Adapting to change: An exploration of students' transition experiences in a senior college in Western Australia

Linda Rogerson

Edith Cowan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses

Part of the School Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is posted at Research Online.
https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses/1729
Edith Cowan University

Copyright Warning

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study.

The University does not authorize you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site.

You are reminded of the following:

- Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright.

- A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. Where the reproduction of such material is done without attribution of authorship, with false attribution of authorship or the authorship is treated in a derogatory manner, this may be a breach of the author’s moral rights contained in Part IX of the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth).

- Courts have the power to impose a wide range of civil and criminal sanctions for infringement of copyright, infringement of moral rights and other offences under the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth). Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.
ADAPTING TO CHANGE: AN EXPLORATION OF STUDENTS' TRANSITION EXPERIENCES IN A SENIOR COLLEGE IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Linda Rogerson BA Psychology (Hon.)

This thesis is presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Psychology

Faculty of Computing, Health and Science
Edith Cowan University
USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
ABSTRACT

This research sought to explore the experiences of students during their transition to a senior college. The senior college was established in response to the amendments to education policy in Western Australia that made it compulsory for students to remain in full-time education, training or employment until the age of 17 years (Department of Education and Training, 2008). Senior colleges were established to teach Years 11 and 12 exclusively, to promote a school environment that suited the maturity of senior students. Students attending senior colleges experience an additional transition during their senior school years and, as previous research has shown, this has the potential to influence their educational attainment and physical and mental health (Eccles, Midgeley, & Adler, 1984). By investigating the experiences of senior college students as they undertook the additional transition, the impact of the amendments to educational policy was examined. In phase one of the research, 16 Year 11 students were asked to share their transition experiences in personal interviews. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using grounded theory analysis processes. The findings that emerged indicated that the participants had transitioned successfully. The participants identified aspects of the school structure and environment that had contributed to their experiences. The participants credited the four-day week timetable, the open school policy allowing students to leave campus during lesson-free time, the mentor program, the accessibility and support of staff and the respectful relationships between staff and students with positively influencing their transition experiences. In phase two of the research, these findings were
incorporated into a transition survey, which was administered to 91 Year 11 senior college students. Survey respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements describing the beneficial aspects of the college using a five-point Likert scale. The results of the survey indicated that phase two participants had transitioned successfully and confirmed the beneficial influence of the college aspects as identified by phase one participants. The survey results were subjected to a multiple regression analysis with successful transition being the dependent variable and mentor program, lesson-free day, open school policy, teacher support and relationships the independent variables. The analysis indicated that the most significant contributors to successful transition were teacher support ($t (85) = 3.40, p < .001$) and relationships ($t (85) = 3.46, p < .01$). These results indicate that the emotional environment created at the senior college helped the participants to make the transition to the college successfully. A theoretical model of transition was developed to explore the relationship between the various aspects of the school environment and to facilitate future research. Further research could be conducted to see if the senior college environment influences the transition experiences of graduates of the college as they move on to higher education or employment.
DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education

(ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or

(iii) contain any defamatory material.

(iv) contains any data that has not been collected in a manner consistent with ethics approval.

I also grant permission for the Library at Edith Cowan University to make duplicate copies of my thesis as required.

Signature: ..........................  
Date: ...
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Associate Professor Lynne Cohen, for her guidance over the duration of this research project. Thanks must also go to all the lecturers, tutors and administrative staff for the encouragement and support they offered during my studies at Edith Cowan University. This research would not have been possible without the cooperation of the administration of the college and the students, who shared their transition experiences with me, thank you. During my studies I have shared some wonderful times with my fellow students and in particular the “lab rats” Kathryn, Belinda, Mandie, Sasha, David, Craig and Cate, to you all I say “thank you”. Finally I would like to acknowledge the undying support of my family, thank you for believing in me, I love you all.
# Table of Contents

**CHAPTER 1**

Educational Transition ......................................................... 1
  Aims of the Chapter .............................................................. 1
  Thesis Plan ............................................................................. 8

**CHAPTER 2**

Educational Change and Transition........................................ 10
  Aims of the Chapter .............................................................. 10
  Educational Change .............................................................. 10
  Ecological Change ............................................................... 12
  Transition Experiences ......................................................... 15
  Summary ............................................................................. 22

