Self-concept over the transition from primary to secondary school: A case study on a program for girls

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Students' transition from primary to secondary school has been associated with negative psychological, social and academic changes. In particular, students' self-concept has been found to be adversely affected by the transition. Some have argued that *transition programs* are effective and practical in easing the transition from primary to secondary school. The present study evaluates the effectiveness of one such program for targeting students' self-concept at the time of the move into secondary school, for girls in an independent single-sex school in Sydney NSW Australia. Results indicate that this specific program was *not* effective in enhancing self-concept. It is concluded that further quality research is needed to investigate the full range of benefits of transition programs for students entering grade 7 before *ad hoc* implementation in schools. The study did, however, identify interesting effects of continuation from primary to secondary within the same school institution. Initial lower entry self-concepts for 'new' relative to 'continuing students had not recovered by mid-year 7, implications of which are subsequently explored.

The transition from primary to secondary school represents for many students a stressful move from the nest of a protective, familiar environment with considerable individual attention, into an often impersonal and intimidating atmosphere in junior high (Berliner, 1993). In the State of New South Wales (NSW) Australia, where the present study was conducted, primary school spans grades 3 to 6, followed by secondary school which spans grades 7 to 12. Once students reach the 'transition point' on commencement of grade 7, school size is significantly larger than it was in primary school, academic standards are more rigorous, social circles and peer pressures change profoundly, discipline is more abruptly delivered, and students often believe their performance is assessed publicly and has life-long implications (Berliner, 1993). Concurrent with the transition from primary to secondary school is the beginning of adolescence. Enormous physiological, social, emotional, and environmental changes are beginning or are on their way.

Clear evidence has been found for negative psychological, social and academic changes among adolescents making the transition to junior high

school (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). In addition to declines in self-concept (Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996; Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989a; Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Simmons, Blyth, Van Cleave, & Bush, 1979; Yates, 1999), declines have been found for academic performance (Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Watt, 2000), motivation (Harter, Whitesell, & Kowalski, 1992), quality of teacher/student relationships (Midgley et al., 1989a; Midgley, Feldhaufer, & Eccles, 1989b), and perceived quality of school life (Eccles et al. 1993; Roeser et al., 1996; Ward et al., 1982). Similarly, negative attributes such as psychological distress (Harter, 1982; Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987; Nottelmann, 1986; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996; Simmons et al., 1979; Trent, 1992; Trent, Russell, & Cooney, 1994), feelings of alienation (Youth Research Centre, 1995a, 1995b), and anti-social behaviour (Blyth et al., 1978; Seidman, Blyth, Van Cleave, & Bush, 1994; Wigfield, Eccles, Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991) were amplified over the transition.

Some studies have found that students' self-concept is at its highest in year 6 due to them being the oldest in the primary school and therefore having the greatest status (Marsh, 1987). At this time, students know their school routines well and their school environment is familiar. In contrast, in year 7 they are the youngest in the secondary school and are adjusting to their new school environment, and as a consequence, their self-concept plunges (Wigfield et al., 1991).

Negative psychological, social and academic effects post-transition to secondary school may well be due to differences between the cultures of primary and secondary schools. Primary schools are mainly concerned with the development of basic skills of literacy and numeracy and the social, aesthetic and emotional development of young children (Midgley et al., 1989a). Secondary schools, in contrast, tend to concentrate on curriculum subject matter rather than the developmental needs of students (Midgley et al., 1989a). According to person-environment fit theory (Eccles et al., 1993), motivation and mental health are both influenced by the fit between the characteristics individuals bring to their social environments and the characteristics of these social environments. Individuals are not likely to do well, or be motivated, if they are located in social environments that are not meeting their needs. If the social environments in secondary school do not 'fit' with the psychological needs of adolescents, then person-environment fit theory predicts declines in motivation, interest and performance (Eccles et al., 1993). In fact, such declines in academic self-esteem, class preparation, and grade point average have been found across ethnic and gender groups (Seidman et al., 1994). Differences may be expected across socioeconomic groups, although little has been done to investigate how transition effects may be differential for those groups. We may speculate, for instance, that the transition impact will be less marked for students from higher

socioeconomic backgrounds, given the possibility of greater congruence for school and home educational values, although comparative designs would need to be employed to investigate such suggestions. Primary and secondary schools have very different environments and it is the disjuncture between these environments on commencement of year 7 that is likely to result in negative effects to students, both actual and perceived. Since it has been argued that children are affected to a greater extent by their perceptions than by actual events (Goodnow, 1988), this study focuses on changes in students' self-perceptions and more objective indexes of actuality, because self-perceptions are not always a result of objective realities (Conger, 1991). The way students perceive events may amount to reality for them, since students' *interpretations* of themselves and their environments have been argued to be more important than more objective indexes (Goodnow, 1988).

Self-concept is made up of a number of components, which can be affected in different ways. When making the secondary school transition, self-concept domains investigated here are those proposed as key by Harter (1985). The present study assesses the dimensions of perceived scholastic competence, social acceptance, physical appearance, behavioural conduct, and global self-worth, proposed as components of self-concept by Harter (1985). Self-concept can be viewed both as an enduring personal disposition characterised by temporal consistency, and also as a variable state of self-evaluation regulated by environmental events (O'Malley & Bachman, 1983). Harter's model of self-concept adopted in the present study, includes both individuals' overall sense of self-worth as well as their multidimensional self-evaluative judgements (Trent et al., 1994). The assessment of a child's self-concept should take into account cognitive developmental changes (Rosenberg, 1986). Self-concept is represented here by the scholastic competence self-concept dimension; as well as major concerns associated with particular periods of development (Rosenberg, 1986), addressed here by the social acceptance and physical appearance dimensions.

Changes in self-concept associated with the transition from primary to secondary school

Harter's self-concept measure for children (1985) assessed students' perceptions related to five dimensions. Scholastic competence is defined as children's perceptions of competence or ability within the scholastic realm. Social acceptance refers to the degree to which children feel they have friends, feel popular, and feel that most kids like them. Physical appearance asks about the degree to which children are happy with the way they look, like their height, weight, body, face, hair and feel they are good-looking. Behavioural conduct measures the degree to which children

like the way they behave, do the right thing, act the way they are supposed to, avoid getting into trouble, and do the things they are supposed to do. The global self-worth factor assesses the extent to which children like themselves as people, are happy with the way they are leading their lives, and are generally happy with the way they are.

