Students in Transition: Teacher as Researcher

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to hear the stories of eight Grade 10 students about their change from Grade 9 to Grade 10 in order to (1) find out what they found difficult or helpful; (2) to find out, based on their stories, what can be done to improve the transition; and (3) to help students examine the difference, as defined by Hertzog and Morgan (1999), between a one-time event over which they have no control, and an ongoing process of transition that can be reflected upon and improved when understood. My goal was to explore with the students the meaning attributed to this transition. In addition, I have worked with them to generate possible ways for improving the transition process. From this perspective, my intent was to engage students in a qualitative participatory research project that was relevant to their lives. I reflected upon and made sense of my observations and experiences for the purpose of applying them to my practice as a teacher. This research was important to me as a teacher who helps students adjust to a high school culture which, in many ways, is different from the junior high culture. The two forms of transition, systemic and developmental, proposed by Queen (2002) were readily apparent in my research. The participants I spoke with all reported varying degrees of anxiety about what to expect from teachers and how they might meet what they perceived to be the higher expectations of teachers and parents. This kind of anxiety is relevant to the category of systemic transition developed in Queen's (2002) study. Again, in keeping with his findings, most of my participants seemed to experience the second level of transition which includes such issues as: how to establish friendships with peers, how to fit with peers, how to make decisions about drug and alcohol use.

Dedication

To my students

Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1

Introduction

I have always loved teaching and I have always been curious about why and how some students find school transitions difficult or why it is that some move through transition at times with greater ease. For several years I have worked as a high school teacher in rural Prince Edward Island. At present, I teach chemistry and Grade 10 science. Over the years, I have taught students who have been labeled general, academic, and advanced. Always, I have attempted to relate to students as if labels were not important, and yet, I am aware that labels exist and that they can work to shape in both good and bad ways the experience of students. Over the years, I also have observed many students who seem to experience some stress while moving from junior high school to high school. From experience, I know this time of transition can be arduous for some. Until recently, however, I have not theorized, nor written about, my observations of what I assume occurs when students move from junior high to high school.

While completing my course work for a Master of Education Degree at the University of Prince Edward Island, and while thinking about possible areas of research, I made two major decisions. One, after considerable deliberation, I decided to research the transition process experienced by students who were moving from junior high to high school. In part, this first decision was made because the professor, a scholar with an expertise in quantitative research methods, left the University of Prince Edward Island to begin work elsewhere. His departure meant that I then made a second decision that impacted on the first: I decided to use a qualitative, rather than quantitative, approach to

frame the transition process I wanted to study. As a teacher schooled in science methods, this later decision would prove to be the more difficult of the two. At the same time, this decision opened me to a whole new way of doing research, and it provided me with a way of examining aspects of my own teaching practice, ways that may not have emerged had I approached the research in a quantitative way.

In undertaking this research, I joined a growing body of teachers and educators who refer to themselves as practitioner-researchers. These are educators who deliberately generate knowledge in the context of improving practice (Pritchard, 2003). Cole and Knowles (2000) describe this process as reflexive inquiry--to understand how the personal influences professional practice. Consequently, inquiring teachers are intent on revealing theory/practice dichotomies for the purposes of self-awareness and improvement. Understanding and closing the theory/practice gap is, from their perspective, the focus and intent of reflexive inquiry. By attending to teachers' reflexive inquiry explorations and articulations researchers can enhance their understanding of teaching practice and, by extension, the abstracted theories they develop (p.11).

According to Cole and Knowles (2000), teachers are traditionally understood to be practitioners and receivers of knowledge, but not developers or generators of knowledge. In other words, teachers are expected to work with the knowledge of others and apply it to their own situations. However, Cole and Knowles believe that teacher research provides a means to acknowledge teachers as knowers and knowledge producers. Moreover, they question what is not known when teachers do not have a central role in theory building and knowledge-related inquires. From their perspective, the

autobiographical nature of teaching means that it is impossible to understand teaching without understanding the teacher; that it is impossible to understand the practice without understanding the practitioner; that it is impossible to understand knowledge apart from the knower (Cole & Knowles, 2000). My role as practitioner-researcher, then, was to reflect upon and make sense of my experiences and observations as both a practicing teacher and as a practicing researcher.

Cole and Knowles (2000) see autobiographical or reflexive inquiry as valuable for a number of reasons. First, it represents a process by which teachers can gain insights into themselves as developing professionals. Teachers have the opportunity to pull out narrative threads that hold together interwoven fabric of their past, present, and future lives and their personal and professional selves. Second, developing autobiographical accounts is a useful way for teachers to examine their teaching and research practices. Finally, autobiographical writing, they assume, is a powerful vehicle for enhanced learning. Cole and Knowles believe that writing about personal philosophies, theories, principles, and skills related to teaching and education can be helpful to discovering and examining the extent and substance of one's continuing learning. From their perspective, teaching is an autobiographical act. They propose that to teach is to develop a living text. Thus, the observations and reflections gleaned from research where researchers are consciously present may provide a living text for others to learn with and from (p.14).

In keeping with their assumptions about research, my goal was to understand the transition process in at least two ways. One, I wanted to hear the stories of student participants who experienced the move from junior high school to senior high school.

Two, I wanted to include some of my own stories of learning, teaching, and schooling in the research process. Specifically, I wanted to understand my own experience of doing qualitative research while simultaneously broadening the knowledge base of what it means for students to experience a defined transition process.

Isakson and Jarvis (1999) suggest there is an absence of descriptive studies to theorize and illuminate the patterns and practices that students experience as they attempt to negotiate the change from junior high to high school. My aim, then, was to describe this change, both from my perspective as a teacher and from the perspective of selected students. My objective was to understand the practices, the factors, and the supports given to students as they experienced the transition process. My purpose was not to generalize findings. Rather, my goal was to describe and theorize the transition process as I experienced it with eight participants. Specifically, my aim was to discover through writing, and through research, how I understand transition.

In keeping with Isakson and Jarvis (1999), I examined the impact of everyday experiences of students who negotiated the tension between parental involvement, friendships, teachers, student personalities, and school culture. Experience told me that factors such as parents, friends, teachers, school culture, and student motivation can impact upon students in a significant way and that these factors play an integral part of students' everyday experience. This everyday experience may include finding class rooms, adjusting to new courses, to teachers, to friends, and to new expectations, and to conflict. I wanted, then, to understand these experiences by talking with eight students who agreed to participate in the study. And, I wanted to understand these experiences by writing about

it in a qualitative way from my perspective as a teacher/researcher.

The intent of this research was to address three key questions: What does the transition process mean to the participants experiencing it? What can educators do to facilitate better the process? What did it mean for me to engage in the research process as a practitioner-researcher?

The study was designed to hear the stories of eight participants, all of them Grade 10 students. Using the narrative inquiry approach described in Cole and Knowles (2000), an approach that values story-telling and stories, my goal was to hear students' stories of a "new" life in Grade 10. This was done through observation, through an interview process, through a focus group process, and through electronic mail. This layering of methods is discussed in more depth in Chapter Three. Overall, my intent was to examine through story, the trials, tribulations, and successes of eight Grade 10 students.

The Setting

In order to describe the transition process of eight high school students, I collected data at one Atlantic high school. Because this research was designed to also examine my experience as a practitioner-researcher, I chose to study eight students in the school where I teach. Like many practitioner-researchers engaged in qualitative research, I assumed it was a research advantage to chose participants with whom I already had some kind of relationship. Most of the participants, for example, were students I got to know better as their classroom teacher. This relationship also meant I had ongoing opportunities to talk with participants outside the two specific occasions where I interviewed them formally, and where I gathered data while observing them in a formal focus group process led by

another educator.

The school where I did the research is located in a small Canadian city in Eastern Canada which, including surrounding areas, has an approximate population of 40,000 people. The majority of students who attend the school live close to the school though many are bused from even more rural communities. The main industries that support this population are agriculture and Public Service. The school population is approximately 1,100 students. The majority of the students who attend this school are white, middle-class, and largely are descendants of Scottish, Irish, and English settlers. This means that the school is without the obvious advantage of a more diverse ethnic population available to schools in areas such as would be found in Halifax, Nova Scotia. This also means that the research I compiled does not reflect the richness and diversity, as well as the problems and issues, common to larger and more diverse schooling environments. As well, the histories of the teachers at this school represent a limited population. For example, there are no visible minorities on staff. Understandably, then, the stories collected in this study will not necessarily reflect the stories of students who live in larger cities such as is discussed in the work of educators such a McLaren (1989) whose work is much broader in range. Similar to the small population from which I drew on to do this research, I also began this study with a rather small view of what it means for students to experience the transition process. In other words, I saw, researched, and read about what I knew-- the white, middle-class experience.

Teacher as Practitioner-Researcher

I love teaching and I love teaching in a school where I feel close to many of my

colleagues. Many of us have worked together for several years, traveled together in schooling events, and celebrated together, and shared meals together. But the greatest satisfaction for me has always been the relationships I have been able to develop with my students. I am not sure, however, if they realize how much they mean to me. Because the school where I work is large, I am aware that there are students who have fallen through the protective net of teachers. But, many teachers I know consistently work hard to hang on to students for as long as possible when such students show signs of stress. Like these teachers, my goal has always been one of working to keep students interested in school, even when circumstances make it difficult for them, or me, to do so.

The building where I work is generally clean and fresh. Graffiti is kept to a minimum and posters in corridors are rarely defaced. This suggests to me the level of respect students have for their school. On occasion, there is vandalism in the school but few students believe this to be "cool." Most teachers who work here, I assume, would say that "we have it very good." The school has a proud tradition of competitive sports teams, an excellent music program, and a wide range of curriculum choices for students of differing abilities. Students with special needs are integrated into regular classes. There is an active Home and School Association, and parent/teacher conferences are always well-attended. This does not mean, however, that every parent and every student in this school does not have their fair share of serious issues.

As a teacher, my greatest and ongoing challenge has been to recognize if, and when, conflict exists. Because I value peace and harmony, I look for it in others. I recognize, therefore, that I may not always see inequities such as gender, race, or class

difference when it occurs. This does not mean that I excuse social injustice, nor that I am unwilling to see it. Rather, I know from what I am learning through this research that there are many hidden curriculums in schools and that I, as a teacher, must work consciously to examine and understand, if not change, the practices and conflicts that are not obvious. As Giroux has pointed out "...knowledge must be made meaningful to students before it can be made critical" (Giroux, as cited in McLaren, 1989, p.226). In a similar manner, knowledge must be made meaningful to teachers before it can be understood in a critical way.

Prior to writing this thesis, I had never reflected in writing on the biases and assumptions that shape me as a practitioner-researcher. In keeping with the work of Cole and Knowles (2000), and in keeping with their views about teacher research, I decided it was important for me and the work of this thesis, to return to and describe my own experience of moving from junior high school to high school.

The year was 1970. I was entering a rural high school much like the one in which I now teach. My first memory was one of fear. This was my first experience of going to school with apparent strangers. I recall being assigned to class 9B. To my dismay, my best friends were assigned to 9A. While I had a few friends in 9B, most of my classmates were new to me. I was shocked to discover that I would see my closest friends only during lunch hours. As well, my teachers were new to me, and worst of all, I was terrified of the principal. To make matters worse, many of the male students in my class seemed aggressive and some, I observed, were even two years older than me. Because I was quite small in stature, I was easily intimidated by the presence of older and bigger students.

As a junior high school student, I had always ranked in the above-average range. In my first high school report in October, I was ranked 47th in all of Grade 9. I was devastated. A second report in early January ranked me 14th. My home room teacher proudly congratulated me in front of the whole class when he handed my report card to me. I was elated. I don't recall at that time if I thought about what it might have meant for the student who took my place as 47th. Looking back, I now try to imagine what caused my turn-around and subsequent success. From the perspective of time, I wonder if it was this experience that led to my current research interest in understanding the transition process of students moving from Grade 9 to Grade 10.

In retrospect, there were probably several factors that worked to make my high school transition experience a successful one. For example, my parents never chastised me for that first report. Instead, they encouraged me to improve. They must have sensed that I was having a difficult time. Neither of my parents had much formal education, but I know that they recognized the value of education, and for this reason I wanted to please them. Very early that year, I also developed positive relationships with all of my teachers. I recall being particularly fond of my home room teacher. Further, I soon discovered that my teachers cared about me and because of this I worked hard to please them and to please myself. I also cultivated new friendships, particularly with students who appeared to be successful. As my fear abated, and as I developed supportive relationships, and new skills, my academic performance improved. For those students who are privileged to find support in school this story may be a common one. Within a larger Canadian context this kind of success may not be common. This larger context, I assume, is an area for future

research.

Thirty-three years following my own transition experience, I set out to understand the experiences of eight students as they moved from junior high to high school. As a teacher/practitioner, I am aware that it is a privilege to have both the time and the opportunity to study the experiences of others, particularly in an academic context. Hopefully, the combined stories told in this research will enhance current and ongoing studies of transition.

Overview

The transition from junior high school to senior high school can be both exciting and apprehensive for students. Many students are excited about the future, while at the same time, they have some genuine concerns about how they will adjust to a new environment. According to Dornbush and Ritter this move involves disrupting relationships with teachers and peers at a time when teenagers are becoming more independent from their families and experiencing less parental involvement in their schooling (Dornbush and Ritter as cited in Schiller, 1999). Some, however, find the transition to high school liberating, in that it gives them the opportunity to redefine themselves socially (Kinney as cited in Schiller, 1999). Others, by contrast, are devastated by the relatively competitive and impersonal environment of high school, a situation which may lead to student drop out (Cotterall as cited in Schiller, 1999). Whether liberating or destructive, the transition to high school is a critical juncture in teenagers' social and academic lives (Schiller, 1999).

Queen (2002) lists the major student concerns during transition. These include concerns about:

- getting to class on time, finding lockers, dealing with crowded hallways, and getting lost.
- being picked on, teased, or victimized by other students.
- being safe in the new school.
- understanding difficult courses.
- rigid rules and strict teachers.
- being able to make new friends in a new setting. (p. 21)

From Queen's (2002) perspective, there are two distinct forms of transition in the move from junior high to senior high. One form of transition is systemic and built into the structure of the public school system; the other is developmental and incorporates physical, intellectual, social, and emotional change that students undergo. Systemic transition includes the process of changing to another level and way of schooling. Developmental transition involves the various types and stages of development. With reference to this second form of change, Potter, Schlisky, Stevenson, and Drawdy (2001) suggest that as they mature, adolescents experience, and exhibit, a wide array of intellectual, physical, emotional, and social changes, ranging from the ability to think more critically and at higher levels to exhibiting immature behavior because their social skills lag behind their mental and physical development. In addition, the pressure of making a high school transition can be amplified by the developmental struggles they are facing as adolescents. Letgers (as cited in Queen, 2002) found that many ninth-graders have a difficult time adjusting to the demands of high school resulting in lower grades, disciplinary problems, higher failure rates, and feeling of not "fitting in" to the high school community.