**CHAPTER 3**

School Features ........................................................................ 24
  Aims of the Chapter .............................................................. 24
  School Structure .................................................................... 24
  Environment and Engagement ................................................ 27
  Transition and Disengagement ............................................... 31
  Summary ............................................................................. 35

**CHAPTER 4**

Development and transition .................................................. 37
  Aims of the Chapter .............................................................. 37
  Stressful Life Transitions ...................................................... 37
  Developmental Issues of Adolescence .................................... 39
  Transition and Development ................................................ 41
  Summary ............................................................................. 50

**CHAPTER 5**

Phase One .................................................................................. 51
  Aims of the Chapter .............................................................. 51
  Qualitative Research Methodology ....................................... 51
  Social Constructionism .......................................................... 56
  Analysing Qualitative Data .................................................... 57
  Grounded Theory .................................................................... 58
  Current study .......................................................................... 59
  Research Framework ............................................................. 60
  Research Context ..................................................................... 61
  Phase One Methodology ......................................................... 64
    Participants ............................................................................. 64
    Materials ............................................................................... 65
    Procedure .............................................................................. 66
    Data analysis .......................................................................... 67
  Findings and interpretations ................................................... 68
  Transition Issues ..................................................................... 69
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aspects of the College Environment</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson-free day</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open school policy</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect and Responsibility</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor program</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal aspects</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support and accessibility of staff</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student/staff relationships</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student relationships</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 6</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase Two</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aims of the Chapter</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale and Research Design</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase Two Methodology</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey development</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research question 1</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 2</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 3</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Data Analysis</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor program</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open school policy</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson-free day</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher support</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College environment</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 7</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aims of the Chapter</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Summary</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition Experiences</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Influence of Demographic Variables in Transition</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Originating school</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic pathways</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior College Environment</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible Curriculum</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson-free day</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open school policy</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor program</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Aspects</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Model of Transition</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion .......................................................................................... 144
Contributions of the Research ....................................................... 145
  Contribution to policy ............................................................... 145
  Contribution to theory .............................................................. 146
Methodology .................................................................................. 147
Model of transition ........................................................................ 147
Recommendations for Future Research ........................................... 148
Personal Reflections .................................................................... 149

References ......................................................................................... 151
**List of Appendices**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A</td>
<td>Interview schedule</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B</td>
<td>Letter of information for school principal (phase one)</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C</td>
<td>Invitation to participate in research (phase one)</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D</td>
<td>Letter of information for parent/guardian (phase one)</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E</td>
<td>Transition survey</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F</td>
<td>Letter of information for school principal (phase two)</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix G</td>
<td>Letter of information for parent/guardian (phase two)</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix H</td>
<td>Invitation to participate in research (phase two)</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix I</td>
<td>Box plot of DV, transition</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix J</td>
<td>Box plot of IV lesson-free day</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Developmental Theories Covering the Period of Adolescence</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Comparison of Classic Research Paradigms</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Demographic Characteristics of Participant Sample</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Themes Common to Participants' Transition Experiences</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Demographic Characteristics of Total Participant Sample</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Features of the Independent Variables Explored in Transition Survey Questions</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Mean of Raw Scores for Survey Statements</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Mean, Standard Deviation and Range of Transition Survey Variables</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>Correlations Between all Survey Variables</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>Standard Multiple Regression of College Administrative and Relational Variables on Transition Experience</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>Mean, Standard Deviation and Range of Transition Scores For Demographic Groups</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>Themes Common to Participants' Independent Comments</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**List of Acronyms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANOVA</td>
<td>Analysis of variance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSC</td>
<td>Ceremonial Senior College (pseudonym)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COS</td>
<td>Courses of Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DET</td>
<td>Department of Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>Grade Point Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAEP</td>
<td>Local Area Education Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NELS:88</td>
<td>National Education Longitudinal Study, 1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCI</td>
<td>Sense of Community Index</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>Socio-economic status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SoB</td>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SoC</td>
<td>Sense of community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRRS</td>
<td>Social Readjustment Rating Scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWL</td>
<td>Structured workplace learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFE</td>
<td>Technical and further education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEE</td>
<td>Tertiary entrance examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TER</td>
<td>Tertiary entrance ranking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VET</td>
<td>Vocational education and training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WSA</td>
<td>Wholly School Assessed subjects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Aims of the Chapter

Transitions are periods during which individuals must adapt to and accommodate change in their lives. This research project concerns the recent changes in education policy in Western Australia and their impact on the educational experiences of students who attend a senior college in Perth, Western Australia. This chapter explores the changes to the structure of education in Western Australia and subsequent ramifications, providing an introduction to the context of this research.