Scholastic self-concept

Marked declines have been found in the school grades of early adolescents as they move into junior high school (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Several transition studies have documented declines in end of year grades for students across the junior high school transition (e.g., Anderman & Midgley, 1997). Academic performance has been found to decrease with every transition between schools (Felner, 1981), but in particular with the transition from primary to secondary school.

Many teachers of young adolescents have reported their students' learning is inhibited by the fragmentation of the curriculum of the secondary school into a large number of subject-based units. Also, students moving from primary to secondary school are affected by the lack of proper articulation or continuity between the curricula of the two stages (Schools Council, 1993). The Schools Council (1993) has found that transition problems can occur for students due to the large number of teachers students are expected to deal with on a daily basis, as well as the large range of subjects. One longitudinal study found students' academic self-concept in Mathematics and English declined following the transition to junior high and, although it recovered to some extent later in the year, it did not recover to pre-transition levels (Wigfield et al., 1991). These declines were attributed to differences between classroom environments in primary and secondary schools, within the person-environment fit theoretical framework. Declines in perceived academic competence following the move to junior high school have also been found in other studies (e.g., Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Watt (2000) supports these findings within the Australian context when she identified the transition to junior high as negatively affecting students' self-concept of ability as well as subjective valuation in both Mathematics and English.

The larger social group in year 7 compared with year 6 can also result in declines in academic self-concept, particularly for competent students who suddenly find themselves no longer at or near the top of their class given this broader comparison group. The Big-Fish-Little-Pond Effect (BFLPE) occurs as a result of external comparisons when equally able students have lower self-perceived academic skills and self-concepts when they compare themselves with more able students (Marsh, 1987), which is more likely to occur given the larger and broader comparison group in secondary school.

Secondary school teachers appear to use higher standards in judging students' competence and grading their performance than primary school teachers (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). There is evidence that secondary school teachers use stricter and more socially comparative standards than primary school teachers to assess and evaluate students' competence, leading to a drop in grades for many adolescents as they make the transition (Eccles, et al., 1993). This drop in grades can also mean a drop in academic self-concept. Adolescence is known to be a time of increased academic concerns and general self consciousness, and some studies have found that competitive academic environments may serve to increase these feelings of self-consciousness at a time when this could be detrimental to adolescents' self-image (Roeser et al., 1996; Eccles & Midgley, 1989). The competition to 'be the best' pervades many school climates and can lead to anxiety and threats to self-worth. These threats are thought to occur due to secondary school environments being more impersonal, formal, evaluative, and competitive than the primary environment (Harter et al., 1992).

Social self-concept

The school transition is associated with changes in the school environment and peer contexts (Seidman et al., 1994). Daily hassles with school have been reported to increase and perceptions of social support and extracurricular involvement to decrease over the transition (Seidman et al., 1994). These changes in young adolescents' attitudes and beliefs have been postulated to be in part due to differences in the school environments of primary and secondary schools (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). These differences include a greater emphasis on social comparison among students (Feldhaufer, Midgley, & Eccles, 1988), and a disruption of their social networks (Wigfield et al., 1991). A study of friendship patterns following school change indicated that social adjustment can be stressful because adolescents then need to re-establish their social world (Wigfield et al., 1991). Those authors estimated it takes adolescents nearly a full school year to form new friendships.

For adolescents who enter secondary school with close friends or a stable cohort of peers, adjustment appears to be considerably less stressful than for their more socially isolated peers (Hirsh & Rapkin, 1987). There is evidence that for girls, looks and peer popularity are particularly important elements of their value system (Simmons et al., 1979). These two aspects are particularly of concern at the time of the transition to secondary school, when appearance is often changing dramatically during puberty, at the same time as peer groups are unstable due to an unfamiliar environment (Simmons et al., 1979). Young adolescents entering secondary school look forward to making new and more friends. However, they are also concerned about being picked on and teased by secondary school.

older students, having harder work, getting lower marks, and getting lost in a larger, unfamiliar school (Mizelle, 1999). Declines in perceived social ability have in fact been found over the transition to junior high school [Wigfield et al., 1991], and although rising through year 7, do not regain earlier year 6 levels [Wigfield et al., 1991]. Work by Simmons & Blyth (1987) suggests that some young adolescents never regain their pre-transition levels of confidence in their social ability.

Physical self-concept

Adolescence has been found to be a disturbing time for self-image, and females have been identified as being most vulnerable, as the secondary school transition is more likely to coincide with significant physical developmental change for girls than boys (Simmons et al., 1979). These findings are supported by Nottelmann (1987), who found that the transition from year 6 to year 7 is problematic for girls if it coincides with significant physical developmental change. Since pubertal change occurs at a time of transition for girls, many girls, but few boys, have to adapt to external changes in their bodies and the responses of others to these changes at this time. Girls must cope with these impacts to their self-image as well as to the new academic and social challenges of secondary school [Nottelmann, 1987; Rosenberg, 1986). Therefore, the effects of physical changes on girls' self-concept are likely to be exacerbated over the transition to secondary school.

Behavioural self-concept

Person-environment fit theory states that behaviour is influenced by the fit between the individual and his/her environment. If the social environment does not fit the psychological needs of adolescents a decline in behavioural conduct is expected (Eccles et al., 1993). Studies have found that students' perceptions of the quality of teacher-student relationships relate to students' behavioural functioning (Midgley et al., 1989a). The more positive the perceived quality of the teacher-student relationship, the higher the level of behavioural conduct. Given findings of lowered quality of school life (Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987) as well as lower teacher supportiveness in secondary as compared with primary school (Midgley et al., 1989a), declines in behavioural conduct are likely as a result of the transition to secondary school.

Global self-concept

As a result of possible negative changes to the scholastic, behavioural, social and physical self-concept dimensions, it is possible these may culminate in declines for students' global self-concept. General self-concept has, however been found to be relatively stable over time

(O'Malley & Bachman, 1983), if anything actually increasing with age. It is therefore possible that a global self-concept measure does not capture changes in specific dimensions, which is why it is important to also employ more sensitive measures to assess change across more differentiated dimensions.