Goal of Research

While drawing from Queen's (2002) research, my goal was not to explain student experience from within specific locations or typologies. Rather, the purpose of my research was to hear the stories of eight grade 10 students about their change from Grade 9 to Grade 10 in order to (1) find out what they found difficult or helpful; (2) to find out, based on their stories, what can be done to improve the transition to Grade 10 and (3) to help students examine the difference, as defined by Hertzog and Morgan (1999), between a one-time event over which they have no control, and an ongoing process of transition that can be reflected upon and improved when understood. As a practitioner-researcher, one who deliberately generates knowledge in the context of improving practice, my goal was to explore with the students the meaning attributed to this transition as well as working with them to generate possible ways for improving the transition process. From this perspective, my intent was to engage students in a qualitative participatory research project that was relevant to their lives and to mine as a practitioner-researcher. This research was important to me as a teacher who wants to help students adjust to a high school culture which, in many ways, is different from the junior high culture once familiar to them.

A focus group was key to this study because it enabled me as a practitioner-researcher to hear their stories in an objective setting (with a helper). At the same time, a focus group was used to enable students to hear and learn from their peers and possibly understand the commonalities and differences they share. Some of the students who agreed to participate in the focus group were invited to participate in an in-depth follow-

up interview with me.

Grade 10 Students in September

Every September in our school, the new Grade 10 students arrive. More than 300 new students arrive into a new school. For most of these new arrivals, I suspect that there is a fair share of nervous anticipation. They are excited, yet apprehensive about what they will experience. No doubt, many students ask the same questions: Who is my home room teacher? Who is in my classes? What are my teachers like? How many of my friends will I see?

These are exciting questions for many. But these are also questions that carry a certain amount of anxiety and uncertainty. How will I find my classes? Which bus do I get on? What happens if I can't do my homework?

As their teacher, I know this state of confusion and anxiety experienced by Grade 10 students. I have observed these students, for example, searching for room 300 on the second floor of the school when the first number in 300 should tell them that they should be on the third floor. This confusion is no doubt related to the anxiety experienced when entering a new environment for the first time. I assume that, for most students, the experience must be similar to entering a new country for the first time. What are the customs? What is the culture?

Two seemingly minor experiences will help to illustrate the difficulties faced by new students. For example, one student did not have her science book in class. When I asked why, she replied that she did not know how to open her locker. I explained how to open the lock using a sample combination and then directed her to go to her locker and try

to open it. At that moment, another student asked to leave also, because she had the same problem.

A colleague related a second story to me. At 3:10 p.m., the fourth period ended. This was the end of the school day. A student asked my colleague, "What do I do now?" The student was told that he could go home now. Upon hearing this, he replied, "Where do I go to get my bus?"

Parents also experience anxiety. Their children are now in the "big" school. There may be a feeling that the new school is impersonal and the teachers are a little less forgiving than the junior high teachers. Many parents are intimidated by the size of the new school and they are fearful that their child may "fall through the cracks" (Williamson & Johnson as cited in Queen, 2002). Also, there are many new subjects taught by teachers whom the students do not know. How can these teachers give a child the same attention he or she received last year? This anxiety may be amplified for parents of children with special needs or concerns. The beginning of the school year marks a "fresh start" for teachers as each one wants to get into his or her routine. It takes a couple of weeks to get all of the names straight and to get the students into the customs of his or her class. For teachers of Grade 10 students there is an effort to promote the school culture. Students should now embrace their new school and disconnect from the ways of their old school.

When parent-teacher interviews are held in October, many parents are pleased to find that their child is progressing well and enjoying high school. For some parents, the experience has not been pleasant. The social life of their child is good, but academically--not all is well. Every teacher has heard the following statement at least once: "My child

was an honour student in junior high." Some students find the academic transition easy while the social transition has been difficult. On the other hand, some find the academic transition difficult while their social circle has expanded. There are students who find the transition difficult in both areas.

Theoretical Frame Used to Examine the Transition Process

The concepts espoused by Havighurst (as cited in Potter, Schlisky, Stevenson, & Drawdy, 2001) among others, are important and helpful to an understanding of the needs of adolescents who are experiencing transition into high school. In particular, Havighurst proposed that stages in human development should be considered in terms of the development tasks that are part of the normal transition from childhood to adulthood. From their perspective, adolescents do not progress through the developmental tasks one at a time, and not all students are at the same stages at the same time. All of these stages are compounded by outside influences such as media, family circumstances, sexual confusion, and so forth.

Research demonstrates that adolescence is an engaging stage. Havighurst (as cited in Potter et al., 2001) list several of the challenges which adolescents encounter. Young people are challenged to:

- Adjust to a new physical sense of self;
- Adjust to new intellectual abilities and cognitive demands;
- Expand verbal skills;
- Develop a personal sense of identity and establish independence from their parents;
- Establish vocational goals;
- Develop stable and productive peer relationships;
- Learn to manage their sexuality;
- Adopt a personal value system;
- Develop control over their actions and behaviour; (p. 53)

Queen (2002) also notes that the critical transition from middle school or junior high to high school occurs while students are experiencing the pain and anxiety of adolescence. These are the two forms of transition, mentioned earlier, at work. This combination of two transitions, occurring simultaneously, may easily be overlooked by educators. Queen suggests that the most important task of the adolescent during this time is the search for identity. From his perspective, this search occurs in three primary ways: by developing values, by developing pride in one's achievements, and by developing close relationships with peers. Thus, the challenge for educators is to structure a school program that allows students to search for their identity and be successful academically and socially.

Based on his assumptions about how to construct a school program, Queen (2002) describes the various roles of teachers and principals. He suggests that principals must establish guidelines that make the transition easier, set the success of all new students as a top priority, investigate behaviour management programs that meet the needs of new students, and involve parents in the transition phase early. Teachers must build a team atmosphere, cultivate appropriate personal relationships with students, be proactive in establishing parental relationships, communicate with both the middle school and upperclassman teachers to create a seamless transition, and seek assistance of support personnel when a student does not appear to be handling the transition successfully.

Queen (2002) has written extensively about how to ensure a successful transition from junior high school to high school. Specifically, he argues that there is a need for staff members to accept the students regardless of their varying circumstances. In harmony with this idea, Hertzog and Morgan (2001) suggest that educational professionals

at middle level and high school must not blame each other for perceived shortfalls in instruction and work together to help students find success as they move from one level to another. According to Schiller (1999), students'entrance into more socially and academically diverse environments in high schools creates the potential for either individual advancement or failure. From Schiller's perspective, viewing the transition to high school as an event in students' lives does not illuminate why the educational trajectories of some students remain on course and others deviate dramatically. However, if as Hertzog and Morgan (1999) suggest, transition is a process, and not an event, my overall goal was to examine, from my perspective as a practitioner-researcher this dual process as viewed from the perspective of eight Grade 10 students. If Queen's (2002) view of these two transitions is correct, then my goal was to understand better how both processes are experienced in the lives of real students. Ideally, I set out to discover new ways to make the transition process more positive and less intimidating for students.

Limitations of Study

The findings of this study are not generalizable in the statistical sense. However, the stories told in this research may be recognized and understood by students and educators alike. From this perspective, both groups may discover new ways to understand, organize, and possibly change the transition process. The size of the school where the research was done may mean that some of the findings may not be pertinent for either smaller or larger schools. I might suggest that the more serious limitations of this study are twofold. Because the students in this study come from a rural as well as a common ethnic history, the findings of this study may not be immediately relevant to larger and more

ethnically diverse populations. A second concern that arises directly from the first is the fact that the literature I chose to study may best support my own way of seeing, and being a teacher in a school that lacks a larger ethnic diversity. The second concern is discussed again in the concluding chapter of this thesis. The strength of this research, I suggest, may be found in the richness of the data I have discovered and written about as a result of engaging in reflective inquiry.

Definition of terms

Below, I define the terms commonly used in this research. These include:

Adolescence: This period of life includes the time from puberty to maturity. In this study, the term will refer to children of ages fourteen to sixteen.

Transition: Transition usually refers to a change from one state to another. It may also refer to an evolution. In this study, transition will refer to changing schools -- from junior high to senior high.

Senior High: In many districts, particularly the U.S., senior high school includes Grades 9-12 . In many districts, senior high is composed of Grades 10-12. The senior high in this study includes Grades 10-12.

Junior High/Middle School: Junior high, in many areas, comprises Grades 7-9. In other areas, it is made up of Grades 7-8. There are several variations of middle school such as Grades 4-6, Grades 5-7, etc. In many areas of Canada and the U.S., there is no middle school. There may be grades which are common to both schools - probably Grade 8. Since there is no consistency in the composition of junior and middle schools, it is important for readers to appreciate that the research topic is *transition* from one school to another- - to

change levels. Whether the change is made from Grade 8 or from Grade 9 is not to be considered pivotal.

School Culture: School culture refers to the belief system of the school. This system may include beliefs about homework, dress, behaviour, attendance, extracurricular activities, community relations, and so forth. Often the school culture is reflected in the traditions, rituals, banners, codes of conduct, etcetera of the school.

The abovementioned terms are key to the discussion of transition in this thesis.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Based upon my experiences as a high school teacher, I know that the movement from junior high school to high school is arduous for many students. Research indicates that there is an absence of descriptive studies to theorize and illuminate the patterns that students experience as they strive to adjust to this change. My aim in this study was to describe this change and to understand the practices, supports, and factors which work to support this change. In keeping with the work of Isakson and Jarvis (1999), I examined the impact of everyday experiences as students negotiated the tension between parental involvement, friendships, teachers, student characteristics, and school culture. In this study I aimed to address three questions: What is the transition experience? What can educators do to facilitate it? What is my part in the process?

Background

According to Isakson and Jarvis (1999), surprisingly few studies have focussed on the move from junior high school to high school. The transition to high school received little attention from educational researchers before the 1980 because it was not viewed as a problem for either students or schools (Schiller, 1999). The research that has been done regarding the transition to high school has reported negative effects in terms of decreases in Grade Point Average (GPA) (Barone et al.; Blyth et al.; Felner et al. as cited in Isakson and Jarvis, 1999), attendance (Barone et al.; Felner et al. as cited in Isakson and Jarvis, 1999), and extracurricular participation (Blyth et al.as cited in Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). Isakson and Jarvis also suggest that increased emphasis on social interactions in high

school may create an environment where fitting in and belonging serves as an added source of pressure. In addition, students in high schools may also experience change in that there is now more pressure to perform well than there was in junior high school. Some students encounter difficulties during the transition to high school from which they never recover (Schiller, 1999).

Whereas these environmental changes are devastating for some students, other teenagers seem to blossom socially and academically following the transition to high school. This transition brings increased opportunities for students to find meaningful and rewarding peer relationships among the diverse adolescent groups or cultures found in most high schools (Kinney as cited in Schiller, 1999). Becoming self-reliant and achieving a sense of autonomy, expanding relationships with peers, and gaining the ability to have intimate friendships are three related developmental tasks of middle adolescence (Kimmel & Weiner as cited in Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). High school is the context in which many developmental challenges will be negotiated. There are social challenges and autonomy issues, among others.

According to Isakson and Jarvis (1999), the social challenges of a move to a new school are important to consider. There may be disruptions in friendships and significant changes in social support. Juvonen (as cited in Isakson & Jarvis, 1999) report that as students move to larger school environments, they tend to label each other based on affiliations such as "preppie," "brain," or "burnout." As a result, a so-called preppie and a brain who were friends in junior high may not be able to successfully cross these relational lines once they enter high school where labels may be more dominant (Juvonen as cited in

Isakson & Jarvis, 1999).

While describing the stress which adolescents experience, Isakson and Jarvis (1999) also describe the stress which parents undergo. Parents are often middle-aged and experiencing their own developmental issues at the same time their adolescents are entering high school and trying to gain autonomy, which may negatively influence both parent and adolescent well-being (Pardeck & Pardeck as cited in Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). Parental well-being is likely to play a significant role in the quality of parenting and the relationship parents have with their adolescents. Supportiveness from parents and measures of parental issues, such as the stressors they are experiencing and their ability to cope successfully, are also needed to fully understand relations between parental well-being, support offered to ones' adolescent, and student adjustment during the transition to high school (Isakson & Jarvis).

The Students' Multiple World Model

In an attempt to examine the types of students who are making the transition to high school, Phelan, Cao, and Davidson (1994) present *The Students' Multiple World Model* which identifies four types of students. This model directs attention to the nature of boundaries and borders as well as processes of movement between worlds. The model is concerned with the ability to make a transition to school and classroom environments successfully. I refer to these types because, for many, they will serve as recognizable examples. The types are as follows:

> - Type 1 students experience worlds that are congruent and transition smoothly. Moving from one setting to another is harmonious and uncomplicated. Many of these students are white, upper middle-class, European American, and high achievers.

> - Type II students are those from different worlds, but cross borders successfully. They may differ in culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and/or religion. They perceive differences but utilize strategies to manage crossings successfully.
>
> - Type III students have not either learned, mastered, or been willing to adopt strategies for successful transition. Like Type II students, they define socioeconomic components of their family, peer, and/or school world as distinct. They experience difficulty in adjusting as they move across borders. Queen (2002) characterizes these students as ones who adapt in some circumstances but not others. They form isolated groups choosing to stay in the lower track. Their primary concern is their inability to understand the subject content, which causes frustration. Teaching styles are unsuited at times to meet student needs. Students may adopt coping strategies to deal with the frustrations. These strategies include copying work, creating distractions, and withdrawing from others.
>
> - Type IV students, according to Phelan et al. (1994), resist border crossings or transitions. This type may be characterized as having values, beliefs, and expectations that are so discordant that students perceive borders as insurmountable and actively or passively resist transitions. Low-achieving students are typical of this type, although high-achieving students who do not connect with peers or family also exhibit Type IV patterns. Many of these students have given up. Their continued failure serves as a reminder that they are incapable of achieving success within school. They would report that they receive very little help with regard to course selection of career possibilities. (p. 418)

While Phelan et al. (1994) admit that the types they describe do not necessarily include all students, they do characterize generally the patterns of students in their study. I believe that the authors do give one a perspective on the different historic backgrounds or circumstances of students who enter into high school.