“When you are through changing, you are through.” ~ Bruce Barton

Watching the young hairdresser painstakingly separate a fine section of hair and then weave the tail comb in and out to capture an even finer section to be pasted with hair dye, I marvelled at the attention to detail and precision and asked if she enjoyed her job as a colourist.

“I love it, it is so rewarding to do the best you can and then see a great result as the client leaves the salon happy.” I asked when she had got into hairdressing because she seemed quite young to be so proficient at her job.
“About two and a half years ago straight after I left school. The school helped me find what I wanted to do and once I had had some work experience I knew that I just wanted to be a hairdresser.”

Having an interest in senior school education as a result of my graduate research, I asked her about her school experiences.

“I had just arrived in Australia with my parents who had decided to move here from England. I didn’t have a choice, I just had to come with them. I hated school at first, I missed my friends and I really didn’t want to be there. But the school was very good; the teachers made me feel like they really were interested in me and the students were friendly. Honestly, if it hadn’t been for the school I don’t know what I would have done, I was so angry and unhappy.” I asked her what was good about the school. “It was just so much fun and they treated you like you really were an adult, and then they helped me to find what I was good at and what I could do with my future.”

“What school did you go to?” I asked. “Ceremonial Senior College”,¹ she replied.

~~~

Unfortunately, not all young adults in Western Australia have as positive a senior school experience as the young hairdresser. The reality is that many students leave senior school before completion of Year 12 without the skills, knowledge or opportunities that are needed to succeed in the next stage of their lives. Based on the social information available in a survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002) (www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs), Long (2006) reported

¹ Pseudonym used to protect identity of the college.
that young people who were not engaged in full-time education or work experienced less satisfaction with their lives, encountered more personal and financial stress and participated less in society than those who remained at school to complete their senior education or had secured employment.

In 2001, approximately 1 in 3 Australians aged between 15 and 24 years of age who had been enrolled in high school in 2000 had exited the education system before completion of Year 12 or a Senior School Certificate (Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers, & Rumberger, 2004). In the same year, the Western Australian Government committed to building a world-class state education system. Its objectives were to improve numeracy and literacy, retain more students in school or training, provide improved learning environments, make better use of information and communications technology and raise the status and standards of teachers (Department of Education and Training (DET), 2005). This commitment was the catalyst for progressive changes to the structure of education in Western Australia.

Change is an inevitable fact of life, whether it is in response to the environment or as a result of the normal developmental processes that people experience as they move through their lifespan (Felner, Farber, & Primavera, 1983). Fundamental to an understanding of human development is an appreciation of the reciprocal transaction between the developing person and the ever-changing environment in which they live (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The two-way nature of this person–environment relationship determines that events in the environment will affect the developing individual in the same way that developmental changes within the individual will impact on the environments in which they exist.
Whether the changes that people encounter in life are the result of events beyond their control, such as revisions to education policy, or of personal choice, they will have an impact on those people's lives. Significant events such as starting school, getting married, having children or relocating to take up new job opportunities, all require the individual to adapt to the demands of the new situation. In psychological literature, these life changes are often referred to as periods of transition, and they have the potential to affect physical and psychological functioning (Felner et al., 1983). Some intrapersonal adjustment and modification of an individual's environment may be necessary to ensure a successful transition (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

One of the first major transition children experience in their lives is the transition to formal education. It can be argued that many children are placed in day care, some from a very early age, and that this change in environment may be considered the first major transition in the life of a child. Whilst the transition to day care requires an adaptation to new people and environments, it does not have the added expectation of formal schooling that the child apply themself to set tasks in order to achieve age-appropriate educational milestones.

In Australia, most children commence their formal schooling at the age of 4 or 5 years and may be involved with education in some form for the next 10 to 12 years. It has been estimated that if a child starts school at the age of 5 years and continues on until the age of 17 years, they will spend about 15,000 hours in school (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979). Consequently, children spend a considerable amount of time during their formative years in educational settings in the company of teachers and peers. Therefore school experiences have the potential to influence their social, emotional and cognitive
