stream and this caused him to view some of their information cautiously. The Dean had a dilemma concerning the sharing of information about behaviourally disordered students, between allowing the information to label the students and giving the students a fresh start.

**Recommendations**

Cross sector dialogue about the strategies that are employed for the behaviourally disordered students is important to make the transition to high school smooth (Sutton, 2000) because the successful strategies can be continued on into the high school.

Dialogue and visits across sectors by the primary/intermediate teachers (Hawk & Hill, 2000) can eliminate some perceptions that the primary/intermediate teachers hold and pass on to their students with messages that increase their anxiety about the transition to high school. Future research is required to examine ways to improve cross sector dialogue around the transition to high school for the behaviourally disordered students. Another recommendation would be to examine the strategies employed in primary/intermediate schools, for behaviourally disordered students, to determine how readily they could be transferred to the high school setting.

Primary/intermediate teachers predict that the behaviourally disordered students will have problems transitioning to high school. They are concerned about their students and would like to have some contact after the transition. The feedback they receive could be a starting point for reflecting on the strategies that they employ when preparing behaviourally disordered students for high school. Future research could determine how this could be done.
References


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Appendix One
Letter of Approach

Andrea Hutchings
19 Petries Road,
Woodend 8255.

Tel: 03 3122257
E-mail: andrea.hutchings@xtra.co.nz

30th June 2004

Dear (Principals’ name)

Thank you for considering to participate in my study which will examine “what do Year 8 teachers do to prepare behaviourally disordered students for transition to high school?”. The participation of your staff will be appreciated and this letter is to gain your permission to approach a teacher of a year 8 class.

This study is being undertaken as part of my study towards a Master of Teaching and Learning degree at the Christchurch College of Education. Throughout this study I will be supervised by Dr. Lynn Kidman a lecturer at the College of Education.

The general aim of the study is to understand the processes and strategies used in the primary setting to aid the transition to high school for the population and to determine what is done to help the students identified as behaviourally disordered. This will require the teacher to be interviewed for about 45 minutes and for them to verify the data once it has been transcribed.

All data gathered from the interviews will be treated as confidential to me, my supervisor and the person who does the transcribing. It will be stored securely on my computer and on back-up discs as well as in a locked filing cabinet. The name of your school and personnel will not be identified in the write up of the research. The Christchurch College of Education Ethics Committee has reviewed and approved this study.

Please be aware that you are able to withdraw from the research at any stage and the data collected will be destroyed. If you have any queries concerning this study please contact my supervisor or myself. If you decide to take part in this study please complete the consent form that is attached to this letter and I will be in contact to establish which teacher to approach and subsequently gain their consent. The College requires that all participants be informed that if they have any complaint concerning the manner in which a research project is conducted, it may be given to the researcher, or, if an independent person is preferred to:

The Chair
Ethical Clearance Committee
Christchurch College of Education
P. O. Box 31-065
I will be extremely grateful if you do decide to participate and I look forward to meeting you.

Yours sincerely

Andrea Hutchings

Supervisor: Dr. Lynn Kidman, Christchurch College of Education
Phone 345 8713          lynn.kidman@cee.ac.nz
Appendix Two
Information sheet

Andrea Hutchings
19 Petries Road,
Woodend 8255.
Tel: 03 3122257
E-mail: andrea.hutchings@xtra.co.nz

30th June 2004

Dear (teachers', Dean’s name)

Thank you for considering to participate in my study which will examine “what is done in the primary school setting to prepare behaviourally disordered students for the transition form year 8 students to year 9”. I have already approached your principal who has given me permission to approach you.

This study is being undertaken as part of my study towards a Master of Teaching and Learning degree at the Christchurch College of Education. Throughout this study I will be supervised by Dr. Lynn Kidman a lecturer at the College of Education.

The general aim of the study is to understand the processes and strategies used in the primary setting to aid the transition to high school for the population and to determine what is done to help the students identified as behaviourally disordered.