Assessing the Adjustment to High School

Isakson and Jarvis (1999) assessed the adjustment of adolescents in an Illinois school as they made the transition from eighth grade to the ninth grade year in high school. The sample included mostly Caucasian, middle-class, students. They hypothesized, based on previous transition studies, that compared to eighth grade, social and academic adjustment, GPA, and attendance would decrease during the transition to high school and

that stressors would increase.

To assess the influence of parents during the transition, the parents of the adolescents also participated in this study. Isakson and Jarvis (1999) argued those parental well-being variables such as stressors, mid-life identity concerns and adaptive coping would provide a more complete picture of how adolescents achieve the transition. Sui and Willms (as cited in Falbo, Lein, & Amador, 2001) also recognized the significance of parental influence when they measured the extent to which parents discussed school at home, communicated with the school about the student, supervised the student's life after school, and participated in school events.

In Isakson and Jarvis's (1999) research, support for expected decrease in GPA was found. They argue that it is important for parents and educators to realize that a decrease in GPA is to be expected as a part of the normal transition into high school. This achievement loss is corroborated by Alspaugh (1998). Furthermore, attendance rates improved during the initial transition into high school and then dropped to a significantly lower level when compared to the beginning of high school. In the opinion of Isakson and Jarvis (1999), the initial improvement in attendance was possibly due to the school exerting expectations upon the students in transition. The additional freedom of a less restrictive attendance policy may not begin to negatively impact their attendance rates until closer to the end of Grade 9.

In addition, the results gave partial support for the increase in stressors during the transition, particularly during the first semester. Stressors significantly decreased from the beginning to the end of that year. Support from friends increased, contrary to the

hypothesized decrease in support. Finally, there was no support found for the expected change in sense of school membership, autonomy, or perceived support from parents.

It is significant that Isakson and Jarvis (1999) found that the more stressors a student reported at the beginning of ninth grade, the lower their sense of school membership at the time. However, perceived support from friends helped to increase the sense of school membership. Based on my experience, these points may seem quite obvious but they need to be theorized because as educators we will need to build support systems for students in transition. A more comprehensive understanding will give educators insight into how to support these students.

The Influence of Peers

Adolescents' relationships with peers also affect their beliefs about the value of school and their own academic competence (Murdock, Anderman, & Hodge, 2000). For some adolescents it may not be "cool" to conform to the expectations of teachers or parents. It is my experience that friends are an important influence. In class, students arrive and leave with, sit near, and work with their friends. It is quite possible that a whole semester will pass and students will not know some of the students in the class. This is due, I believe, to the observation that students seem to circulate within a small group of friends.

Berndt (1999) proposes that peer influence can best be understood in the context of general theories of social influence and interpersonal relationships. His theoretical framework focusses on two pathways of friends' influence that differ in whether their central constructs refer to the characteristics of a student's friends or to the features of the

student's friendships. One pathway is concerned with having friends with specific characteristics. The idea here is that people are influenced by the attitudes, behaviours, and characteristics of their friends. According to Berndt, students' adjustment to school can be negatively or positively influenced through this pathway. Berndt's second pathway is concerned with the effects of friendships that differ in important features such as their quality and their stability. He argues that high quality relationships have a high frequency of positive interactions. In addition, his research shows that these relationships are stable.

Several studies have shown that friends have more influence on children and adolescents than other peers do (Morgan & Grube; Urberg as cited in Berndt, 1999). In fact, Berndt (1999) proposes that students' behaviour becomes more like that of their friends. In addition, he adds that overt and explicit pressure is rarely the means by which friends influence adolescents. Severe punishment for nonconformity is avoided by a peer group because it can cause a child to leave the group.

To assess the influence of friends on students' attitudes, behaviour, and academic achievement in junior high school, Berndt and Keefe (as cited in Berndt, 1999) studied 297 seventh and eighth graders. Small groups of students completed questionnaires that included items about their positive involvement in classroom activities and their disruptive behaviour. Also, the students' English and Math teachers reported the grades that the students had received in their subjects on the last report card. The student questionnaire included a page in which students could name up to three best friends. Students completed the same questionnaire in the following April or May while the teachers again provided reports on the students' grades. The results of this study revealed that students high in

involvement, disruptive behaviour, or grades in the fall usually showed similar characteristics in the spring. Students became more disruptive during the year if their friends were more disruptive in the fall. By the same measure, friends became less disruptive during the year if their friends were less disruptive in the fall and students' grades decreased during the year if their friends had lower grades in the fall. The research of Berndt and Keefe suggests that students became more like their friends.

While this study was carried out in junior high, the influence of friends is clearly important. Berndt (1999) suggests that the influence of friends' characteristics does not vary regularly with age. Peer influence can be demonstrated across a very broad age range (Hartup; Schunk & Zimmerman as cited in Berndt, 1999).

Teachers observe the dynamics of friendships every day. Also, on many occasions parents have informed me that they believed that their child's marks decreased because of the influence of the group to which their child belonged. And, these same parents have also told me that marks increased when their children left the group and found new friends who were better students. Berndt and Keefe's (as cited in Berndt, 1999) research appears to confirm this idea. Other research corroborates this notion. Not only are adolescents more likely to seek friends who are similar to themselves, they also influence their friends to behave in ways consistent with their own actual or ideal self-perceptions (Epstein; Ide, Parkinson, Haertal, & Walberg as cited in Murdock et al., 2000)

Supporting Research on the Influence of Peers

Murdock et al. (2000) note that transitions between different levels of school often bring with them a marked disruption in students' friendship as schools are consolidated and

students are tracked into different classrooms based on academic abilities. Adolescents may be particularly vulnerable to potentially negative peer influences during the transition. This occurs at a time when peer-influence effects are assumed to be greatest among early adolescents as this is often a time of heightened self-consciousness coupled with an instability in one's own identity (Erickson as cited in Murdock et al., 2000).

While the influence of friends is indisputable, it is important to note that students are not necessarily "blind followers" or zealots to a particular peer group. That is, many students are quite discriminating and are able to detach themselves from relationships. In one particular study, successful urban high school students spoke of disengaging from students who tried to pull them into behaviours that would undermine their academic success (Farrell as cited in Murdock et al., 2000).

Student Motivation

While the influence of friends and parents is researched and documented, what about the students themselves? What effect does the students' own motivation have during the transition? According to Murdock et al. (2000), a number of motivational theories are employed to explain variation in students' engagement in academic tasks. Bandura's research (as cited in Murdock et al., 2000) on self-efficacy emphasizes students' beliefs that they are capable of completing academic tasks. Self-concept models (Harter as cited in Murdock et al., 2000) focus on students' more generalized sense of competence.

The Influence of Teachers

Teachers communicate information regarding the value of schooling and their expectations both directly and tacitly (Murdock et al., 2000). Consequently, various

aspects of students' relationships with teachers are predictors of adolescents' motivation and adaptations in school. Murdock (as cited in Murdock et al., 2000) found that students were more engaged academically to the degree that they perceived their teachers as fair and equitable toward them in the class room, as well as holding high expectations for them. A positive student-teacher relationship is characterized by interpersonal warmth and a clear communication that students' academic learning and success are valued. On a personal note, how many times have I heard students relate that they are doing poorly because they do not like the teacher or they perceive that the teacher does not like them? When students perceive that they are not liked, then they often progress into "self-destruct mode." Perception becomes reality. They believe that the teacher does not like them, so the teacher really does not like them. They may skip classes, tune out, and/or become disruptive. The chance of success diminishes.

Many of these researchers stress the importance of the teacher in student expectations. Student-teacher relationships may be the keys to understanding the process of alienation from school (Murdock et al., 2000). Studies of high school dropouts document poor relationships with teachers and perceived teacher disrespect/unfariness as central to students' decisions to leave school (Farrell; Fine; Wehlage & Rutter as cited in Murdock et al., 2000).

Influence of Outside World

While the value of education is communicated by teachers and peers, students also receive information from their observations of the larger world around them (Murdock et al., 2000). Schools do emphasize the importance of education, but many low-income and

minority students develop concrete values based on their lived experiences of the link between schooling and job success that differ from the abstract values of the Protestant work ethic they learned in school (Mickelson as cited in Murdock et al., 2000). This suggests that students who are members of under-represented groups are apt to challenge the notion that education will guarantee success. So, the student's perception of the economic value of educational success is the third motivational context that may influence the students' expectations and valuing of schooling.

A Study on the Influence of Teachers, Peers, and Economic Utility

A longitudinal study by Murdock et al. (2000) focussed on three general domains which might be considered to influence students' expectations for and valuing of educational success: teachers, peers, and economic utility. Specifically, these researchers examined students' perceptions of the expectations and values communicated to them with regard to these three dimensions of schooling. Students, during the final marking period of the seventh and ninth grades, completed questionnaires assessing their academic self-concept and perceptions of the motivational context created by teachers, peers, and their economic opportunity structures. Achievement and discipline data were also collected at both time points.

Results indicated that students' experiences of the expectations and values communicated to them became more positive following the transition to Grade 9. By ninth grade, students reported feeling more respected and less disparaged by teachers. There were also improvements over time in both students'academic self-concept and the number of disciplinary referrals. These findings are consistent with the hypothesized developmental

mismatch between early adolescents' stage of development and their school environment (Eccles & Midgely; as cited in Murdock at al., 2000). Middle school teachers are often assumed to be inappropriate for early adolescents not because of their teaching style per se but rather because students at this age are in need of the levels of attention and student focus that more typically characterize elementary teachers (Midgely, Anderman, & Hicks; Midgely et al. as cited in Murdock et al., 2000).

Murdock et al. (2000) also found that the aspirations and values communicated by peers did not change over time. Even though peer groups changed as they left middle school, it is quite possible that the students had formed friendships with people whose values were similar to their own. Having peers with higher aspirations in middle school appeared to have a continued influence in high school. Peer aspirations were significant unique predictors of both self-concept and effort. The power of seventh grade peer aspirations to predict ninth grade attitudes may reflect stability in the norms of the peer group over time. These findings, regarding the influence of peers, are in congruence with those of Berndt and Keefe (1995), mentioned earlier in this discussion.

Among the students in this study, researchers also found that beliefs in the benefits of education became stronger from middle school to high school. Mickelson (as cited in Murdock et al., 2000) maintained that these positive attitudes are simply reflections of the degree to which students have learned a dominant ideology. Murdock et al. (2000) propose that the grade-related increase in students endorsement of these beliefs may be a simple by-product of increased schooling (i.e., socialization). Finally, researchers discovered that students who were less adapted in Grade 9 were less adapted in Grade 7

and reported motivational contexts that were more negative. This suggests that some students may be predisposed to have difficulties with the transition to high school. Administrators have related to me that students have revealed that they began to lose interest in school as early as grade four!

The Influence of Parents

Many studies have concluded that parental involvement is a multidimensional construct that both directly and indirectly promotes school success (Grolnick & Slowiaczek; Muller; Sui-Chi & Willms as cited in Falbo, Lein, & Amador, 2001). Parental involvement includes parental participation in school activities, parental discussion of school with their child and help with homework. The large and growing body of literature suggests that different kinds of parent involvement are effective at different times during the student's life (Muller as cited in Falbo et al., 2001).

According to Falbo et al. (2001), most of the studies of parental involvement in the secondary education of their children have been based on surveys in which students describe their parents or parents describe themselves using statements followed by a series of forced-choice responses. Sui-Chi and Willms (as cited in Falbo et al., 2001) examined National Educational Longitudinal Study data from eighth-grade students and their parents and found that their responses could be grouped in terms of four parent involvement factors. These included the extent to which parents discussed school at home, communicated with school about the student, supervised the student's life outside of school, and participated in school events.

Sui-Chi and Willms (as cited in Falbo et al., 2001) found that three of these

parental involvement factors were positively related to academic achievement of students, while one factor was negatively related. Parents' discussion of school at home had the most positive association with the student's achievement. Parents' supervision and participation had smaller yet positive correlations with achievement. Communications with the school had a negative and significant association with school achievement. Parental involvement is a predictor of student success, and this is not surprising. Sui-Chi and Willms explained the negative correlation was caused by parents of students with learning or behavioural difficulties. These parents received more communications from the school, and their children were more likely to score poorly on achievement tests.

Research Assessing the Influence of Parents

To assess the influence of parents, Falbo et al. (2001) selected a suburban middle school with an enrollment of about 700. Families of 26 students were selected for interviews during the last half of the eighth grade. After the first grading period of ninth grade, the interviewers returned to the homes of the participants and reinterviewed them. Finally, at the end of the ninth grade, the researchers obtained information about each student's school performance. This information included the final grades for each course taken, the number of credits earned, and the percentage of absences.

In addition, parents and students were asked open-ended questions about high school. Parents were asked to describe family resources, such as income, parental education, employment, and so forth. Falbo et al. (2001) considered students as making a successful transition to high school if they passed all course work, earned enough credits, and attended school enough to be promoted. Only three students failed to meet this

minimum requirement. Three interrelated parental activities were identified as common among teens who made a successful transition to high school. These were monitoring, evaluating, and intervening. Parents who closely monitored their teens during the transition to high school were more likely to discover difficulties. Most monitoring was overt, but some had to be covert or indirect. Most parents probably use both types of monitoring. I have done so myself. Some parents were more able to identify possible problems than others. The information obtained from monitoring was evaluated based upon the parents' own experiences from high school, the experiences of their older children, or their interpretation of what experts advised.

Falbo et al. (2001) found three types of parental intervention assisted the teen in making a successful transition to high school. These intervention types were active involvement in schoolwork, direct participation in the school, and nesting the teen in a desirable peer network. These researchers proposed that for a student to be successful, parents had to engage in at least two of these behaviours.

To illustrate the power of parents, Falbo et al. (2001) described two case studies. Adam studied challenging courses and earned straight As in ninth grade. Fran took courses of average difficulty but failed three courses. Adam's parents were highly productive people who emphasized the importance of time management. Adam's mother, in particular, was very sensitive to the things that could go wrong. She nested Adam in a particular peer group and she had no qualms about intervening in his life. According to the researchers, she did not slack off when he entered high school. She maintained control over his life and was as proactive as the school personnel would permit.

Fran's mother found setting firmer limits to be difficult. She didn't always intervene when she observed an issue. When Fran skipped school for the first time in high school, her father never got upset. Instead he tried to reason with her. Fran admitted that her parents were easy targets, for she could manipulate them. From the perspective of the researchers, her parents failed to instill a strong work ethic, even though they knew what had to be done. The burden of setting expectations and enforcing limits was more than they could endure. According to the researchers, their inability to nest her in a peer group that promoted school achievement, and to involve themselves in Fran's day-to-day life, led to Fran's failure to pass three courses.