Characteristics of transition programs

In an effort to alleviate identified declines in self-concept (Berliner, 1993), a number of schools are now implementing transition programs. Transition programs are predicated on the basis of meeting the needs of young adolescents, and providing a smooth transition to junior secondary school years. Although little research has been done to systematically evaluate transition programs, it is expected that students who participate in them will be better off in terms of adjustment to secondary school than students who are not. Transition programs target students' adjustment through focusing on the negative impacts of the transition and trying to prevent them. In this way, students should adjust to the school in all targeted areas as quickly and smoothly as is possible. It is argued that students making the transition into secondary school need to receive assistance prior to, during, and after the move so that their social, psychological, and academic well-being are not compromised (Schumacher, 1998).

A secondary school transition program typically includes a variety of activities that provides students and parents with information about the new school, provides students with social support during the transition, and brings primary and secondary school personnel together to learn about one another's curricula and requirements [Mac Iver, 1990). Effective and comprehensive transition programs help to build a sense of community, respond to the needs and concerns of the students, and provide appropriate, multifaceted approaches to facilitate the transition process (Schumacher, 1998). Transition programs aim to establish a sense of belonging among the multiple constituencies involved, appropriately respond to the needs of incoming students, and provide multiple opportunities for all constituencies to develop meaningful roles during the transition process, as well as maintain those roles throughout the school year.

Mac Iver (1990) asked school principals to list ten articulation activities in their school designed to help students make a smooth transition to the middle grades. The three most common activities for easing the transition from primary to secondary school were having primary school students visit the secondary school, having administrators of the secondary and primary schools meet to discuss programs and articulation, and having secondary counsellors meet with primary counsellors or staff members.

Mac Iver found that the average number of articulation activities employed by each school was 4.5, indicating that principals recognise a significant 'school transition' occurs between primary and secondary schools.

Concern over education for young adolescents has increased in recent years, as evidenced by burgeoning research literatures investigating the transition to junior high school and also students' experiences in middle school years. Psychologists point to this period in the life cycle as a critical stage in human development. Adolescence encompasses puberty, value formation, and social-group identification, as well as marked shifts in learning (Smith, 1997). Points of transition have been identified as periods of psychological disequilibrium, marked by both an increased opportunity for psychological growth, and a heightened vulnerability to psychological disturbance (Felner, Primavera, & Cauce, 1981; Simmons et al., 1979). In particular, the primary to secondary school transition is a major cause of disruption. This disruption would likely have a negative effect on children's psychological orientation toward school at any grade level. However, it is particularly harmful at early adolescence, given what is known about psychological development during this stage of life (Eccles et al., 1993). It has been argued that adolescents need a reasonably safe, as well as intellectually challenging environment to adapt to these shifts; but the move to secondary school seems to emphasise competition, social comparison, and ability self-assessment (Simmons & Blyth, 1987).

Research into schooling in the transition years has identified aspects of a transition program that include ways in which schools can smooth the transition from primary to secondary school without major re-organisation (Hargreaves & Earl, 1990). A variety of approaches has been proposed, including the building of constructive liaisons between secondary schools and their feeder schools (Youth Research Centre, 1995a); as well as focusing on encouraging and facilitating communication, planning and joint work among teachers from different school levels through meetings, visits and exchanges, and by establishing norms of collaboration and collegiality (Hargreaves & Tickle, 1980). Providing for and encouraging some career flexibility among the teaching force could allow staff to work on both sides of the primary-secondary divide. By having contact with the same teachers from primary to secondary school, negative effects could be reduced by having a continuous stream of teachers. Also, by ensuring that student records are well written and accessible, receiving teachers can use them to assist incoming students. Finally, by creating orientation programs for students entering the secondary school, students and their parents can get a realistic and thorough sense of what the next stage involves. With such initiatives, primary students will be more familiar with their high school surroundings and the schools' expectations and should therefore find it easier to settle in following the secondary school transition. It has been proposed that a school transition program with

several diverse yet articulated activities is the most effective and practical method for easing the transition to secondary school (Mac Iver, 1990).

The present study

Two schools chosen for the present study were both independent girls' schools, one with a transition program and the other without. Both schools spanned grades from kindergarten to year 12, but with constituent primary (kindergarten to year 6) and secondary schools (years 7 to 12) located on separate grounds. Girls' schools were used, since research findings indicate that girls are most vulnerable in terms of declines in self-concept over the secondary school transition (Simmons et al., 1979). Girls also appear to be more vulnerable than boys to symptoms of depression and hostility that emerge during the early teen years (Simmons & Blyth, 1987), and since girls reach puberty earlier and start dating sooner than boys, they may experience heightened stress during school transitions. The effects of a transition program were therefore expected to be more evident in a study focusing on girls.

A subsidiary element of this study investigated possible effects on self-concept for students continuing from primary to secondary, within the one school. This 'continuation' was thought possibly to contribute to changes in self-concept over the transition, based on findings by Simmons et al. (1979). Their findings indicated that new girls entering the junior high school environment appeared to be at a disadvantage in terms of self-esteem compared with girls who continued at the same school from kindergarten to secondary school. This finding was attributed to adolescents entering secondary school with close friends or a stable cohort of peers having considerably less stressful adjustment than their more socially isolated peers (Simmons et al., 1979).

For the present study, the school with the transition program was chosen as it had a relatively new program, first implemented in 2000, and staff were excited to find out the effectiveness of it. This school was an independent girls' school in Sydney's inner west. The total population of the secondary school at the time of the study was approximately five hundred students, and the socioeconomic status of children attending this school was upper-middle to upper class. The comparison school was similar in these aspects, with a slightly larger secondary school population of approximately six hundred students. The transition program that was assessed was called "*Step Up to Year 7*", and the designer of the program drew on school staff and her own expertise, and also consulted with students about their perceived needs over the transition period in developing this program, which was implemented for year 7 students. Core features of the program are described in Appendix A.