The study will involve an interview lasting about 45 minutes which will be taped with your permission. Next the data from the interview will be transcribed and you will be given two copies one for you to verify that it is an accurate record of the interview and one for you to keep.

All data gathered from the interviews will be treated as confidential to me, my supervisor and the person who does the transcribing. It will be stored securely on my computer and on back-up discs as well as in a locked filing cabinet. The name of your school and personnel will not be identified in the write up of the research. The Christchurch College of Education Ethics Committee has reviewed and approved this study.

Please be aware that you are able to withdraw from the research at any stage and the data collected will be destroyed. If you have any queries concerning this study please contact my supervisor or myself. If you decide to take part in this study please complete the consent form that is attached to this letter and I will be in contact to establish a convenient time to conduct the interview.

The College requires that all participants be informed that if they have any complaint concerning the manner in which a research project is conducted, it may be given to the researcher, or, if an independent person is preferred to:

The Chair
Ethical Clearance Committee
Christchurch College of Education
P. O. Box 31-065  
Christchurch  
Phone: (03) 3482059

I will be extremely grateful if you do decide to participate and I look forward to meeting you.

Yours sincerely

Andrea Hutchings

Supervisor: Dr. Lynn Kidman, Christchurch College of Education

Phone 345 8713  lynn.kidman@cee.ac.nz
Appendix Three
Consent Form

I understand that by participating in this study I agree to:

Meet with the researcher and be involved in an interview lasting about 45 minutes.

Have the interview audio-taped and transcribed.

Read, comment on and return a transcript of the interview.

I understand that by being involved in this study:

I can withdraw from the study at any stage and any data I have contributed can also be withdrawn.

All the data will be treated confidentially.

My identity will be protected as will the identity of the schools represented by me.

The information will be stored in a secure location, available only to the researcher, the transcriber and the supervisor.

The data will be kept for up to three years and will only be used for the purposes of this research.

Name: ____________________________________________

Signed ____________________________ Date ____________.
Appendix Four
Teachers’ Interview schedule

How long have you been a teacher?

How long have you been working with year 8 students?

Tell me about the qualities of a year 8 student.

Is there a range of abilities or social needs within the class? Can you explain your classroom situation?

How do you prepare the year 8 students for the transition to high school?

Are all students prepared in the same way and if not what is done differently?

What has proven to be the most effective technique for the transition to year 9? Why?

Does the school have a policy on transition? What does it say?

What contact do you have with the secondary school regarding transition?

What sort of contact programmes do the students have with the local high school during their year 8 year? Is this effective? Why or why not?

What are factors that act as barriers to smooth transition? What works well?

What information is collected about the students by the secondary school? Is this done in an efficient and effective way?

Is there information sought about the individuals in the class? If so, what?

How do you think the information you give to the high schools is dealt with?

Are there any students who you consider will have problems as they transition? Please describe them and explain why you think this?

How do you think students with behavioural disorders will cope socially at high school? Why?

Do you envisage social, emotional or motivational issues for the behaviourally disordered students?

Would you suggest to the dean, ways to help these students with the transition? Please explain.

Do you have any contact with the high school after the transition? Is any extra information requested about the behaviourally disordered students?
Appendix Five
Deans’ Interview schedule

How were you selected to be the year 9 dean?

How long have you been a dean?

How do you contact the teachers of year 8 students? What information do you request? How is it used in the transition?

Are you able to obtain all the information you think is necessary about the students? What other information would be beneficial to have?

How do you use the information you have collected from the primary school?

What can aid or hinder the information sharing process?

What can help make the social transition to high school successful?

Do behaviourally disordered students get identified? How? Are they treated any differently from their peers?

What factors make the transition problematic for the behaviourally disordered students?

In 2003 did you have contact with the year 8 students? If so what was it like?

How were the year 8 students familiarised with the high school?

How did these students adapt socially?

When considering the behaviour disordered students what is needed to make the transition successful?

Is there anything you would suggest to the next year’s dean?