



Middle School Guidance Officer Report

The Tightrope between Primary and High School – Scary or Successful?

'Orientation' is an event, whereas 'transition' is a process.....and I have worked with students in senior years who I believe are STILL transitioning into responsible, resilient, motivated young adults.

This particular transition coincides with massive physical, social emotional and cognitive growth and development. The adolescent brain is undergoing huge reconstruction, and the tendency towards impulsive behaviour and the expression of 'odd' attitudes can be confronting for both teachers and parents alike.

Adolescents in this age group vacillate between extremes of emotions; progressions and regressions in thinking and learning; swings between self-centredness and altruism; between dependence and independence; and between social behaviour and isolation (Arnold, 2000).

So how, can high school teachers and parents support the transition process with their new Yr 7, Yr 8 and Yr 9 students?

Research has identified these five R's as essential for long-term student engagement and well-being. The five R's of Relationships, Relevance, Rigour, Responsibility, and Resilience.....not just the three R's of reading, writing and 'rithmetic!

Here are a few key points we need to consider when preparing our students for high school and life:

* **Relationships are critical to this age group** – new high schoolers are more interested in how they 'fit' than how much they know. Peer relationships are uppermost in their minds, but role models, mentors, relationships with trusted adults are also what they seek. They don't need adult friends, they need mutual trust and respect from us as parents, teachers, year advisers and counsellors. They need to earn our trust and we need to earn theirs (DET Vic, 1999).

* **"When am I EVER going to need to know this!"** – sound familiar? Teens look for relevance; something that sits with their sense of reality beyond the classroom. As teachers and parents we need to frame the teaching and the learning in a real world context – not always easy. If we can engage students as co-participants in their learning.....not just us telling them what to do, the results can be amazing (Pendergast & Bahr, 2005).

* One of the biggest complaints of early high schoolers is that their **initial excitement** at the prospect of being challenged by new, "harder" work is quickly **replaced by disappointment**.



Because Yr 7 and Yr 8 teachers may not yet know the capacity of their students, the inevitable 'dumbing down' and 'revising' of material already covered in primary school immediately undercuts the challenge of high school learning, and establishes low expectations and potential disengagement. We need to be rigorous and challenge our students; and have realistic and transparent expectations of the standard and quality of work we will accept.

* **Responsibility is not only key to success at school, but to life in general!** The PEEL Project, started in Victoria in 1985, implemented hundreds of strategies for teachers to support independent, self-regulated learners. One of the most important developmental tasks for adolescents is to learn how to take responsibility for decisions, actions and consequences (Mitchell, Mitchell and McKinnon, 2001). In terms of personal responsibility, research suggests that increased anxiety, confusion and decreased motivation are direct responses to the stripping of responsibilities from incoming Yr 7 and Yr 8 students. We need to provide not only opportunities for responsible learning, but also for increased leadership roles on entry to high school.

* **The 'gold star for everything' approach in schools does NOT support resilience.** Student resilience levels decline from Yr 5 to Yr 9 (Krause et al, 2003) for a variety of reasons. We need to offer well-scaffolded academic and non-academic tasks to build self-esteem and self-efficacy. Promoting goal setting, open communication and recognising individual learning styles and learning differences are all ways we can support students to develop resilience.

Final reflection:

Transition from primary to secondary school is a significant process...some teens handle it better than others do. We have a high level of responsibility to provide the kinds of learning experiences that will not only assist them in their learning, but also to become resilient, responsible adults ready to take their place in the world. What we do (or don't do) now will affect these young people for a long time to come – both academically and, more importantly, personally.

* This article was taken from Angie Wilcock's (the tightrope from primary school to high school).

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