development. Dewey, a renowned pragmatist and educational theorist, declared that "The quality of any experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences." (Dewey, 1963, p. 27). Although some school experiences may be initially rewarding, not all experiences result in positive outcomes; some tend to engender a lack of sensitivity which may render an individual oblivious to the richness of future experiences (Dewey).

As children progress through the education system, they are normally promoted every year to a higher year or grade. In primary school, the annual advancement usually means that students experience a change of class and teacher. In this thesis, this change will be referred to as a transfer within an educational organisation. Transfers can result in children finding themselves in an unfamiliar classroom setting; however, they usually retain some familiar classmates and the teachers and structures of the school remain the same. When students change schools as a result of their family relocating, or when graduating from a primary level of schooling to a secondary school, the change is referred to as an educational transition.

Transitions have the potential to affect students' physical and mental health as well as having far-reaching influence on their long-term educational attainment (Eccles, Midgeley, & Adler, 1984). The influence of progressive transition through the education system on students' motivation to complete school should not be underestimated (Eccles et al., 1993). As suggested by Dewey (1963), school experiences, including transitions, may encourage or discourage a student to engage or disengage with the education process. If
school experiences are discouraging to students, they may lack the motivation to complete their formal high school education.

In Western Australia, the public education system is traditionally categorised into pre-primary, primary and secondary education. Children start formal primary education at the beginning of the year in which they turn 6½ years of age. Education before this age is not compulsory; however, children can attend kindergarten in the year in which they turn 4 years of age and pre-primary in the year in which they turn 5 years of age. Public primary schools cater for children's education from the age of 6½ to 12 years in Years 1–7. In addition, most primary schools in Western Australia offer places in kindergarten and pre-primary classes, often located on the primary school campus. Secondary schooling provides education for students aged 13–17 years in Years 8–12. Private schools or independent schools may follow the public school pattern; however, many offer primary and secondary education on one combined campus.

The progressive changes to the structure of education in Western Australia mentioned previously included a policy amendment under the slogan "Doing nothing is no longer an option", which stipulated that it is compulsory for students to remain in full-time education, training or employment until the age of 17 years (DET, 2008). As part of this amendment, DET established a number of middle schools to provide education for students from Years 7–10 (12–15 years of age) and associated senior colleges to provide for students completing their high school education in Years 11 and 12 (16–17 years of age). As illustrated in Figure 1.1, the new three-tier configuration of primary, middle and senior schools results in an additional school transition for students. In the
traditional education system, transitions occurred when students initially started their formal schooling and enrolled in kindergarten, pre-primary or Year 1 (4, 5, or 6½ years of age), when they transferred to high school at the end of Year 7 (12 years of age), and finally to higher education or work at the end of their high school education on completion of Year 10 or 12 (15 or 17 years of age).

These recent changes imply that students who transition to a middle school on completion of Year 6 will transition again to a senior college to complete the now compulsory Years 11 and 12, unless they are employed or in formal vocational training. Therefore, with the establishment of middle schools and senior colleges, there is an additional transition at a crucial time in a student's education. During the final two years of high school education,
students (16 -17 years) are either preparing for the final exams that will determine their future in terms of higher education, or are exploring training opportunities that will prepare them for the transition to employment. In addition, some students may still be experiencing the effects of normal pubertal changes which may make them vulnerable to the negative aspects of school transitions. For example, transition may result in the loss of familiar social support networks of peers and teachers, and school environments may pose a threat to a student’s physical, mental, psychological and social well-being (Eccles et al., 1993; Rice, 2001).

**Thesis Plan**

This review will explore the issue of transition, particularly in relation to students’ experiences during their years of high school education. The first chapter introduced the topic and provided an overview of the scope of the project. In Chapter 2, the recent changes to education policy in Western Australia will be examined through a systems perspective. Chapter 3 explores the influence of structural issues, such as the relationships between students and teachers, timetabling and discipline policy in students’ school experiences. This will be followed in Chapter 4 by an examination of the developmental issues of adolescence which may influence transition experiences.