The anticipated effectiveness of the transition program in terms of enhancing self-concept can be determined by examining its goals. The relationships between program goals and self-concept dimensions are outlined in Table 1. It was expected this specific transition program would be most effective in enhancing perceived scholastic competence as 8 of its goals were directed at this. Social acceptance and global self-worth also had a large proportion of the program goals aimed at them (5 and 4 correspondingly). Weaker effects were expected for behavioural conduct and physical appearance, as these were only targeted minimally (3 and 2 goals respectively).

Table 1: Dimensions of self-concept the transition program is aiming to achieve

Self-Concept Dimension	Relevant Program Goals[a]
Scholastic Competence	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10
Social Acceptance	1, 3, 4, 6, 10
Physical Appearance	1, 10
Behavioural Conduct	2, 4, 10
Global Self-worth	1, 2, 5, 10

[a] Note. This mapping of program goals to self-concept dimensions was gained from the year 7 coordinator at the school with the transition program.

The present study evaluated the effectiveness of this specific transition program in enhancing children's self-concept across a range of self-concept dimensions. The major aim of the present study was to assess possible benefits of the transition program through comparing changes through year 7 across the two schools. A subsidiary aim was to explore whether students who continued their primary and secondary education within the same school institution evidenced better adjustment compared with those students new to the school in year 7.

In response to considerable concern about the negative effects that the transition from primary to secondary school can have on young adolescents, many schools have looked at different strategies to ease the transition. The use of a transition program has been found to be an effective strategy (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991), most likely because it is easy to adopt across a range of schools with varying student needs and backgrounds. Support within a transition program can be shared among the primary and secondary schools, the parents, fellow peers and teachers. This eases the load on any one person and surrounds the student with a choice of support systems. However, schools with transition programs in place may simply assume their students will now be better off, which may not necessarily be the case. It is therefore

important to monitor and evaluate program effectiveness.

Findings that self-concept 'recovers' to some extent during the first year of secondary school (Wigfield et al., 1991) may suggest that with or without a transition program, students will settle into secondary school, and self-concept will naturally recover without formalised support structures. Wigfield et al.'s (1991) research design is more extensive than most research investigating school transition effects, which has tended to assess outcomes only prior to and immediately following the transition point (e.g., Marsh, 1987; Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Simmons et al., 1979). Wigfield et al. (1991) employed a longer-term design, continuing their research with a follow-up assessment later in the first year of junior high school, finding evidence of considerable further changes through this year. To effectively evaluate a transition program, it would therefore be valuable to investigate student perceptions in two similar schools, one with a dedicated program aimed at smoothing the transition, as well as at a later point in the year. Due to the constraint of the one-year timeframe of this project it was not possible to commence the study with year 6 students, instead commencing with students in the first weeks of year 7. Administration of questionnaires right at the start of year 7 should capture student perceptions prior to potential benefits of the transition program which we would expect to occur later than the first week of the school year.

Method

Design

The central research aim of the study was to assess whether a specific transition program impacted on students' self-concept over year 7. Self-concept was measured using a questionnaire that assessed self-concept dimensions of scholastic competence, social acceptance, physical appearance, behavioural conduct as well as global self-worth (Harter, 1985). The same questionnaire was administered at another all girls' school, similar to the focus school, but without a transition program. From these results, inferences were made concerning the extent to which the particular transition program enhanced students' self-concept.

Participants

The whole of year 7 at each of the two schools was invited to participate in the study, resulting in response rates of 60% (n=47) from the school with the transition program and 60% from the school without (n=76). Of these participants, 59% (n=28) had continued from the primary school for the

school with the transition program, while 38% (n=29) had continued from the school without.

Materials

Harter's Self-Perception profile for children (Harter, 1985) was selected due to its established reliability and construct validity, particularly within an Australian context (Trent et al., 1994). The version for children was selected for use due to the average age of students in the sample being 12. This instrument provides measures of students' perceived competence in different domains, as well as an independent assessment of global self-worth. This tool provides a richer and more differentiated picture than those instruments providing only a single self-concept score (Harter, 1985). Self-concept domains included scholastic competence, social acceptance, physical appearance, behavioural conduct, athletic competence, and global self-worth. For the purposes of this study, all constructs were measured except athletic competence. This was omitted with the consideration that the transition program did not have as its aims anything to do with athletic ability.

Following the two questionnaire administrations, the year 7 coordinator at the school with the transition program was asked to express her views about the effectiveness of the transition program. The interview was conducted via telephone since this was the method that best suited the coordinator, who was asked to rate how effective she believed the transition program had been for each of the five target areas relating to scholastic competence, social acceptance, physical appearance, behavioural conduct and global self-worth. She was then asked to comment on the reasons for her responses, and further comments were elicited with reference to the actual results found in the analysis of questionnaire data.

Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed to year 7 students during the first week of school to assess students' self-concept at the beginning of the year, and were readministered at the end of term two halfway through the year. The school with the transition program received the questionnaire for the first administration in week two of term one, and then for the second time during week nine of term two. The school without the transition program received the first questionnaire in week four of term one and the second in week one of term three. This delay in initial questionnaire administration by the school without the transition program was not ideal, but was unavoidable due to school organisational differences. At time 2, the schools received the questionnaire in different terms. However the difference is only of one school week as the school with the transition

program administered the questionnaire the last week of term 2, whilst the school without the transition program carried it out the first week of term 3.

Analyses

Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) determined comparability of schools at time one, in order to assess the extent to which students' initial self-concepts were comparable across the two schools, such that subsequent changes could be meaningfully compared. Repeated-measures MANOVA then identified statistically significant between-subjects effects of schools with and without the transition program ('TP' and 'nTP' respectively) and continuation from the primary school or not, as well as within-subjects effects of time, and any possible interactions among these.

Statistically significant 'school' effects indicate where self-concepts differ for students from each of the two schools, while statistically significant 'continuation' effects show which self-concepts are higher for students who have either continued from the feeder primary school or are new to the secondary school. Significant effects of 'time' demonstrate self-concepts that have changed between the two administrations. Interaction effects of time and either school or continuation show self-concepts that have changed differentially between the two occasions for students who are in different schools, or who continued from the feeder primary school or not. The central aim of the project, assessing whether self-concepts for students in the school with the transition program adjusted more smoothly than those for students in the other school, is addressed by findings of significant interaction effects between time and school. If students in the school having the transition program experience greater positive change (or less negative change) than students from the other school, this is likely to indicate that the transition program has effectively targeted those self-concepts.