The results of this research, while not generalizable, certainly do accentuate the influence of parents in the transition of teens into high school. My experience, as a parent and educator, suggests that the parents who monitor, evaluate, and intervene in their children's lives are setting the stage for a successful transition. When parents or parental supporters do not get involved, the child struggles. I advise parents to interfere in their child's life because when they do not, the child is I think, receiving tacit approval to continue with minimal effort and low achievement. This study yielded significant information about successful parental involvement in the transition of teens into high school. It provided concrete examples of what is required of parents. In addition, this study highlighted some of the pitfalls.

A Study Examining the Impact of Day-to-Day Events

Cotterall (1982) studied the impact of day-to-day events upon students entering high school. The study focussed on the interplay between school environments and student

characteristics. Cotterall sought to answer two questions:

(1) Are changes evident in student feelings and perceptions in the first three weeks of secondary school?

(2) If evidence is found, with what aspects of the school organization and curriculum is it associated?

Cotterall's (1982) study involved new year eight students attending five secondary schools in Brisbane, Australia. The study employed a diary-keeping procedure in which students reacted to particular events at school. These events included those which pertained to uncertainty and others which pertained to confidence and interest. On each day of the first three weeks of school, students were asked to make an entry in a diary sheet in which the students responded to a statement made by the researcher. Different diary forms were circulated each week, each containing a statement for each day. The distribution of the forms was randomized so that individual students would have completed each form, but in random order. The diary forms were collected on the Friday of each week.

On Form A, the daily diary entry was introduced as: "Think of a moment in the day when you were not sure what to do, or what to say. Note down what it was that made you feel this way, and what you did." On Form B, the daily diary entry was introduced as: " Think of something which happened at school which interested you. Say what it was, and what you did."(p. 296). Daily responses were assigned to categories according to the experiences described. Examination of the responses suggested that they could be grouped into three broad domains, namely: (1) the general school system, its procedures and

expectations, (2) schoolwork and classroom learning, and (3) interpersonal relationships.

Analysis of the data revealed that students reported more incidents of anxiety about schoolwork in the second and third weeks of high school. However, students reported higher frequencies of interesting classroom experiences during the first week. The changes in student experiences following entry into high school were associated with the curriculum and organizational aspects of the school while interpersonal relationships did not change significantly from week to week. According to Cotterall (1982), a continuing source of anxiety was associated with the school system. Finding one's class, reading the timetable, negotiating the school grounds successfully were regarded as achievements by the new student, reflecting upon his status in the eyes of peers and affecting his self-esteem.

In addition, diary entries revealed schoolwork anxiety and references to information increased during the second and third weeks. Classroom events relating to schoolwork became more salient. General interest in the secondary school was replaced by a focus on specific elements of the curriculum. Anxiety was often linked to failure to understand or inability to respond appropriately to a teacher's question and this uncertainty was made more acute by the presence of other students. This suggests that students did not want to "look bad' or insecure in front of others. With respect to interpersonal relationships, data revealed that there was a continuing sense of threats from others and feelings of loneliness and alienation. Accordingly, the students continued to feel uneasy in the presence of older students even when their worst fears failed to materialize. There was no marked change in the incidence of support from friends and teachers. Finally, the data

revealed two aspects of the curriculum which contributed to reducing student anxiety and fostering a sense of confidence. These were: (1) the actions of teachers in establishing a supportive class climate, and (2) the therapeutic value of well-organized class activities.

According to Hirschowitz (as cited in Cotterall, 1982), students experience the "oscillating quality" of psychological reorganization during a transition (p. 300). Students search for a compromise between defence and mastery as they cope with transition situations. If left to their own resources in coping, they are likely to need a longer period to adjust and are more prone to retain elements of confusion and disorganization within their self-image which will hamper effective coping in later events at school. The results of this study are significant because they give one a real sense of what students are feeling during the first three weeks of transition into high school. In addition, the role of the teacher in reducing anxiety is accentuated. Cotterall's study clearly demonstrated the anxieties of students during transition. Transition is all about change and, as educators, we must be sensitive to the world of the adolescent so that we can provide appropriate support during this time of change.

In life, change is inevitable. What is important is how students and teachers manage this change. Often, adolescents need help in this regard. Queen's (2002) idea that there is both a systemic and a developmental transition as the student enters high school accentuates the complex circumstance that adolescents encounter. The developmental challenges, outlined by Havighurst (as cited in Potter et al., 2001), serve as a backdrop or frame to the scene of the adolescent world. These developmental challenges are characteristic of adolescence.

As adolescents struggle to define themselves, they must adapt to a new environment. While everything is changing around them, they are changing. Also, they look to their friends, parents, and teachers for reinforcement and support. And, they look within themselves to make sense of their worlds.

Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, and Blyth. (1987) proposed that it is easier if a child goes through the various adolescent changes at different times rather than simultaneously. The ability to cope with all the discontinuities created by major life transitions will be easier if they come into focus at different stages. Consequently, children who experience several important life changes at once are expected to be at greater risk than those who have longer periods of time to adjust to the new status of adolescence (p. 1221). This idea suggests that, as mentioned previously, we must be sensitive to the world and experiences of adolescents. My research explored the adolescent world against a backdrop of developmental challenges described by Havighurst (as cited in Potter et al., 2001) while they make the systemic and developmental transitions outlined by Queen (2002).

According to Hertzog and Morgan (1999), transition into high school is a process-not an event. This transition takes place during arguably the most important life stage. The timing of these two events emphasized the significance of this research. As suggested, Isakson and Jarvis (1999) noted a lack of descriptive studies which illuminate the experiences of students making the transition into high school. This notion is corroborated by Schiller (1999). My intent was to respond to this perceived gap in research, and at the same time, provide information about youth transition from junior high to senior high for

educators in Island schools.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Research Approach

The purpose of this research was to hear the stories of eight Grade 10 students about their change from Grade 9 to Grade 10 in order to (1) find out what they found difficult or helpful; (2) to find out, based on their stories, what can be done to improve the transition; and (3) to help students examine the difference, as defined by Hertzog and Morgan (1999), between a one-time event over which they have no control, and an ongoing process of transition that can be reflected upon and improved when understood.

For the purpose of this research, I have defined myself as a practitioner-researcher. This denotes that I am an educator who carries out projects that deliberately generate knowledge in the context of improving practice (Pritchard, 2002). Cole and Knowles (2000) describe this process as reflexive inquiry-- to understand how the personal influences professional practice.

My goal was to explore with the students the meaning attributed to this transition. In addition, I have worked with them to generate possible ways for improving the transition process. From this perspective, my intent was to engage students in a qualitative participatory research project that is relevant to their lives. I reflected upon and made sense of my observations and experiences for the purpose of applying them to my practice as a teacher. This research was important to me as a teacher who helps students adjust to a high school culture which, in many ways, is different from the junior high culture.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us to understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena (Merriam, 2001). According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), the unique strengths of this genre are that qualitative research is exploratory or descriptive, assumes the value of context and setting, and searches for a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences of the phenomena. According to Merriam the key philosophical assumption upon which all types of qualitative research is based is the view that reality is constructed by the individuals interacting with their social worlds. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people will construct.

Characteristics of Qualitative Research

Merriam (2001) outlines several characteristics of qualitative research. First, the key concern is understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspective, not the researcher's. Second, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Third, qualitative research usually involves fieldwork, and the researcher must physically go to the setting in order to observe behaviour in its natural setting. Fourth, qualitative research primarily employs an inductive research strategy. Accordingly, there are no hypotheses to be deduced from theory to guide the investigation. Here, the researchers build toward theory from observations and intuitive understandings gained in the field. Finally, the product of qualitative research is richly descriptive. Words and pictures, rather than numbers, are used to convey what the researcher has learned.

Rationale for Choosing a Qualitative Research Design

The aforementioned characteristics of qualitative research were the reasons for choosing this method of research. Rich, descriptive stories were the product of my research. The methods of qualitative research yielded these stories. My role as a practitioner- researcher engaged in reflexive inquiry corresponded well with the qualitative mode. The key characteristic of such an approach was flexibility. Cole and Knowles (2000) describe an important characteristic of reflexive inquiry when they suggest that instead of having the research design carefully planned out in advance in minute detail with the intention of merely implementing or applying it to an inquiry focus, researchers will have a basic structure or plan to follow, but will also expect and be prepared to modify this plan as they proceed. According to Cole and Knowles, it is not important that researchers implement the design to get results; it is important that they attend to the process of researching so as to learn from it. The questions and issues that emerge from inquiry may cause slight or dramatic changes in the plan. This idea has a certain appeal. I did not feel "boxed in" to a set of research questions or research design. There was a great deal of flexibility, which will lead to rich, descriptive results. In my opinion the choice of qualitative research was quite appropriate.

Data Collection: Open -Ended Interviews Questions

Much of the descriptive data was obtained through open-ended interviews. According to Patton (1990), this format is used when there is limited time and it is desirable to have the same information from each person interviewed. Each person was asked the same questions. The interview questions were written out in advance exactly the

way they were to be asked during the interview. Careful consideration was given to the wording of each question and probing questions were strategically placed. The open-ended interview questions minimize interviewer effects by asking the same question of each respondent (Patton, p.285). The interview is systematic and interviewer judgement is reduced. Patton also proposes that data analysis is also easier because it is possible to locate each respondent's answer to the same question rather quickly. I found this to be true. Analysis of the data was easier. Common themes became more apparent which made organization of the extensive data a simpler task.

Rationale for Open-Ended Interview Questions

Patton (1990) lists three major reasons for using standardized open-ended interviews. First, the exact instrument used in the evaluation is available for inspection by decision makers and information users. Second, variation among interviewers can be minimized where a number of different interviewers must be used. Finally, the interview is highly focussed so that interviewee time is carefully used. The open-ended interview was appropriate to my study because it was more focussed and more fitting to my comfort with a "scientific" approach. My sample group consisted of eight students who missed class time. I needed to ask direct questions to eight students during a 90 minute time frame.

The questions I asked in these interviews were as follows:

1. How would you describe to a Grade 9 student what it has been like for you to make the change from Grade 9 to Grade 10?
2. What have been the major problems you have experienced during the transition? Explain.

3. What has been positive about the transition? Explain.
4. What support or help have you received in making the transition? For example, did parents, friends and/or teachers help you?
5. What advice would you give to a Grade 9 student who is preparing to make this change?
6. What could your teachers or school do to make it easier for you to make this change?

The Focus Group as a Data Collection Method

The focus group is a collective interview. For the purpose of this study, it was not a problem-solving session or a decision-making group (Patton, 1990). As required, I asked for permission from the school board (see Appendix A) and the principal of the school (see Appendix B) before conducting the research. The questions asked during the focus group session stimulated other questions that were asked during one-on-one interviews held later. Participants were encouraged to listen to others' opinions while formulating their own opinions. According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), the advantage of this method is socially oriented, studying participants in an atmosphere more natural than artificial experimental circumstances and more relaxed than the exposure of a one-to-one interview. Marshall and Rossman also note that the format allows the facilitator the flexibility to explore unanticipated issues as they arise in the discussion. It was my intention to take advantage of this feature.

Data Collection: The Focus Group

The open-ended interviews were conducted in one focus group consisting of eight

students. The focus group was composed of males and females whose academic abilities ranged from low to high achievement. At first, I consulted with other Grade 10 teachers for prospective participants. Eventually, I decided to select seven present or former students. Three of the participants were in my home room class at the time, while four participants were in my class during the first semester. One student was recommended by a colleague. I felt at the time that it was crucial to recruit students who would be dependable. In addition, I assumed that these participants would have stories to relate. Finally, I believed that knowing the participants would provide easier access. I have always worked hard to develop positive and trustful relationships with my students. I assumed that the quality of our relationship would be an asset. I could trust them and they could trust me. Students who were recruited to participate required parental permission before participating. As mentioned, some of the participants were also students in my class. In this event, students were advised that their participation (or nonparticipation) would have no impact on their school standing. Finally, students were advised before participating that they could withdraw their participation at any time during the research.

Parents were informed by letter of the intent of the research (see Appendix C). They were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix D). The focus group was conducted in a professional manner by a former colleague who is presently a counselling consultant with the local school district. This individual has experience in counselling, mediation and facilitating focus groups. This individual was not known to the participants in this study. Data was recorded using a tape recorder. This was less intrusive than a video recorder. I was present during the focus group session to record field notes. The focus

group took place in the school during normal school hours for a duration of approximately 90 minutes. Because the subject material was personal and potentially sensitive, before the focus group session commenced there was a discussion about the principle of confidentiality and the need to not discuss any personal information outside the group.

Data Collection: One-on-One Interviews

Within a week of the focus group, I began to conduct separate one-on-one interviews with five of the participants. This ensured that the participants had a period to reflect upon their experiences in the focus group. They were able to elaborate on their answers from the focus group. Also, I needed to address new questions which had arisen from the focus group. The interviews were as informal as possible and the purpose was to "flush out" additional ideas about transition which the participant did not divulged during the focus group. Criteria used to select these students included, but were not limited to, particularly good or bad experiences during the transition, unique experiences during the transition, and thought-provoking responses to questions. The students were invited to participate in these interviews. Students were advised that they had the right at any time to refuse to answer any particular question. Each interview was not more than one hour in duration. Again, the data was collected by tape recorder.

Data Collection: Electronic Mail Responses

In order to gain more information and increase my understanding of the transition process, I asked some participants to respond to questions sent by electronic mail. For example, they were asked to describe a situation in which they felt unsure of themselves or to describe an instance when they experienced support from teachers, parents, or friends.

Other questions did arise as the research proceeded. I knew that most of the participants used a computer daily. For students whom I did not have a great deal of contact with, this method of data collection was convenient. It also provided time for the students to compose a response to my questions.

Data Analysis

The audio tapes from the focus group and interviews were transcribed. These transcriptions, and electonic mail responses were read several times to generate categories and themes. The data was further organized by coding.

Chapter 4

Results

My Old School

Recently, I attended the thirtieth anniversary of my graduating class -- the Class of '74. It was, I think, coincidental and fortuitous that this anniversary coincided with this story of my research! Former classmates I had not seen for 30 years came from near and far to celebrate. As part of the celebrations, we together toured the school. The school has been renovated recently, but parts of the "old" school still remain. It was a moving moment for me. Of course, parts of the school seemed strange to us. But when we walked into a familiar classroom, or recognized a particular section, some of us would stop and contemplate our surroundings as if looking for something from the past. I felt like I was transported back in time. Around me, I heard my classmates say, "Isn't this our English classroom?" or, "This is where Miss M taught French." Invariably, the conversation would lead to comments concerning a particular teacher or a humorous incident we recalled.