Chapter 5 will examine quantitative, qualitative and combined research methods in order to consider which methodology might be appropriate to examine educational issues such as transition. The methodology selected to conduct phase one of the current research project will be defined. In particular, the research framework, data collection procedures and the method of analysis
of data will be presented. The interpretation and findings that emerge from the data analysis will be reported in this chapter, followed by a brief summary of the findings. Chapter 6 will outline phase two of the research including the methodology, data collection, analysis and results. Finally, Chapter 7 will provide an overall discussion of the results followed by the implications of the research, recommendations for future research and personal reflections of the researcher.
Chapter 2

Educational Change and Transition

Aims of the Chapter

Amendments to education policy do not only result in changes to the structure of education, when examined through an ecological or systems perspective, these amendments may ultimately influence the educational experiences of students. The ecological impact of changes to education policy in Western Australia was an additional school transition for some senior school students. This chapter examines the research literature concerning the influence of transition in students' school experiences.

Educational Change

The commitment by the Gallop Government, in 2001, to build a world-class education system in Western Australia was motivated by the failure of previous state and federal government initiatives to retain adolescents aged 15–19 years, in education or training. As a result of this commitment, the Western Australian Government prioritised the retention of students in school or training and proposed raising the age of compulsory attendance at high school from 15 to 17 years (Carpenter, 2004). The government acknowledged that compelling adolescents to remain at school until the completion of Year 12 was no guarantee that the additional years spent at school would be beneficial to their future. The Department of Education and Training (DET) recognised that
additional strategies were needed to motivate students to remain engaged with education. DET involved the community in a comprehensive consultation process that resulted in the Community Consultation Report - *Creating the future for our young people: Raising the school leaving age* (DET, 2005).

The consultation process that informed the report commenced with the release of a discussion paper in 2004, followed by public forums, stakeholder meetings, focus group discussions and written submissions from interested individuals and organisations including parents, students and teachers. Many issues were raised during this consultation process and there was strong support for the proposal to raise the school leaving age from 15 to 17 years, for increased flexibility to allow students to participate in a combination of work and study (including training and employment opportunities) and for flexibility in the curriculum to meet the needs of individual students (DET, 2005). To achieve more flexibility in schools, strategies suggested included the establishment of additional middle schools (Years 6–10) and senior campuses (Years 11–12) to provide an environment that suited the maturity of senior students.

The introduction of the primary, middle and senior school model of education was not new to other Australian states where the organisational structures of the model varied from state to state. For example, in Tasmania, the Australian Capital Territory and in the case of most recently established schools in other states, the formation of a senior college was part of a collaborative collegiate model within an education district. In the development of this collegiate model, one senior high school was restructured as a Year 11–12 senior college and the remaining senior high schools in the district were restructured as middle schools. Middle schools catered for students from Years
7–10 (ages 12–15 years). Students then graduated to the newly designated senior college to complete the final two years of schooling (Polesel, 2002).

In recent years, some purpose-built senior colleges have been established, these may have a dedicated middle feeder school or they may compete for enrolments with traditional senior high schools (Years 8–12) for students who have completed Year 10 and who intend to continue their education through to Year 12. In addition, some senior colleges have been established to provide educational opportunities solely for students who were returning to education as adult re-entry students or students who for various reasons were not able to attend mainstream senior colleges (Polesel, 2002).

**Ecological Change**

Environmental changes, such as those which occurred in the Western Australian education system when senior colleges were established, tend to effect changes in related environments because of their interconnectedness (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The world, as depicted by Bronfenbrenner, is a nested set of systems in which humans function (Fig.2.1). At the centre of the systems is the *microsystem* which a person experiences daily. For example, the family, playgroup, school, and work environments are considered to be microsystems of the individuals who operate within them. Microsystems are linked by the presence of the individuals common to them and it is this interrelationship that constitutes the second level of ecological systems theory, the *mesosystem*. The influence of the mesosystem on an individual's life stems from the congruence, or lack thereof, between the microsystems in which they operate. If the demands of one microsystem conflict with those of another microsystem,
Figure 2.1. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, depicting the interconnected nature of the systems that exert influence in an individual's life.