Results

Assessing comparability of the schools at time one

Initial MANOVA analysis indicated that all constructs were comparable across the two schools at time one, with the exception of social acceptance. There was a statistically significant difference between schools for social acceptance $(\underline{F}[1,121]=4.36, \underline{p}=0.04)$, where the school without the transition program had significantly higher mean scores $(\underline{M}=3.14, \underline{SD}=0.61)$ than the school with the transition program $(\underline{M}=2.91, \underline{SD}=0.58)$. It was thought this significant difference in time one scores for social acceptance could be explained by the later date of questionnaire administration in the school without the transition program. A later

administration date may imply that students would have had more time to settle in and therefore establish themselves socially. Therefore, despite this difference between schools for social acceptance, it was considered that the continuation of the comparison was acceptable, with schools sufficiently similar at time one to permit comparisons at a later time.

Results of the repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance

Figure 1 summarises mean scores of both schools over time for the five dimensions of scholastic competence, social acceptance, physical appearance, behavioural conduct and global self-worth. Visual inspection shows that mean scores for nTP (the school with no transition program) appear higher on all dimensions, excepting behavioural conduct, where TP (the school with a transition program) is higher at time. Time one and two mean scores also appear more similar for the nTP school than for the TP school.
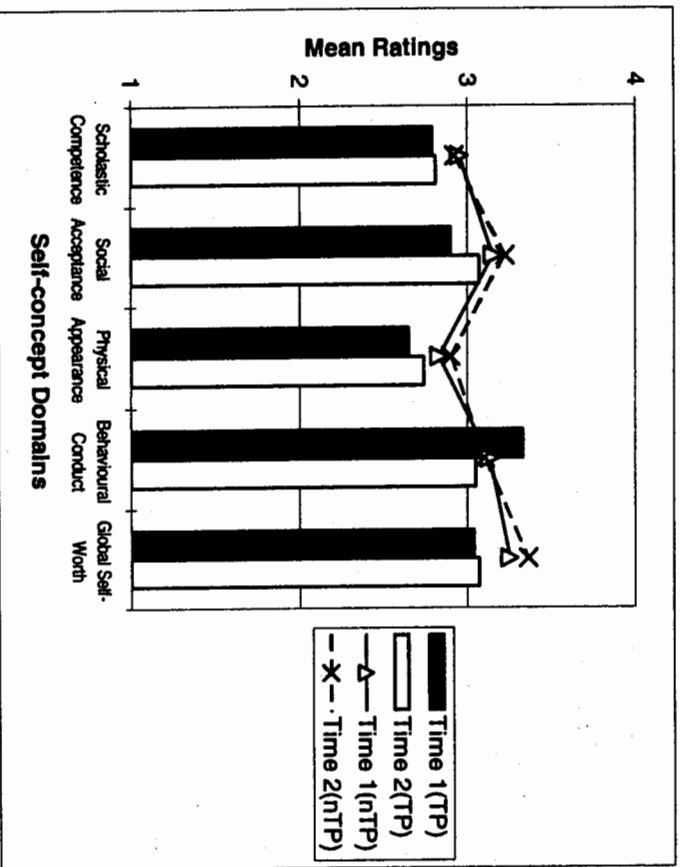

Figure 1: Self-concept construct means for both schools at time one and time two

Effects of time

Multivariate tests showed a significant within-subjects time effect (Pillai's Trace=0.20, $F(5)$=5.36, $p<0.01$). Univariate within-subjects tests showed this time effect occurred specifically for the social acceptance dimension, with a statistically significant difference between times and two for social acceptance [$F(1,109)$=6.33, p=0.01), due to time one and two mean scores being lower ($\underline{M}$=3.06, $\underline{SD}$=0.60) than time two scores ($\underline{M}$=3.17, $\underline{SD}$=0.59). This change is consistent with theory, since social acceptance was expected to increase over time due to the five-month period students had in which to get to know one another.

Interaction effects between time and school

Significant interaction effects between time and school addressed the central issue of this study. A significant time by school interaction, where the school with the transition program increased to a greater extent than the school without a transition program, would provide evidence for the effectiveness of the transition program. Despite no significant multivariate interaction effect for time and school, there was one univariate interaction effect for behavioural conduct (F(1,109)=4.72, p=0.03). Contrary to expectation, the school with the transition program had a much higher mean score at time one (M=3.33, SD=0.55) than at time two (M=3.05, SD=0.48). In contrast, the school without the transition program had similar mean scores at both time points, being substantially lower than time one scores for the school with the transition program, and slightly higher than time two scores for the school with the transition program (time one M=3.13, SD=0.60; time two M=3.10, SD=0.61). That is, students from the school with the transition program initially had higher behavioural conduct mean scores than students at the school without the transition program. Over time however, students from the school with the transition program experienced a decrease to a point similar to the school without the transition program.

Differences between schools

Multivariate tests showed a statistically significant between-subjects school effect (Pillai's Trace=0.11, F(5)=2.52, p=0.03). Univariate between-subjects tests show this was due to significant differences between the two schools for the dimensions of social acceptance and global self-worth.

The significant difference between schools for social acceptance [F(1,109)=5.62, p=0.02) was due to the school without the transition program having mean scores higher (M=3.14, SD=0.61) than the school with the transition program (M=2.91, SD=0.58). Both schools' scores increased over time as reported earlier, where the school without the transition program was consistently higher than the school with the

transition program. In preliminary analyses determining time one comparability of schools, it had been thought the results at time one could be explained by the school without the transition program receiving the questionnaire at a slightly later date than the school with the transition program, therefore allowing the students a little more time to settle in and adjust socially. However, this does not explain the results at time two, where the school without the transition program had considerably higher mean ratings of social acceptance than the school with the transition program. This could demonstrate that the transition program had not taken effect, as it would be expected that the school with the transition program would have higher mean ratings than the school without the transition program at time two.