At one part of our tour, I said to a classmate, "Wasn't there a stairwell here?" "Yes" replied my friend. This is where we used to hang out. My Grade 9 home room would be down the corridor from this stairwell. Some classrooms were still there, while many had been swallowed up in the renovations. While many of my classmates were thinking of that graduation year, I was also thinking of the year 1970. This was the year I entered into Grade 9. The classrooms, the gymnasium, and the yearbook photos took me back to Grade 9 and helped me to revisit some of the feelings I had experienced in Grade 9. Anxious anticipation for a new school experience, uncertainty about what lie ahead,

sadness over being separated from friends, and happiness over little victories each day were just a few of the sensations that I resisted. During this reunion, I wondered too, about all who were not at the reunion. What were their stories?

Of course, these sensations were not as intense on that reunion day as they were in 1970. But not much has changed since then. Many students today continue to experience similar fears and emotions. I know this to be true. I have lived through the experiences of my own children in transition into high school and my participants have related this similarity in their stories. I came away from my reunion convinced even more of the importance of this research, if only to myself. I can learn how to integrate my findings into practice. I can learn how to make the transition into high school a more positive experience for students.

The Research

This research was designed to understand the experiences of eight Grade 10 students in transition into high school. As set out in the introduction, my aim was to describe the transition from Grade 9 to Grade 10, both from my perspective as a teacher, and the perspective of selected research participants. My objective was to understand the practices, the factors, and the supports given to participants as they make the transition to high school.

The following questions were used to guide my research:

1. How would you describe to a Grade 9 student what it has been like for you to make the change from Grade 9 to Grade 10?

2. What have been the major problems you have experienced during the transition? Explain.
3. What has been positive about the transition? Explain.
4. What support or help have you received in making the transition? For example, did parents, friends and/or teachers help you?
5. What advice would you give to a Grade 9 student who is preparing to make this change?
6. What could your teachers or school do to make it easier for you to make this change?

Data Collection

Data were collected in a high school in the Maritime provinces of Canada during the months of May and June 2004. A focus group consisting of eight students and a facilitator was used as a primary source for data. The data were recorded on tape and transcribed. The tapes and transcription were reviewed by the researcher to check for accuracy. The literature review was used as a guide to coding and organizing the data according to themes. In addition, one-on-one interviews were conducted with five students from the focus group. To gain additional information about the transition process, some students were asked to respond to questions delivered by electronic mail. In several instances, I simply met with a student informally in my lab or classroom to ask one or two new questions or to seek clarification of a previous answer. Their responses were recorded as field notes. In all instances, I stated that anonymity and confidentiality were assured.

Selection of Participants

For my research, I selected four males and four females in an attempt to achieve gender equity. Seven of the eight participants were present, or former students. All participants were white and middle-class. This reflected the general composition of the school population. The group reflected a range of academic abilities from low to high achievement. I do realize however, that the homogeneity of the participants, with respect to ethnicity, is a limitation of the research.

I work very hard to develop trusting relationships with my students. Knowing my participants, therefore, was an advantage in this study. As with all my students, I purposefully maintain contact with them outside of regular class time. In the corridors, I talked with the participants about music, last night's hockey game, the impending snow storm, summer jobs, and so forth. I was a part of their everyday experiences and they were part of mine. Rather than limit my data, I assumed the selection of students whom I knew and trusted would enhance it. Throughout the research, I have been impressed by the openness of the participants in their responses. This candour, I think, is due in a large part to the trusting relationships developed with the participants.

The Researcher

My teaching career has thus far spanned 24 years. Chemistry has been my main area of concentration. But, I have always believed that the student is more important than the subject. The quality of a teacher/student relationship is, I assume, so crucial to achievement. A positive relationship can, I think, motivate a student to higher achievement. Thus, a positive attitude, nurtured in a climate of mutual respect has always

been my goal in the classroom. My unwritten code is, "It's not about the chemistry."

At times, it is difficult to establish positive relationships with some students. But, most students appreciate your care and attention. It is important, however, for the teacher to establish this care and attention. Often, I initiate conversations with students whom I meet in the corridors. While these students may not be current students of mine, someday they, a friend, or family member, will enter into my classroom. Making this first move to establish connection, is crucial, I assume. From my perspective, it is better to be known for the quality of your character than for how well you know your subject! At the end of the semester, I've discovered, students will remember me for the quality of their relationship with me.

The role of practitioner-researcher therefore has been easy for me to adopt. In school, I am situated in a "web" of relationships with my students. But, I am just one small part of this web. In fact, I am almost inconspicuous. In an atmosphere of mutual respect, my students and I work together daily. The unwritten "line" between what it means to be student and teacher is always there. Boundaries were clear. Because of this healthy relationship, data collection was exciting and informative.

The Research Experience

This process has changed me. I have learned more about youth culture and the need to be more sensitive to the needs of the Grade 10 student. I have learned about my limitations and strengths as a researcher. At first, I struggled with the idea of doing qualitative research. I was a scientist and I wanted to prove something. This process has been a new experience and I have learned how to cultivate and refine a research idea and

then to see it through. Once I was able to embrace the qualitative approach, the burden of proving something was lifted. I felt so free!

The flexibility of the qualitative approach has allowed time for reflection so that I could generate new questions for my participants. New questions would often "pop up" at the strangest times, such as when I was driving in my car or working out at the gym. Even during the summer, I generated new questions to ask my participants when I returned to school in the fall. In my busy life as a teacher, the qualitative approach has permitted me to "catch my breath" and internalize the data before moving on to analysis. Finally, a qualitative approach has enabled me to really get to know my participants. I think that they also know more about me. Throughout this whole process, I have appreciated their sincerity and their willingness to assist my research.

The Participants

Below, I have constructed a brief picture of the key participants in this study. All participants' names in this study are pseudonyms.

Bill, along with Cody and Aaron, is in my home room. Several years ago, I taught his older sister. Bill is small in stature. He appears reserved and he speaks very softly. Through diligence, he does reasonably well academically. On occasion, he lacks confidence and often remains behind after class to get help with the material, or just to talk. Bill is an example of the student who has to "work for everything he gets." He does not travel in a circle of friends. I remember my first encounter with Bill. In January, I was on duty in the computer lab. I asked him his name and discovered that I had taught his sister, who was a very good student. I asked him if I would see him in my chemistry class next year. His

reply was, "I don't think so, I'm not that smart." In February, at the start of the second semester Bill was a student in my home room. The first class is spent on administrivia assigning lockers, checking timetables, etcetera. At the end of class, Bill came up to me and said, "Mr. Cole, I am not a good student, but I am a good worker." I sensed immediately that this young man lacked confidence. He was letting me know "up front" that I shouldn't expect too much.

Lori is a pleasant, reserved young woman who likes to spend time on the computer. From talking with her I know that she is also a hockey fan. In class, Lori works very diligently at her studies, in school, and at home. Often, I would notice her alone in the corridors between classes. Also, she worked in the computer lab when I was on duty there.

Christine plays the cello in an orchestra. She also listens to music, particularly "indie" bands. She was a student in my class during the first semester. I discovered that she was a good problem solver who worked well independently. Christine seemed to be very articulate and this is why I selected her.

Mary is Christine's friend. They seem to be inseparable. Mary sat beside Christine in my class. A tall girl, she is well-suited to play volleyball and rugby. She has older brothers and sisters who have graduated from this school. I selected Mary because she was a good friend of Christine and I would hopefully gain some perspective on the influence of friends during transition.

Jean is a soccer player and a very conscientious student who plans to be a pharmacist. Easily recognizable by her long red hair, I see her everyday talking with her group of friends by her locker. We talk often, as we share a favourite hockey team. She

seems like a very confident young woman.

Aaron is also a soccer player. He is a tall young man with brown hair which is blonde-streaked. He is a respectful young man who is a good student. He is mild-mannered. I taught his sister, who was also a good student.

Cody likes to watch movies and ride his mountain bike. Also, he likes to make home movies with his friends. At times, Cody struggles academically. Socially, he does well. He has a pleasant disposition and a good sense of humour. His locker is near my classroom door. Thus, we have many discussions before and after class.

David is the only student in the group who did not attend the same junior high as the other students. He is an articulate young man who loves to draw comic books. He dreams of being an artist. A colleague recommended that I recruit David for the research because he seemed to be so articulate.

Researcher

Personally, impending new experiences are characterized by nervous excitement. I remember my first day in Grade 9. I am with a small group of friends in the gymnasium. The teacher is introduced at the front of the gymnasium and then the principal called out the names of students who would be in this particular class. One by one, my friends leave my group to go with their new teachers. As each friend is called away to another class, my anxiety increases. At the end of this exercise, I am left with a smaller group of friends. I felt disappointment in the knowledge that I would not be in class with certain friends. But, there was solace in the fact that a few friends from my elementary school were with me.

My new class, 9B, was to be my home. There were two close friends -- David and

Bruce. In our anxiety, we clung together. Even though my older brother was also in the same school, I knew I couldn't go running to him with every question I had. In our class, questions would inevitably arise. But I did not want to appear too needy. So, I kept my ears open for "tidbits" of information. I believe I was experiencing what Hirschowitz (as cited in Cotterall, 1982) called the "oscillating quality" of psychological reorganization, cited earlier. I searched for a compromise between defence and mastery as I coped with transition situations. I also experienced this search for a compromise between defence and mastery while a university, student, when starting a new job, and at other significant times.

Seven themes became apparent throughout the research. Specifically, the experiences during the first week, the importance of friends, drugs and alcohol, and the influence of friends, peers, parents, and teachers were the recurring themes which were evident in the data. I have chosen to organize the data around these seven themes. The students in this study had a range of experiences during the first few weeks in high school. My aim was to make sense of these experiences in a dialogue format. As narrator, I am the researcher. All participants, by contrast, are identified by pseudonyms. Throughout this dialogue, I interrupted the narrator commentary.

The First Week--I Got Lost!

Researcher: What was the first week like?

Bill: Nightmare

Researcher: Nightmare and why?

Bill: Getting lost you know, junior high you know.

Researcher: You got lost, what was it like?

Bill: Pretty bad.

Researcher

In all probability, Bill probably still felt like a junior high student during his first few weeks. And not being very confident, his stress was magnified. He also reported feeling overwhelmed in courses like Math and English. Lori, I discovered, had similar experiences.

Researcher: So Lori, when you first came to high school, how did you feel?

Lori: Nervous. I didn't know where to go. Everyone was just standing there. I didn't know what to do so I just stood.

Researcher: So, you just stood by yourself.

Lori: Yeah

Researcher: Lori later described the first few weeks.

Lori: The first week was a little bit harder because I didn't know where everything was and few weeks like the second week I got into my groove as far as where everything was.

Researcher

David also reported the same feeling of anxiety.

David: Well before I was really scared because you know you always hear like high school, high school is when things start to count, you know it's when marks start to become important and um you know growing up and all that. But I didn't really know what it was really like in high school so I didn't know how much of a change it would be. Um, and I was worried about getting lost. I was scared academically but I think I was more worried academically than I was worried socially, but it turned out when I got here it kind of

flipped around. I realized that I was okay academically but not so okay socially.

Researcher

David's main concerns were academic, but he admitted that his fears in this area were not as great as anticipated. His biggest challenges, he told me, were social.

I immediately contrasted Bill, Lori, and David's discussions with those of Christine and Jean, who demonstrate confidence.

Jean: Yeah, it was scary but once you got around it wasn't that bad and everyone's like you're going to get lost and stuff but it's not that hard to get around after. It's not like people don't help you if you ask them. If you ask them, they will help you even if you don't know them. So you just kind of get here and you look around and you think it's really big and everything but you just think about the year ahead and positive thinking.

Researcher

This is the type of confidence that I, as teacher and parent, try to instil in my own children! Knowing Jean as I do, her reaction is not surprising.

Christine: I was a lot more worried the first hour of school. But then, it's like - why did I worry about this at all?

Researcher

Experience tells me that the first weeks run smoothly for many students, yet I also know that for others there is much confusion, anxiety, and feelings of loneliness. I recall several of my own Grade 10 students waiting after class to ask for directions, or to ask for help with opening a locker. When I notice that a Grade 10 student is standing alone for a length of time, I will often approach the student and ask if I can assist him or her.

Looking back to my own experience, if there was one wish I had on that first day in high school, it was that I could be with all of my friends in the same class. While I did make new friends, I felt very forlorn. Similarly, for some of the participants, this circle of friends expanded. For others, meeting new friends was very difficult. Sadly, a couple of students were left out of the social circles. To hear a student tell you that he or she has no friends is heartbreaking.

Making Friends

Researcher

Jean and Cody had little difficulty making friends. Mary and Christine were good friends who were together in every class. Also, being French Immersion students, they had the same classmates for several years. So, in high school they had a large circle of friends, probably due to their confidence.

Researcher: Cody, has it been easy to make friends?

Cody: Ah, it's been easy in some aspects to make friends.

Researcher: What has been difficult about it?

Cody: Ah, the difficult part would probably be like it's hard to explain, like you find that ah, you can't really talk, you don't feel like talking to ah much people that you don't know.

Researcher

I asked Cody if he had any fears before arriving that he wouldn't have any friends and that it would be hard to make friends.

Cody: No, I had and have excellent friends now.

Researcher

Bill, on the other hand, had the opposite experience. He was relating a story about getting lost on the first day, going to "A" period.

Researcher: So this is your first day and you got lost going to class. How did you feel?

Bill: Pretty bad.

Researcher: Pretty bad, what did you, how did you get to your class?

Bill: I asked everybody.

Researcher

As our interview proceeds, I asked more question about friends. Those lost in a crowd often seek out a friend for help. Bill had to ask "everybody" for help.

Researcher: Now you're kind of travelling on your own, so to speak?.

Bill: Yeah.

Researcher: You didn't kind of go with a group of friends?

Bill: No.

Researcher: Now, I want to ask you this question, Bill. Ah, have you made some friends while you were here?

Bill: No.

Researcher

I asked this question of Bill, as the school year was ending. I assume that this must be very discouraging for him. I worried about how I might help him socially.

In this exchange, readers may sense Bill's feeling of rejection.

Bill: Yes, I found it hard to make friends and just felt isolated from everybody.

Researcher: Now, did you find that in junior high too?

Bill: Yes.

Researcher: So you find it hard to make friends in junior high, so when you came to high school, it was pretty much the same thing.

Bill: Yeah, more challenging.

Researcher: More challenging? And why do you think that it was more challenging?

Bill: Like a lot of popular kids.

Researcher: Popular kids?

Bill: Yeah.

Researcher: Yeah? So explain a bit further.