There was also a significant difference between schools for global self-worth ($F(1,109)=5.28$, $p=0.02$). The school without the transition program had higher mean scores ($M=3.26$, $SD=0.61$) than the school with the transition program ($M=3.06$, $SD=0.71$), with both school means remaining stable over time. This direction of effect was not expected, since the transition program aimed to increase students' perceptions of their global self-worth. Not only did mean ratings for global self-worth not increase over time, but the school without the transition program maintained a higher mean rating than the school with the transition program.

Effects of continuation within the same school

Continuing students were those who continued their primary and secondary education within the same school. Students who were *not* continuing students were those who first arrived at the school in year seven. Multivariate tests showed there was a significant between-subjects continuing effect (Pillai's Trace=0.128 $F(5)=3.09$, $p=0.01$). Univariate between-subjects tests showed this was due to differences on the scholastic competence and social acceptance dimensions.

The significant difference between new and continuing students for the scholastic competence construct ($F(1,109)=5.06$, $p=0.03$) was due to students 'new' to the school having consistently lower mean scores (time one $M=2.80$, $SD=0.64$, time two $M=2.80$, $SD=0.58$) than 'continuing' students (time one $M=3.01$, $SD=0.60$, time two $M=2.98$, $SD=0.52$). It is interesting that perceived scholastic competence for new and continuing students stayed parallel over time. It was thought that as the new students settled into their new school their perceptions of scholastic competence would increase, however the data do not support this expectation.

The significant difference between new and continuing students for the social acceptance construct ($F(1,109)=6.12$, $p=0.02$) was due to new

students having consistently lower mean scores (time one $M=2.98$, $SD=0.65$, time two $M=3.08$, $SD=0.66$) than continuing students (time one $M=3.12$, $SD=0.52$, time two $M=3.27$, $SD=0.49$). It is again interesting that social acceptance for new and continuing students stayed parallel over time, as it was expected that as the new students settled into their new school they would increase in their feelings of social acceptance more so than continuing students who were likely to be familiar with the peer group.

Year 7 coordinator perception and evaluation of the transition program

The year 7 coordinator was asked to rate the effectiveness of the transition program for improving students' self-concept across the range of self-concept constructs. She had choices of 'not effective at all', 'a little effective', 'quite effective' and 'very effective' (see Table 2). The year 7 coordinator rated the transition program as 'very effective' in promoting higher self-concept for social acceptance and behavioural conduct, and 'quite effective' for scholastic competence, physical appearance and global self-worth. Most of the transition program's goals were aimed towards scholastic competence, so it is interesting to note that the year coordinator did not deem the program to be 'very effective' at achieving a higher self-concept for students in this domain. Social acceptance was focused on quite heavily in the transition program and the year 7 coordinator believed that the program had been successful here rating the program as 'very effective' at achieving increased social self-concept for students. The transition program was rated as only 'quite effective' in promoting self-concept for physical appearance and global self-worth. This is not surprising, as the transition program did not focus many of its goals on these two aspects of self-concept. Interestingly, the year coordinator rated the program as 'very effective' at achieving increased self-concept for students' behavioural conduct. Behavioural conduct was not a large focus of the transition program and the questionnaire data in fact reflected students' perceptions of their behavioural conduct as *decreasing* over time in this school.

In a separate follow-up telephone interview, the researcher informed the year 7 coordinator of the students' decreased perceptions of their behavioural conduct and asked how these results might be explained. The year coordinator was surprised, but speculated that the students' perceptions of what may be 'naughty' behaviour was actually perceived as confidence by the teachers. She had noticed a difference in the students' behaviour over the year, but had attributed this to students' increased familiarity with the school and their peers. The year 7 coordinator

Table 2: Effectiveness of the transition program according to the year 7 coordinator

Construct	Not effective at all	A little effective	Quite effective	Very effective	Reasons for rating
Scholastic competence The child's perception of his/her competence or ability within the realm of scholastic competence.			☆		The girls gained important skills in research, while not being conscious of these skills. The girls are achieving well.
Social acceptance The degree to which the child feels s/he has friends, feels popular, and feels that most kids like him/her.				☆	The girls spend a lot of time together, they have opportunities to try new things, to perform and to speak in public. The girls have learnt to value other girls talents.
Physical appearance The degree to which the child is happy with the way s/he looks, likes his/her height, weight, body, face, hair and feels s/he is good-looking.			☆		While physical appearance is not directly targeted, it is hoped that the overall tone in self-esteem abilities will translate to their physical appearance. Physical appearance and body issues are focused on a lot during their PDHPE lessons.
Behavioural conduct The degree to which children like the way they behave, do the right thing, act the way they are supposed to, avoid getting into trouble, and do the things they are supposed to do.				☆	The culture of the school is what determines the girls' behaviour. As the year has progressed the girls have become more 'culturated' into the school. At lunch time the girls sit quietly and talk, whereas at the primary school they run around and climb and yell.
Global self-worth The extent to which a child likes him/herself as a person, is happy with the way s/he is leading his/her life, and is generally happy with the way s/he is.			☆		Anxiety and high expectations are issues at our school. We are aware of these issues and can monitor the students' response, but the whole culture of the 'pushy' parents and school might work against the transition programs effectiveness.

preferred the students' behaviour later in the year when they were more relaxed and confident. She said that while some students had developed friendships that were deleterious to their behaviour, for the most part she was happy with the behavioural conduct of year 7 students.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate the effect of a particular transition program on key dimensions of students' self-concept. The first research hypotheses for the study was that the transition program would have a significant effect on students' self-concept as assessed by Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Children (1985). Students who participated in the transition program were hypothesised to demonstrate increases in self-concept, compared with students who did not participate in the transition program, over the study duration. The second hypothesis was that students who continued their primary and secondary education at the same school were expected to have higher self-concept relative to students new to the school in year 7. Results are discussed with reference to the specific transition program and its aims, as well as perceptions of program effectiveness by the year 7 coordinator, who was in a position to be able to evaluate the program's effectiveness as she acted as an observer of the year 7 students over the course of the year.

Evidence of benefits to self-concept as a result of participating in the transition program

The transition program would be deemed effective if self-concept constructs increased to a greater extent in the school with the transition program than in the comparison school. In this study it was found that for the behavioural conduct domain, scores in the school with the transition program actually decreased through the year, while the school without the transition program had similar mean scores at both time points. An explanation for these unexpected results could be in terms of Eccles et al.'s (1993) person-environment fit theory, where if the secondary school's social environment did not fit with the psychological needs of these adolescents, declines in motivation, interest, performance and behaviour would occur despite the program's existence. The school needs of these adolescents may not have met the students' psychological with the transition program needs as well as the school without the transition program. In an interview with the year 7 coordinator at the school with the transition program, the coordinator revealed that anxiety and high expectations were issues at the school, which she attributed to the 'pushy' attitudes of the parents and the culture of the school, which could contribute to psychological needs of students not being met. It is interesting that behavioural conduct appeared to be the only construct affected. Perhaps

the students were using behaviour as an outlet to release the pressure they felt they were under.

Another explanation for lowered mean ratings of students' perceived behavioural conduct in the school with the transition program could stem from aspects of the transition program focusing on behaviour. Part of the transition program consisted of an ethics-based program established by the Chaplain and year 7 teachers, and was incorporated into the English and History program, concentrating on values and morals, and causing the students to be conscious of their own behaviour. Students were also instructed to keep a 'learning diary' to review their studies and reflect on other areas of their lives. These two aspects of the program may have caused the students to develop a heightened awareness of their behaviour. Students may have been particularly sensitive to their behaviour by the time of the second questionnaire administration, when the results reflected a decrease in mean rating of *perceived* behavioural conduct. In *reality* the students' behaviour may even have improved, and they may simply have been more aware of times when their conduct was poor.

Alternatively the transition program may have been so effective that the students felt at ease with the school system and were comfortable pushing its boundaries. According to the year 7 coordinator, the students became more familiar with their environment and more confident over time. However, although the year 7 coordinator said she had noticed a change in the students' behaviour, she did not necessarily perceive it to be a negative change. She explained that the students' perceptions of what may be 'naughty' behaviour was actually perceived as confidence by the teachers. She had noticed a difference in the students' behaviour over the year but explained that it was due to their increased familiarity with the school and their peers. Therefore, students' low rating of their behavioural conduct could be due to the different perception of 'bad' behaviour by the students from teachers. The information provided by the year 7 coordinator may reflect 'actuality' more so than the students' own perceptions.

Irrespective of whether students were involved in the transition program or not, there was significant improvement for perceived social acceptance over time. These results are consistent with findings of Wigfield et al. (1991) and Nottelmann (1987), who found that students' social self-concept decreased immediately after the transition to junior high school, as students adjusted to the school change and developed new social networks and roles. As adjustment proceeded, young adolescents' social self-concept rebounded slightly by midway through the year, although not to previous year 6 levels (Nottelmann, 1987). Although the present study could not identify whether there was a 'drop' for social acceptance

between years 6 and 7, the fact that continuing students had higher scores than the new students in social acceptance at time one provides indirect support for this. Certainly the improved perceived social acceptance over time supports notions of positive social adjustment through year 7.

Differences in self-concept between the schools unlikely to be attributable to the transition program

Students at the school without the transition program began the year with higher mean ratings of social acceptance than the school with the transition program, and remained at a higher level over time. Consistently higher ratings for the school without the transition program imply the later date of administration does not explain the time one difference between schools. Inspection of mean scores for the two schools at times one and two shows scores for the school with the transition program did increase to a greater extent than for the school without the transition program over time, which would imply the program *had* been effective, however this effect did not achieve statistical significance. After studying the goals of the transition program, it is surprising that it was not more effective in terms of enhancing social acceptance. Particular strategies implemented to target social acceptance included placing the same teacher with year 7 classes for three subjects, with the students remaining in a fixed room with the same students for most subjects, as well as requiring year 7 teachers' regular participation in team meetings to examine the curriculum and discuss students' needs. These three aspects of the program should allow students to get to know a teacher and a group of students quite well. In addition, all class groupings were organised on the basis of ability, to allow students to work with others of like interests. Students were required to keep a journal, and although social issues were not the focus for journals, this could provide an outlet to discuss social issues.

Despite the transition program's focus on these social aspects, it is possible that if the students did not enjoy the company of their peers in their class group, or did not identify with their teacher, their social acceptance would not increase. By placing students in ability groups students could experience the Big-Fish-Little-Pond Effect (Marsh, 1987), which occurs when equally able students have lower self-perceived academic skills and academic self-concepts when they compare themselves with more able students. Although this effect would most likely relate to students' scholastic rather than social self-concept, it is possible that if students felt inadequate surrounded by their peers, that this may affect their social acceptance. The year 7 coordinator was surprised by the lack of a large increase in students' perceptions of their social acceptance, as she had noticed a dramatic change among the social structure of year

7 as the year progressed, where students were happier, more confident and more familiar with the other students and teachers. Her observations were supported by significant increases in social acceptance, however, this increase was similar in both the schools. The comparative design employed for this study reveals this increase to be a natural adjustment due to progression through secondary school and not specifically due to the presence of the transition program.

Similarly to social acceptance, global self-worth was also higher for those at the school without the transition program, and these results did not change significantly over time. Again, this direction of effect was not expected, since the transition program aimed to increase students' perceptions of their global self-worth over time. Aspects of the program that encouraged global self-worth included placing students in the same classes with the same teacher, students participating in an ethics-based program, and keeping a learning journal. These initiatives aimed to encourage students to socialise, learn about themselves, try new things and mentally challenge themselves. Not only did mean ratings for global self-worth not increase over time, but the school without the transition program maintained higher mean ratings. It is possible the setting the students at the school without the transition program were exposed to was a more relaxed positive environment. That school was larger in size which may in part contribute to between school differences. There was also a lower proportion of 'continuing' students in the non-transition program school, which may have resulted in an environment where there was greater frequency of new social interactions. The year 7 coordinator from the school with the transition program rated the transition program as 'quite effective' in improving global self-worth, however, she acknowledged that the transition program may not have been effective in removing the anxiety and high expectations that many of the students felt from 'pushy' parents and a high performing school culture. The coordinator said that staff monitored students' behaviour and were aware of these issues, but had not found a way to reduce feelings of anxiety that students experienced, which may have counteracted positive aspects of the transition program.