Bill: Well, they didn't want to be around, like loners and things - just wanted to be around huge groups of kids.

Researcher: Yeah, so would it be fair to say that you found it hard to fit in with another group?

Bill: Yeah.

Researcher

Bill agreed that this was a continuation from junior high school and that he had not been able to do anything to change this. Again, I considered my role as a teacher and I wondered what I could do to make school a better place for Bill.

Researcher: When you were coming, say over the summer, you knew you were going to high school - were you nervous or anxious about going to high school? Anything you weren't sure of?

Bill: I was disappointed and half-happy.

Researcher: So, what would be the happy part?

Bill: I would be going to a bigger school.

Researcher: And ah, what was kind of disappointing?

Bill: That I wouldn't have any friends.

Researcher

Feelings of isolation and labelling oneself as a "loner" are surely disheartening for a young adolescent. Do we as teachers play a part in this isolation?

My conversations with David illustrate the dynamics of making friends. David came from a junior high school that is not one of the feeder schools. He is not bringing a group of friends with him. David and I established that for him, the transition was easy academically, but difficult socially.

David: I guess the biggest part was the groups of people again. There are different groups and just I found that most people that were considered like cool were from Parkview Junior High and that's where most of my friends wanted to hang around with, so you know of course everyone wants to be popular so you try to fit in with that group but it's very difficult 'cause also I found is most of that group were hockey players and stuff and they're into sports and stuff and they're on sports teams and most of my friends are into sports too and I'm not, so where they could kind of easily become friends with them through sports, I didn't have that so I had to make a bit more of an effort. I knew some of the people here because I went to Maplewood Elementary. But that was a little awkward because I hadn't seen these people in you know three years so that was a little different but

you kind of didn't know where to go. Like at break time, you know everyone, you just didn't know what to do a type thing.

Researcher: So there is a bit of anxiety. How did you get around it?

David: Well um, a couple of my friends already kind of knew a some of these people so I just kind of hung around them but basically I just most of the time hung around a smaller group of friends from Pinetree Junior High for now. It's just you know trying so hard becomes a waste of time after a while but um, you know I've made, I've become stronger friends with people from Pinetree. I find it difficult to get in with that crowd. It's kind of late to switch to another crowd, do you know what I mean?

Researcher

Basically, David had decided to hang around with the few old friends from his junior high because he found it too difficult to enter into a new group. I suggested to him that there seemed to be a great deal of pressure during the first few weeks to get into a group. He agreed with this observation, noting that over the winter he decided that he felt more comfortable just hanging around his old friends instead of trying so hard to fit in with new ones.

This social aspect has been the most difficult adjustment for David. Here is a bright, articulate, young man wrestling with the politics of making friends. He realized that there are many opportunities to meet new friends in school clubs. But he wanted to make friends with people in a certain crowd but none of these people were involved with school clubs and he wasn't into sports.

David: There's lots of clubs and stuff but the only reason I didn't go in any of these was I

wanted to make friends with people in this certain crowd of people. And of course, none of these people were involved in these things because they were all in sports.

Researcher

I noted that the people you hang around with seem to be very important, almost like a touchstone or reference.

David: Yeah, I haven't figured it out, like somehow you must have to prove yourself but I haven't figured it out yet, you know?

Researcher

I asked Jean if she knew of situations where people had a difficult time making friends.

Jean: Um, I do know because some people tend to stay to themselves and some people don't try to get to know those type of people because whenever they do get to know them, like first impression, they don't like them. But, I have a friend that like, people don't like her the first time they meet her but that's why I like her because she's so different. And I think people look at that more than anything and some people don't need friends.

Researcher

I suggested that some people would say that if you have no friends in junior high then when you get to high school, it's really tough.

Jean: That's not true. I don't think it's true because we had a big group last year and we talk to each other now, but we're not really together anymore but I have more real friends now than I ever did last year. I miss the group idea but, they um, they just weren't the type of people that I want to hang around with for long. So I don't think that it's true that if

you don't have friends in junior high school that you're not going to find anybody- - that's when you find people.

Researcher

But if you have difficulty making friends in junior high then would it be fair to say that you would have difficulty making friends in high school?

Jean: Oh, yeah. I'd say you'd still have difficulty but people just tend to be more mature in high school. So, that helps a lot too.

Researcher

So is it easier to make friends in high school?

Jean: In a way because people are more mature as opposed to immature. It's like nobody knows you whenever, nobody knows who you are, so they kind of get to know you.

Researcher

When I talked with Jean, I was thinking of Bill. The "art"of making friends has a great deal to do with confidence, I imagine. Jean has the confidence to move from one group of friends to another. Bill feels like a loner - unable to establish friendships. Is this a problem which goes deeper than confidence, I wonder?

The Importance of Friends

Researcher

Remembering my own high school experience, I recalled standing in the gym waiting for my assignment to a home room, I was hoping that I could stay with my friends. I needed them for support. Thirty-five years later, Grade 10 students probably wait with the same nervous anticipation. I can imagine that the success of the first day is evaluated

by the number of friends in a given student's class. I wanted to know as a researcher why friends were so important. Because friends provide some degree of validation for me as a person, I assume, this also promotes feelings of self-worth in the participants I interviewed.

I thought of David's struggle and Bill's feelings of loneliness as I listened to Cody's proud statement, "I had and have excellent friends now." His words are a testament to the value of friendship. Mary and Christine have been together in every class for so long and they plan to take the same classes next year. Several times a day, I observed Jean standing by her locker surrounded by half a dozen friends. They appear to be so content. Day after day, this continues. I asked Jean about the importance of friends.

Jean: My friends influence me like good friends should, they are always there for me whenever I need someone and they are always there to give me a push when I need it. But, they are never putting me down about my career goals, or my schoolwork or anything. they are just always encouraging me. Friends make school a much better environment to be in, just because you know they are there and they make it worthwhile and you know that they are going through pretty much the same things you are, so you don't feel out of place.

Christine: My friends are awesome and we have always supported one another with any problems we have. They are a big help during stressful times because they understand what I'm dealing with the most.

Researcher

For others, friends are helpful with homework. I have watched Aaron working with friends on his Math and I have watched Christine and Mary walking toward class together and then working together in class.

Recently, Mary did poorly on a test. I talked to her and tried to re-reassure her that this was only one test and that she should not give up. The next day, I heard Mary and Christine outside my door. Christine said, "It's only one test." In contrast, I observed Bill in class and I noticed that he always worked alone. He always walked alone in the corridors and he spent his lunch hours in the computer lab. I wondered who Bill has to comfort him?

For David, friends become a major help because parents are not able to assist with high school subjects. For Jean and David, friends have been very supportive during the transition to high school. According to David, the value of friends is that you can relate to them and, "they are all going through the same stuff most if the time." Listen to the way David answered my question about who influenced him with respect to adolescent issues.

David: Oh, that would be friends 'cause honestly, like I find most of the time parents don't have a clue. You know it's one thing if you're a teacher but they don't seem to know much at all about what's going on in school. There's one thing that came up a while ago where I just started telling my parents stuff because they just weren't getting it. And you know they had no idea that it was like this you know. They thought it was the way it was you know when they were in school. Things change so they really just don't know 'cause they're not there.

Researcher

Asked for an example, David continued:

David: Um, a lot with things like drinking and stuff. They, like basically any party or any place you know there's no parents home and there's drinking basically everywhere but

they didn't think, they thought that was just you know, it didn't happen at all.

Researcher

During the research, these discussions about friends caused me to reflect with care and concern. David's situation reminded me of my daughter's story. Because she was a French Immersion student, she did not go to the same feeder school as most of her friends. As parents, we saw her struggle even though she did have a few good friends. Bill, who was insecure about establishing relationships, struggled differently. David, who is more outgoing than Bill, stayed with his known friends. But both have had difficulties. David decided to stick with friends, while Bill believed that he was a loner. His earlier statement that "no one wants be around a loner" spoke of his feeling of isolation. Bill's story haunts me.

As his home room teacher, I tried to, "take him under my wing." He would hang around at lunch and talk about his home work. Or he would drop in early for class. I wondered -- wouldn't it be better if he had friends to spend time with instead of me?

Peers

Researcher

My research took me into discussions about a well-discussed topic--the influence of peers. I wanted to discover how students were influenced by peers more generally. What was the effect of peer pressure? To understand, I looked back at high school. From the music I listened to, and the dominant clothing styles, and attitudes about drugs and alcohol--I had my ear to the ground. Back then, I decided what would "work for me." Of course, friends and parents had a major influence on what constituted acceptable choices.

Peer pressure is still evident in school. When I was in high school, I wanted to fit in. Little has changed. I can see evidence of peer pressure every day in clothing styles, music, and behaviour. My students talked freely about their interactions with their peers. There was a consensus that there was less peer pressure in high school than in junior high. I asked Cody to compare high school with junior high, with respect to the amount of peer pressure.

Cody: Well in high school there's no influence like that. There might be one little fad go around every once in a while but in junior high there's a new fad going on every week. There's not much peer pressure this year.

Researcher

Jean displayed a certain degree of independence when spoke of the behaviours of certain peers.

Jean: I kind of tell people my opinion of what they're doing and I'm not putting them down or anything. I still respect them-- I don't respect what they are doing and they know that, so they don't really put pressure on me because they, if I want to do it I'll do it and if I don't, I won't.

David: When it comes to clothes and stuff, I'd say peers. Um, when it comes to music and things like that, it's what I like. And choices about drugs and alcohol-- it's all me.

Drugs and alcohol

Researcher

When I started my research, I was not searching for any information pertaining to drug and alcohol use. This theme arose during the focus group session. It became apparent that peer pressure with respect to drug and alcohol use was quite prevalent during

transition. I wanted to investigate this topic further. As a teacher, I know that drugs and alcohol are "all around." I hear the talk in the corridors. I see small groups of smokers in the parking lot and sometimes I can smell it! I was aware that this topic can be sensitive. No one will probably admit to drug and alcohol use. Believing that my students were sincere, I assusmed that they would at least tell me what they had observed in the school.

Cody: I look around and I mean I don't drink or smoke or anything like that, but people who left junior school that didn't and this year you come back and then they started.

David: Like last year in Grade 9, it was almost like you know there were a few kids in class that would drink and stuff but they were almost kind of made fun of. Then suddenly over the summer, like I hadn't seen most of my friends, and then when we come back in the fall and I went to some of their parties and stuff like that suddenly they had totally changed, and then it seemed like all of a sudden everyone was drinking and I thought like what happened here, when did this change? I didn't know how things could change so fast. And all of a sudden it whipped around, you know.

Researcher

Jean confirmed David's comments. She admitted that there is more pressure in high school than junior high. I asked Jean if there was a change in alcohol use over the summer.

Jean: A major change.

Researcher

Jean then described the change.

Jean: People are scared. I think they just want to fit in with everybody else and they think

that if they do, then everybody else will think that they are really cool in high school. But people don't even know you in the beginning of this school year and they get to know you by reputation, by what they hear or just talking to.

Researcher

Often peer pressure comes in the form of verbal abuse. Jean felt that if you say no to alcohol, most people respect you and if they don't--they're just not worth it anyway.

Aaron, too, perceived a lot of peer pressure for Grade 10 students.

Aaron: Probably there's a lot of peer pressure too with drugs, alcohol, and stuff like that. A lot of people older in the school. A lot of people are smoking when you are walking by.

David: Like a major thing with me was like drinking. Like I found in junior high, no one did it and all of a sudden over the summer it suddenly changes and I just, I don't know, I found that the major difference.

Researcher

But decisions about alcohol use have to be made at some time in the future. I asked David and Jean how they avoid getting "caught up" in alcohol use.

David: Well I haven't actually had the opportunity lately, like it happens most within this group and I, you know, most people don't know me enough yet to get invited to them, you know a lot of parties. So basically, I just haven't had the opportunity and if it comes up, I'll look at it and make decisions.

Jean: I stay away from it whenever I can. Actually, I don't think of not hanging around with them. I respect their decisions. I may not like their decisions, but I do respect them and then if they do anything to me that makes me not want to be there, then I won't.

Researcher

I asked Jean who influenced her with respect to her attitude on drugs and alcohol.

Jean: Myself and my dad, well not really my parents, well my parents yeah, but probably myself and my brother. Just because he went through it before and he wouldn't want to see me go through the same stuff he went through.

Researcher

Lori believed that there was less peer pressure in high school than in junior high. She was aware of drug and alcohol abuse among her peers. But, she felt no pressure to participate.

Lori: I'm doing it right. I'm doing something I know is right for myself.

Researcher

Who influences Lori?

Lori: Students, because I see what happens to them, like taking drugs. They're acting stupid so I don't want to end up like that.

Researcher

Lori admitted that her friends had no influence in this area. She has made her own decision based upon her observations of peers.

Christine summarized the opinions of many of the participants when she compared the peer pressure in high school with that in junior high school.

Christine: I think peer pressure has decreased. As I, and most of the people around me, matured we became more comfortable with ourselves. I don't feel the need to do anything in order to be cool. I believe that once you get to high school you are less concerned with

being in the popular group and more concerned with finding friends you have things in common with. When you have friends, you share interests with and are comfortable with, peer pressure is eliminated.

Family Support--The Influence of the Family

Researcher

My mom went to every parent/teacher meeting for her six boys. Not only that, she was active in the Home and School Association. She worked to establish the serving of hot meals in the school cafeteria. She believed that students should have the opportunity to have a hot meal at lunch.

I knew that my mom was monitoring my education. She would give me a report after the parent/teacher interview. If I was absent, I brought a note explaining my absence. A common question in the evening was, "Do you have any home work tonight?" After my disastrous first report in Grade 9, I remember my mom telling me not to worry and to just keep working hard. I could always count on my mom for support. She knew many of the teachers and administrators in my school. This also meant that my behaviour was closely monitored. My mom had ways of finding out.

My two children attended the school where I currently teach. I remember their questions about Grade 10. Questions which may have been mundane to others, were of significance to them. How do I get a locker? Will I have a new home room in second semester? My children were privileged in that they never rode the bus. We drove together. Often we talked about school. How was your day? This was the question upon meeting after school. I taught my son, so I knew his homework! As a parent, I asked the same

questions to my children that were asked of me. Do you have any home work? When is your next test? I believe that these same questions are asked by most of our parents of Grade 10 students. As a teacher, I make many assumptions about how and whether students are supported by their families. Experience tells me that a combination of factors such as poor attendance, lower grades, behaviour problems, etcetera may suggest some crisis at home. For some students, friends become the major influence at the exclusion of parents. While some parents may wish the best for the child, they may no longer have any influence over their child's behaviour.