Effects of continuation from primary to secondary school

'Continuing' students, that is those who continued their primary and secondary education within the same school institution, had higher mean ratings of both their scholastic competence and social acceptance than students who first arrived at the school in year seven, by approximately the same amount at both time points. These results are consistent with findings by Simmons et al. (1979) which indicate that girls who enter the junior school environment appear to be at a disadvantage in terms of self-concept in comparison to girls who do not change schools. To fully test

this claim, the girls would need to have been followed from year 6 rather than from the beginning of year 7, although the present study does offer limited support for this finding. These results are also supported by Hirsh and Rapkin (1987), who found that adolescents who enter secondary school with close friends or a stable cohort of peers, appear to adjust to secondary school with considerably less stress than their more socially isolated peers. However, the fact that these effects were evident for only two constructs is interesting. Physical appearance, behavioural conduct and global self-worth were not found to be statistically significantly different between continuing and new students, perhaps suggesting that these constructs do not rely so much on familiar surroundings or a support group and are less dependent on peer influences. In contrast, social acceptance and scholastic competence are two aspects of self-concept that an individual has little control over. Continuing students may have both more social familiarity with their year 7 peers, and a better idea of other students' abilities, and therefore feel more at ease in their new surroundings.

Interestingly, effect sizes between new and continuing students for social acceptance and scholastic competence perceptions were stable over time. It was expected that the new students would initially have lower mean ratings for these constructs but that they would 'catch up' with continuing students through the year. The fact that trajectories were parallel raises several questions. Why do new students not 'catch up' over time? How long does it take for new students to achieve similar ratings to continuing students? Do new students ever really catch up? To answer these questions longitudinal designs must be employed, and it is possible that these apparent disadvantages are never quite made up. Specific interventions tailored to 'new' incoming students would be necessary in this case.

Conclusions and implications for future research

The present study has made several distinctive contributions to the research literature. First, it was found that the transition program studied was not effective in increasing students' self-concept. There were no interaction effects between time and school, except in the case of behavioural conduct where the effect was in the reverse direction to expectation, but which can be explained. It is possible however, that the transition program may have had some unmeasured positive effects, which could be a path for future research. Alternatively, five months may not be a long enough period over which to assess changes in self-concept, and future research could include an additional later time point. Future work may also fruitfully specifically plan to relate transition programs to domains of self-concept.

Importantly, it was found that students who continued their secondary education within the same school as their primary education had higher self-concepts for social acceptance and scholastic competence going into secondary school than students new to the school. This was attributed to continuing students being more at ease while surrounded by a familiar peer group and having some knowledge about their academic abilities. Midway through the year, continuing students' self-concept scores for social acceptance and scholastic competence were still higher than the new students' by a similar amount as at time one. This provokes questions about when or whether new students ever make up these differences. Implications here are in terms of a possible need for interventions focused specifically towards 'new' students, to help them adjust as smoothly as possible to their new environment.

The current study involved students from two independent girls' schools in Sydney's inner west. The potential transferability of these findings to other settings cannot be assessed without further research investigating other types of settings. A study involving boys is needed to determine how a transition program affects them. Due to the different stages of physical and psychological development boys and girls are in at year 7, results may vary. A study involving students from different 'types' of secondary schools, such as Government, Catholic, or Regional schools, may also lead to variation in results due to the different school cultures, as may research with students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Indeed, it is possible that the dynamic interactions between the cultural capital of upper-middle class students in the present study and the culture of the school, were such that 'transition' problems were not an issue. Studies with students from lower socioeconomic groups could further explore this possibility. Further work is also needed with a larger sample of transition programs, to increase generalisability of findings about the effectiveness of different 'types' of programs, since the present study can only make inferences relating specifically to the transition program evaluated here.

Clearly there is a need to formally evaluate transition programs, since the assessment of students' self-concept across year 7 failed to confirm positive outcomes of the transition program on any self-concept dimension, contrary to the year 7 coordinator's subjective personal evaluation. It would be useful, in future research, to canvass the evaluations of other staff and parents relating to the transition program. It is also possible that the transition program had other beneficial outcomes that were not assessed in the present study, and future research could fruitfully explore a broader range of outcomes than self-concept, focused on in the present study. It is clear that further research is needed to investigate the full range of benefits of transition programs for students entering year 7 before they are implemented ad hoc in schools.

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Appendix A: Description of the transition program

Information booklets given to prospective students outline the transition program as below:

1. Year 7 classes will have the same teacher for English, History and Religious Education. This teacher will also act as Form Tutor for the class. This will ensure that students will develop a close relationship with this teacher who will understand their needs more fully.

2. The Chaplain will work closely with Year 7 teachers to develop an Ethics-based program, which is integrated into the English/History program.

3. Teachers of Year 7 will regularly participate in Team Meetings in which they will examine the curriculum and design courses, which develop the principles of learning basic to the learning community.

4. Year 7 classes will be located in a Home-room. This room will be developed as a resource centre for the class. Students will work in this room in all subjects not requiring specialist areas.

5. Information technology will be an integral part of all subject areas. The director of Information Technology will work closely with staff to develop Information Literacy in Year 7 students.

6. All classes will be organised on the basis of ability and needs to allow students the opportunity to work with others of like interests and cater more effectively for each individual's learning style.

7. The Coordinators of Gifted and Talented and Academic Support Programs will work closely with the teachers of Year 7 in addressing the needs of individual students. These specialist teachers will assist in writing programs and in classroom and small-group work.

8. The Accelerated Learners' Program, which has been a successful and well established program for gifted learners over the past five years, will continue to support and provide appropriate modifications for our most able students.

9. Year 7 will be involved in an Interdisciplinary Inquiry in Autumn Term. This will take the form of a problem-solving exercise, which will involve a number of subject areas. Students will develop skills in independent learning, organisation, research and presentation in this unit[1].

10. Year 7 will be required to keep a Learning Journal in which they will regularly comment on and evaluate their learning. The Learning Journal will become an important resource for work in all subject areas and will be part of the management of learning skills developed in the Program.

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[1] This goal was not implemented during the period of the study.