Because of my experiences with my own parents and my experiences with parents during my career, I wanted to explore this area to discover the effects of parental support during the transition from junior high to senior high school. Because of concerns for confidentiality, many of my questions concerning family support were directed during one-to-one interviews and also as e-mail messages. Having spent a great deal of time with the participants in this study, I was not surprised with the degree of parental support. I discovered that all participants came from supportive homes. I know that in Prince Edward Island, there are home situations where this degree of parental support is not possible. Maybe there is conflict in the home. There may be several reasons for diminished parental of support. I carried my assumptions to my discussions with Jean. I was not surprised. Jean: My parents don't exactly influence me and my decisions concerning Grade 10, but they are always in the back of my mind when it comes to anything. I know that they want me to succeed and do well, and they don't want me to go through difficult times. But everyone does and you can't help that but they are great when it comes to asking me how

school is going and just letting me know that they are there whenever I need them--which I appreciate very much. When it comes to influencing me, they don't. I just try to do my best and be who I want to be and who I know I am and they will be just as happy.

Researcher

It was apparent that Jean felt a great deal of support from her parents in ways similar to Christine.

Christine: My parents are probably my biggest influence. They taught me the importance of education at a very young age and have also taught me to set my goals high. They have always helped me with important decisions regarding school, but they have never made them for me.

Lori: Parents influence me in a way of behaviour as in if they are nice to their friends, I'll be nice to my friends as in I'm copying them in their behaviour. In the way they support me in my career goals is, I might think of a job that I might want to do and they will support me all the way. In school work, they would help me as much as they can and if I say no to needing help, they'll just let me go at it alone.

Researcher

I have taught these three individuals, and I have met their parents at parent/teacher interviews. Our discussions at these interviews left me with the belief that the parents of these children were very much involved in the education of their children. At the conclusion of the interviews, their parents will often say, "If you have any concerns, please call us."

David, like Jean, Lori and Cody, has made his decisions with respect to drugs and

alcohol. But he credits his parents with influencing him in other positive ways

David: My parents have a major influence with respect to anything career/future oriented and, although I may not realize it, have probably influenced the way I behave too because of the ways I was brought up. However, it's me who makes my decisions about drugs, alcohol, etcetera.

Researcher

Aaron's parents were his strongest supporters. I asked him to tell me about them.

Aaron: They just keep on motivating me to do my best and like to study and try my hardest in school since it's a big change from junior high.

Researcher

Cody had the benefit of a cousin who still attends the school. Mary relied on her sister who is one year older. Bill depended upon his parents to help with projects. Among my participants in this study, it is apparent that parental support is evident. These were the parents who attended the parent/teacher conferences, sporting events, band concerts, and other activities which are part of school life. As this research proceeded, I discovered that all of the participants were privileged to live in homes with two parents.

Parental Monitoring of Education

Researcher

During the research, it had become evident that the participants had the benefit of parents who cared about the education of their children. But I wanted to explore this idea further. It's one thing to go to the interviews. But sometimes, parents get a big surprise when the teacher reports that their child is not progressing as well as they suspected.

Maybe they assumed that, "no news is good news." As a parent, I know that monitoring is important. I was interested in whether there was active monitoring of education in the homes of the participants. Did parents ask those questions which I was asked every day and which I asked my children?

David: I am the only child so my mom knows what I am doing.

Researcher

David also noted that his parents saw him working on his studies at home. He felt that there was good communication with his parents. His parents regularly attended parent/teacher interviews. Mary also reported that there was plenty of communication at home.

Christine: Mom stays on top of me for tests. She can predict what is going to be hard and what will be easy because we are so much alike.

Researcher

Christine's mom regularly attended parent/teacher interviews.

Bill: Mom and Dad help me with my homework They go to lots of parent/teacher meetings.

Researcher

Bill also disclosed that his parents were very aware of his progress. They always tell him, "just do your best."

Cody: At the dinner table, we discuss things about school. We have built a trust. I am pretty good about telling the good and the bad

Researcher

Cody also related that his mother gave him advice on bullies. She also tells him to work hard. His mother attended parent-teacher meetings.

Researcher

Jean felt that discussions about school were part of their normal, natural conversations at home. Although Jean did not play sports at school, her parents attended her soccer games in the local soccer league.

Teachers

Researcher

Looking back, I remember all of my teachers from my first year in high school but I forged strong relationships with only a few. My French teacher had actually taught my father many years before. She was very strict and tolerated little nonsense. I certainly knew what to expect in her class. Math and English classes were much the same. These teachers were firm but fair. I really liked my home room teacher. History became interesting. He was relaxed and personable. When you did well, you were complimented. As mentioned previously, my first report was not good. He must have sensed that I was having difficulty. He continued to talk with me and offer encouragement. His support helped me earn a much better second report card.

In retrospect, the support of teachers inspired me. Knowing that I was supported, I worked hard to please them. Now, I am the teacher. I think teachers would like to know how they are perceived by students. Are they perceived as helpful? This question is, I think, quite significant, and so are the answers. I recognize however, that this could be a

sensitive topic. Students may be hesitant to criticize teachers. In all questions pertaining to teachers, I asked that no names be used. I wanted my students to describe the influence of their teachers. Did they feel the same support I had experienced?

Jean: All of the teachers I have had throughout my years before high school have always been a great help. The teachers here are the same. The teachers I have had this year have been so great with trying to help me pick out my courses for next year and they are always trying to help you achieve to your highest status. When it comes to school work, the teachers are great. They don't pile on the work, especially work I don't understand. They really influence me on how I do my work, and how I enjoy my classes.

Researcher

Jean also noted that her teachers often offered advice.

Jean: Well from my own experiences, I have had teachers that have spoken to me on different occasions outside of class about my career future and have always told me that if I ever needed anyone to talk about it, they would be in their class at anytime.

Researcher

David felt that his teachers influenced his school and career goals somewhat by encouraging him. He related to me that during the first semester, he had an excellent teacher who took time to look over projects with him. This resulted in a better result, according to David, and also added a certain comfort level. David also felt that expectations were higher.

David: I think expectations are higher. It's more like you know, we're not going to look after you. It's up to you to get your stuff done. Obviously, they still care, but they don't

look after you. But, they're always there for you if you want help. They expect you to be organized already and they expect you to know that you are going to remember a project.

Researcher

Aaron appreciated the fact that teachers encouraged him to participate in a variety of extracurricular activities.

Finally, there was a consensus that high school teachers treated them more like adults. Christine and Mary suggested that they were babied in junior high. While everyone appreciated the adult treatment, they also recognized that there were higher academic expectations. There were more exams and project work.

I wanted to discover more about their perceptions of high school teachers. I had read that junior high teachers were more interested in the affective domain while high school teachers were more career-oriented. Were high school teachers more interested in careers and less interested in their students than junior high teachers? I posed this question to several of the participants.

Christine: I don't think it's all teachers, although I am sure that there are some that couldn't care less at the end of the day. All the teachers I have had have shown an appropriate amount of care toward students. They introduce us to many different career paths and guide us toward them. Most teachers make school fairly enjoyable which makes it easier to go every morning. Junior high teachers treat us more childish, but in junior high we were more childish. By the time we reach high school, most of us are mature and are ready to be treated like adults and take on more responsibilities.

Researcher

While high school teachers were not perceived to be less caring, David and Jean suggested it was easier in junior high to get to know the teacher because they had more contact with the teacher. But just what qualities do these students look for in a good teacher? I wanted to know.

Aaron: I look for a nice, organized and smart teacher. Someone who will listen if I have anything to say. The teacher should not treat us like junior high students.

David: Patient, understanding, encouraging, calm, motivating, interesting.

Lori: Enjoys teaching the subject he is teaching, funny, changes up the routine - like one day you're on the computer and the next day you are having discussions in class.

Christine: I look for a teacher that treats me with respect and teaches with rules they stick to. I like teachers that are straight forward with their expectations so there is no confusion. Eccentric teachers are a plus too.

Researcher

I asked Christine to describe a situation where she observed these qualities in a teacher.

Christine: I had a teacher that on the first day of school, she told us exactly what was expected of us, what her rules were regarding due dates, etcetera and she stuck to them. She was pretty strict, but she treated everyone equally and made no exceptions to her rules for anyone. She was great because I have so many teachers that treat one student differently from the others. I have also had teachers that were very wishy-washy with due dates. I had a project due the beginning of November and a boy in my class didn't do it and

the teacher gave him until after Christmas break to finish it and he lost only 10 per cent. I was furious!

Researcher

For the most part, participants were satisfied with their teachers. If they were disappointed with teachers, they did not say. I recognize again that students may have been reluctant to criticize their teachers.

Positive Experiences

Researcher

A key objective of this research has been to discover the positive experiences of students during transition. This knowledge, I hoped, would give insight into the features of a school culture which promote a smooth transition. As a practitioner-researcher, I hoped that this research would also increase my awareness of the needs of the students in transition, and would therefore help to develop further my skills as a teacher.

When I reflect upon my own transition to high school, I recall that after the initial "shock" of losing a few friends to other classes I began to feel confident about making new friends. Many of the participants in my study reported similar experiences. They actually discovered that it was easier to make friends in high school than in junior high.

Aaron: There's a lot of people in the school. I like it. There's a lot more people to get to know and a lot more friends to be made and I like how you change people, like every class. You don't have the same people in every class. A new set of people.

Researcher

Cody, Lori, and Jean's comments were quite similar to Aaron. They suggested that

the maturity of the students may be a factor. Of course, being in contact with more students will open up more possibilities for making friends. But, it was suggested that because students were more mature, it became easier to make friends because students were more accepting of other students. Lori and Cody agreed that there was less gossip in high school. Cody revealed the hurtful side of gossip during his interview with me.

Cody: When I was in junior high, I had a lot of rumours go around about me like ah, I'll name for example, one incident was that I pooped my pants in class. It was serious, like nobody would talk to you and that was like 5% of the whole population had a rumour going around about them.

Researcher

I asked Cody how the rumours affected him.

Cody: They affected me socially and then I wasn't doing great academically-wise either.

Researcher

In high school, Christine suggested, rumours still get passed around. But eventually, these rumours get passed to a teacher, parent, or student and usually don't go further. As the students perceived a higher maturity level of their peers, they also perceived that they were treated more as adults by their teachers.

During our discussions, it became apparent to me that the semesterized timetable system was viewed quite favourably by the participants. As Cody said, "You only have to worry about four subjects."

Mary: I like the classes because I'm used to having the same twenty-five people, the entire day, all year with you. But then you have different people in every class and like you

change halfway through the year. I thought that was good.

Researcher

For some participants, the higher expectations of teachers resulted in a perceived sense of independence. David and Jean, in particular, felt that they had become more independent because of their teacher's expectations.

Jean: One thing we did this year was a research paper and I felt a lot more independent doing that than I ever did with the projects. They kind of left it up to you to do whatever you wanted to do and then figure it out on your own and then if you need any help they would be there for you. You kind of feel you are more ready for the world because it's not always going to be like you have somebody there to protect you for everything.

Researcher

Academically, the students in my study either maintained or improved upon their academic standing from junior high. Discussions with participants suggested that these growing feelings of autonomy and maturity, and positive relationships with teachers and friends have been significant factors in a positive transition experience.

Negative Experiences

Researcher

Much of the data collection has revealed that there have been many positive experiences in Grade 10. During the research, I have tried to uncover the negative experiences also. There may not be remedies for these problems but being aware of the difficulties may help others cope during the transition. I am familiar with the struggles of establishing relationships and the difficulties with peer pressure. These are themes which

have been shown to be significant issues to students. However, I have also been interested in problems the students encountered which may be related to the high school system itself.

One major concern, expressed by Lori, Cody, and Bill, was the different evaluation scheme in high school. Because high school is semesterized, mid-semester exams have been a new experience. Evaluation in junior high involved a series of small tests culminating with final exams. In high school, the students experienced a major set of mid-semester exams twice during the school year.

Cody: I found that there's too many big tests that are worth a lot and not enough little-step tests, like step-by-step tests after a little bit and then you jump to a big test.

Researcher

Christine and Mary related that in junior high it was common to have a pretest before a major test. David and Jean and elaborated on this notion.

David: I find they hardly do any kind of reviewing now. Like last year we would have like at least a couple of days of review before a big test. Now we have no review as all except for us to do that and start studying ourselves. Last year they would kind of tell us that we have a test next week and to make sure we start studying over the weekend and we're going to have a review on Monday. Now, they don't have that anymore.

Jean: They don't really prepare you for some things, like projects and tests. They don't prepare you for them. You kind of have to keep yourself ready for stuff like that.

Researcher

For several of the students, the course work for English was thought to be very demanding. In particular, it was felt that they were not prepared for the demands of

learning to do projects and research papers.

For Bill, the semesterized system has created another concern-the pace of classes. Will felt that some teachers went too fast, saying, "Explaining once isn't enough."

Finally, several participants reported anxiety resulting with course selection for the next school year. While students welcomed the variety of courses, some students felt anxious about their selections. Were they making the correct choices for the future? The role of the teacher in counselling for course selection and career planning was acknowledged.

A Word of Advice

One year of high school is marked by many experiences. The students in this study have experienced the demands of new courses and new teachers. The daily struggles of establishing and maintaining relationships have been documented in this study. Personal decisions regarding peer pressure and course selection have been additional highlights.

As the school year was drawing to a close, I wanted to ask the participants for a word of advice-- not for me but for students presently in Grade 9. What words of wisdom could they give to the student who is about to enter Grade 10 this coming September? This, I think, is a significant question. My students were near the completion of Grade 10 and their experiences were still fresh. Surely, Grade 9 students would be interested. Here is a sample of their responses.

Christine: I would just say don't be shy and don't be afraid to try anything new because like you're going to make friends and be involved if you're going to shy away from it all. Even like from the first day, like if you sit beside someone you don't know just talk to

them and get to know people right away

Jean: Just be yourself and get to know your teachers. Don't go into school and think everything is going to be sad and that you're going to get lost and that you won't be able to find your friends and not make new ones. Don't think that everything is going to work out that way. You should think positively and say, "I do have friends here and I may not find them the first day but I will find them. I may get lost but everyone does." Just have a positive approach to everything you do. It makes it easier to go through.

Mary: I just say, get involved because it's pretty boring just sitting at school all day and if you just got involved in a team or club or something, it's a lot better. Just being organized is really important.

Lori: Get involved

Aaron: I would probably tell them to start to study a bit, get into a study routine or study habit because once you get into high school it's kinda hard just to start. If you start a little bit, you can work up.

David: I have always been organized but you know for other people I think that would have been the main thing. Use the agenda book you know. If I didn't have that agenda, I'd be lost.

Cody: Try your best. You shouldn't reject anybody because like they're going through the same thing you are and kinda work off each other.

Bill: Just to get organized and try your best.

What Can We Do To Make the Transition Easier?

Researcher

I needed to ask this question. Over the years, our school has worked hard to welcome our new students. In fact, over the past year my colleagues have instituted several Grade 10 orientation activities. However, it is fair to say that we can feel comfortable in our ways and not be sensitive to the needs of our new students.

Aaron, Christine, and Mary concurred that teachers in the school probably could not do anything differently. However, they believed that there should be more preparation in junior high school. In particular, it was felt that higher expectations and more adult-like treatment in Grade 9 would better prepare them for the demand of high school. Listen, here, to their words.

Jean: I agree. But, I also think like teachers at junior high school could have talked about it more with us. Like instead of not acknowledging that we are actually moving on, they should have talked to us more about it and kind of gave their point of view or like examples of what they went through.

Christine: I don't think like any of my teachers last year talked about going into high school at all. Like it was just like when Grade 9 was over we were going to be going back there in Grade 10--switching schools. I don't remember any talk.

Researcher

Bill proposed that a high school should give Grade 9 students a pamphlet. He also suggested that Grade 10 students could visit the school to help prepare Grade 9 students. In the spring, guidance counsellors visit the junior high schools to advise students on

course registration. At present, Grade 9 students do not make a formal visit to the high school before entering Grade 10.

So, How Would You Rate Your Year?

Researcher

As I approached the conclusion of each interview, I asked several of the students to rate their first year in high school. On a scale of one to five, with five being excellent, here is a sample of the ratings.

Lori: Probably a four.

Researcher

Lori added that her grades were better than she expected. She wished that she was better at making friends.

Bill: Probably a three.

Researcher

Academically, Bill has had a successful year. Making friends continues to be a concern.

David: Basically, nothing has gone wrong, nothing bad has happened, so it's good that way and I would probably give it about a four.

Researcher

I asked David if there was anything he could have done differently during his first year.

David: I've tried my best--I don't think I could have. I'm not involved in most sports teams so this is where most people made their friends that way and I really don't think I

could have. I tried really hard and then I realized I wasn't getting too far so I thought, you know, I'm wasting my time here you know.

Christine: I would rate my Grade 10 experience a five. I hated junior high. I don't really have one specific reason why I did, I guess I just thought it was really juvenile. I love high school. I love the respect from teachers, and the course selection and the freedom I have. I don't feel trapped like in junior high.

Cody: I think that it has been a good experience.

Researcher

In the next chapter, I will describe the significance of these findings.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This study was designed to examine the experiences of eight Grade 10 students who experienced the transition from junior high to high school. My aim in writing this thesis was to describe the change both from my perspective as a practitioner-researcher and from the perspective of selected participants. My objective was to understand the practices, the factors, and the supports available to participants as they experienced transition. The intent of this research, then, was to address three key questions: What does the transition process mean to the participants experiencing it, what can educators do to facilitate better the process, and what did it mean for me to engage qualitatively in the research process as a defined practitioner-researcher?

According to Hertzog and Morgan (1999), the transition into high school is a process and not an event. From their perspective, and I agree, transition to high school arguably takes place during the most important life stage of a young person. Supporting this view, Queen (2002) proposes that there are two distinct forms of transition as young people move from junior high school to senior high school. One form of transition, he contends, is systemic and is built into the structure of the public school system. The other form of transition, he suggests, is developmental and involves the physical, intellectual, social, and emotional changes that students undergo as part of their transitions. How students experience these dual events was central to my research. Notably, however, I focused more on the second phase of transition than on the first, in part, because I wanted to understand the quality of experience as told by eight participants. In a future study, I

might also examine how school structures (i.e. size of school, teacher to student ratios, availability of technology, etcetera) shape student participation.

The two forms of transition proposed by Queen (2002) were readily apparent in my research. The participants I talked with all reported varying degrees of anxiety about what to expect from teachers and how they might meet what they perceived to be the higher expectations of teachers and parents. This kind of anxiety, I suggest, is relevant to the category of systemic transition developed in Queen's (2002) study. Again, in keeping with his findings, most of my participants seemed to experience the second level of transition described by him. But, the participants in my research also struggled with the second layer of concern discussed in Queen's work: how to establish friendships with peers, how to fit with peers, how to make decisions about drug and alcohol use, for example. These concerns, Queen suggests, belong to the developmental phase of transition. Like Queen, I find these categories helpful as a means of organizing the layers of experience common in qualitative research findings. Some of the participants in my study, students such as Jean, Christine, Aaron, and Mary, were obviously comfortable with both forms of transitions. Other participants, students such as David and Lori, struggled with the developmental phase of transition. Bill, I suggest, struggled with both transitions.

For some of the participants in this study, the adjustment to high school was relatively seamless. For others, this was not as readily apparent. For example, Christine's comment- "What was I so worried about?"-- made during the focus group, exemplifies an easy transition. Mary and Jean also found the transition easy.

By contrast, the data revealed a marked difference in Bill's experience. Perhaps

Bill's greatest achievement, however, was discovering a friend. David, unlike Bill, did not have to struggle for academic success. But he also struggled, like Bill, to make friends.

The value and importance of friends as integral to successful transition is well described in the work of Berndt (1999). His assumption that high quality friendships have a higher frequency of positive interactions is supported in my data. This data also underscores the significance of making friends with people who share similar values. This assumption supports the view that a student's adjustment to high school can be negatively or positively influenced by friends. My many conversations with Jean and Christine, two of the participants who demonstrated a strong ability to sustain and build friendships, support both Berndt's (1999), and my own assumptions, about the importance of friendship as key to successful transition. Again, Berndt argues, and I agree, it seems that high-quality friendships may enhance the sense of group belonging and thereby reduce anxiety for young people in transition. According to Isakson and Jarvis (1999), increased emphasis on social interactions in high school may, however, create an environment where fitting in, and belonging, serves as an added source of pressure, rather than pleasure. Data indicated that this kind of pressure was evident in Bill's story. As well, David's struggle to fit in with one particular kind of group was later altered when he decided the struggle to "fit in" wasn't worth the effort. "Why bother?" he told me.

All of the participants in my research reported a significant degree of parental support. My data is consistent with the work of Sui-Chi and Williams (1996, as cited in Falbo et al., 2001). Their study indicated that parents' discussion of school at home had the most positive association with student achievement. In addition, Falbo et al. (2001)

noted that three related parental activities were identified as common among teens who made a successful transition to high school. These activities included monitoring, evaluating, and intervention. My research data supports these findings. In fact, the high degree of parental support in my research is notable. All participants readily acknowledged the importance of parental support. Even participants such as Bill, Lori, and Cody, students who struggled academically, reported that parents played a major role in their successful transition to high school. In the case of all participants, school was a daily part of home discussion and clearly parents were aware of their children's progress. Furthermore, all parents of participants in the study attended parent/teacher conferences. This support, I suggest, was key to the levels of successful transition analyzed in this research.

Overall, and contrary to the work of Isakson and Jarvis (1999), most of the participants in my research demonstrated no significant drop in achievement while they were in transition. In fact, most of the participants in this study reported increased academic achievement.

In keeping with Isakson and Jarvis (1999), most participants indicated an increase in stress during the first semester of the year in which transition occurred. Isakson and Jarvis report that attendance rates improved during the initial transition into high school and then later dropped significantly. Unlike Isakson and Jarvis, however, the participants in this study showed no evidence of a significant drop in attendance in the second semester of their transition year. Again, I would suggest that this factor could be attributed to parental support.

An unexpected benefit of doing this qualitative research project was the change that was brought about in the life of one of the participants through his becoming friends with one of the other research participants. Bill did not have any friends at the outset of this research and I worried continuously throughout the year that I worked with him. I worried about his fitting in with his peers, most of whom seemed to have at least one other friend to help them during their transition. Bill did eventually develop a friendship with another student who was in our class and had participated in this study.

Another unforeseen benefit of doing qualitative research was the change brought about in my own understanding of what it means to research what I actively practice as a teacher. Seeing myself as a practitioner-researcher has enabled me to see myself in three new ways. First, as a science teacher I can do more than write up objective experiments that do not necessarily involve people. Second, as a practitioner-researcher I can use qualitative, as well as quantitative methods to evaluate experience. Finally, I am a person holding assumptions that can change. Importantly, I have begun to see how my assumptions about areas such as diversity, or a lack of diversity, directly affects the research I am able to do. In other words, doing this research has taught me to question better who I am, what I do, and how I do it. Reading my study may also help others, by analogy, to question themselves and their practices similarly.

It has been amazing for me to realize that in telling the stories of eight participants' transitions, and of my orchestrated interactions with them, I have been doing research and describing a research process. I never before knew that narrative, as discussed in Cole and Knowles (2000), could be used as a research framework within the larger frame of

qualitative research. After all, I was a science teacher who saw story as something that belonged to the realm of pleasure. However, I have long appreciated the power of narrative but I did not know until working through the literature for this research, and then in executing the study itself, that I could use story to explore a research question and my own observations.

Interestingly, my realization about the use of narrative ran parallel with my understanding of Hertzog and Morgan's (1999) distinction between a process and an event. The students' transition were processes rather than events and similarly their understanding of their process and my understanding of them were also processes, not events. Thus, I realized that the use of a narrative framework for examining participants's experiences was indeed the appropriate form for illustrating a process itself rather than a single moment or statistic that could be called an event.

As my literature review suggested, two key factors support the successful transition of students from junior high to high school: family support and friendships. Leaving aside the fairly homogenous nature of the participants I studied (even though this group was fairly representative of the students I teach) it is significant, I think, that these two factors are clearly the most decisive influences of successful transition. Interestingly, neither of these seems to be within the power of the school to create or influence. I am not suggesting that schools are responsible for arranging healthy friendship, but I am suggesting that a recognition by teachers of the power of friendship could influence the way schools encourage group interactions among students. Even though schools cannot assume that there is parental support at home for students, schools can recognize that they

must work to provide some alternative for this support even if it is strengthening the opportunities for friendship and thereby providing one of the two key factors for successful transitions.

A third critical factor for successful student transition found in Murdock et al. (2000) is the presence of teachers who are actively engaged with their students. It may be that teachers who love their jobs as I do can supplement parental support and possibly provide a substitute for parental support when not present simply by being actively present to students in a classroom context. While no teacher can replace the benefit of having parental support described by Falbo et al. (2001), for homework, school interaction, and encouragement of peer supportive friendships, teachers can support students in student interactions with community and in the development of friendships. This support, I know, occurs in the school where I work in the form of the many teachers who are actively engaged in a variety of extracurricular activities. This involvement ranges from day-to-day and ongoing discussions with students in a classroom context to actual events that are supervised by teachers. It may be, I suggest, that the development of community relationships and strong peer ties through teachers could encourage students to do homework, and thus to work harder for success.

I recognize that in many ways the participants in this study, and the student population at large in the school where this study was done, have ideal support from parents and guardians. But, I can see from working with selected participants that even if their situations were not ideal there could be ways to provide through school strategies the supports and qualities of interaction that are crucial to their transitions. Perhaps because

the conditions in my school and in this sample are "ideal", I have not pursued, though I am aware of, the conditions that make student transitions difficult and even assume that some students fall through the cracks. I maintain, however, that a positive study is as beneficial to understanding transition as is a negative study concentrating on lapses and poor conditions. This, I suggest, could be done in a future study were I to continue with this work. Concentrating on the three most positive elements that the participants in this study enjoy in this school underscores the primacy of these conditions where other students less fortunate are concerned.

The literature suggests, and I concur, that a strong identity is key to students' well-being and healthy adjustment in schools. I would suggest, following the lead of Cole and Knowles (2000), that a teacher's identity is strengthened by being a practitioner-researcher. Through the process of strengthening personal identity the practitioner-researcher may provide students with a model of thinking and living in process. If teaching is an autobiographical act as is suggested by Cole and Knowles, and if the "I" shaping the autobiography is itself strengthened through the process of doing practitioner-research, and through the process of writing in a qualitative way, then perhaps it follows that the stories of the students involved in the teacher's autobiography are themselves strengthened in the process of the telling.

I have chosen, then, to close this portion of the research process with one version of Bill's story. Bill, I've discovered, continues to "soldier" on in a schooling environment that is not always easy for him. Now a grade eleven student, Bill soldiers on in a new way, perhaps as a result of his participation in a research project, or perhaps, simply because he

is a year older. Bill came to my class early in September following the year in which he had been a participant in the study. I had promised to burn some music for him. Every time he met me in the halls he would ask if his music was ready. This time, I had indeed finished making his music. That morning I told him to see me at lunch so that he could pick up his disk. When he arrived at the door of my classroom, I gave him the music. I noticed that Cody, another participant in the study, was waiting with him at the door. I said to Bill, "Are you two guys hanging around together?" With a broad smile, Bill replied, "Yes." Bill, I know, could not have found a nicer guy to "hang" with. In retrospect, I'm not sure I would have known this had I organized my research in a quantitative way.

If we recognize the transition from junior high school as a process rather than an event, then we are better able to focus on the necessary elements of support for this process. These elements include informed and supportive teachers, friends, peers, parents, and administrators. As a practitioner-researcher, I plan to help future students make this transition successfully. Seeing myself as a teacher and a researcher, and an integral part of this process of transition, I see schooling in a different way. As well, I will continue to work to provide a schooling context that supports successful student transitions. From this perspective, this research is designed to help students and teachers become more aware of what students in transition need to make it a process rather than an event.

I agree with Queen (2002) that principals must establish guidelines to make the transition easier. The success of all new students is a top priority. Also, I would concur that teachers must build a team atmosphere and be proactive in cultivating relationships with students and parents. Queen's suggestion that there is a need for all staff members to

accept students regardless of their varying circumstances is an important recommendation for all schools. When we embrace this idea, we are showing unconditional support for students who are new to our school community.

Finally, we must continue our dialogue with junior high schools. As Hertzog and Morgan (2001) propose, we must not blame each other for perceived shortfalls instruction. Rather, we must work together to help students find success as they move from one level to another.

These abovementioned ideas are significant recommendations for all high school communities in support of students in transition.

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Your signature below indicates your acceptance of the above request but you may withdraw your consent at any time. I will return a copy of this signed letter of consent for your records.

Sincerely,

Dale Cole
Graduate Student, University of Prince Edward Island

I, _____, agree to allow my child to participate in the abovementioned study at this site.

Signature:_____

Date: _____

I, _____, agree to allow the above study to be conducted at this site.

Signature:_____

Date: _____