The resultant lack of congruence can result in stress to the individual (Bronfenbrenner).

The exosystem exerts indirect influence on people's lives and includes issues such as employment conditions, education and health policy decisions, and community influences that dictate the type of facilities available. The outermost system, the macrosystem, is far removed from an individual's world but may exert great influence. The social conventions, ideologies, cultural and governing standards as determined by society and government are examples of macrosystem influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).
Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory suggests that there are multi-layered sources of influence in an individual's environment that, due to the dynamic nature of life, are in a perpetual state of change that the individual must constantly endeavour to accommodate. The most rapid rate of intrapersonal change occurs in the first five years of life when a child's brain and personality are developing (Porter, 2006). The environments that a child experiences in the early years usually consist of familiar contexts such as the extended family, playgroup and day care. When children enter formal education for the first time aged 5, they experience a major environmental transition from the comfortable and familiar family environment to what can be an impersonal and frightening organisation (Dockett & Perry, 1999). This is the first educational transition that children experience as they progress through the school system.

In terms of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory, a student who moves from one school to another experiences an ecological transition from one microsystem, the originating education institute, to another microsystem, the new school. The transition to a novel environment from one that is familiar may generate different pressure or influences in the individual's life. It is the adaptation to these influences and the congruence within the mesosystem, or between the two environments, that can impact on a student's ability to cope with the changes that accompany these school transitions. The nature of these transition experiences will be discussed in the next section.
Transition Experiences

The demarcation of high school education (Years 7–12) into middle school (Years 7–10) and senior college (Years 11–12) was relatively new to Western Australia when introduced in 2000–2001, where secondary education traditionally catered for students from Years 8–12 on one campus. Students who proceeded from primary education into a traditional senior school transitioned once between educational institutions. However in the new system students, who graduate to middle school (Year 7) from primary school (Year 6), now face the prospect of a second transition to senior college (Year 11) to complete their senior schooling. The subject of school transitions has received much attention in psychological research because of the perceived link between transition and negative academic and social experiences (Rice, 2001).

School transition experiences were not subjected to much scrutiny prior to 1980, possibly because the issue was viewed as being personal to an individual or related to the organisational structure of a school (Schiller, 1999). Transitions were, in time, recognised as an interaction between the transitioning student and their environment which could impact a student and result in their vulnerability to negative educational and psychological consequences. Subsequently, transition research focussed on developing preventive programs aimed at ameliorating the impact of the stressful elements of transition (Felner, Ginter, & Primavera, 1982). An examination of the research literature suggests that most of the transition studies at this time (early 1980s) were conducted in the United States of America (USA) and concentrated on quantitative indicators of school engagement such as Grade Point Average (GPA) and attendance
records (Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis, & Trickett 1991; Felner, Primavera, and Cauce, 1981).

An increasing tendency in the USA for people to relocate due to work commitments was examined by Felner et al. (1981) who investigated the impact of multiple school transitions on the experiences of students who had recently graduated to high school. In particular, they explored the relationship between the number of transitions experienced by a student and their academic adjustment to high school. Additionally, they considered the impact of school transitions as a result of events such as family relocation and the usual move from primary to high school. Academic adjustment was operationalised as GPA fluctuations and attendance records. The rationale for using these records was that they were perceived to be gauges of current and future adaptation and to be indicative of the level of satisfaction with a new school environment, academic progress and the likelihood of leaving school early.

This research by Felner et al. (1981) sampled 250 students from three public high schools in a predominantly non-white, lower socioeconomic community. The results of the study indicated that repeated school transfers may increase the risk of school failure for all students and that non-white students, in general, were more at risk regardless of the number of school transfers undertaken (Felner et al.).

The vulnerability of students from ethnic minority groups has been found in many of the research projects conducted in the USA. Research that examined students' psychosocial adjustment to middle school and high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004), academic persistence (Heck & Mahoe, 2006), changes in students' grades during transition to junior high school, and exploratory
research into transition experiences of middle school students from diverse
economic backgrounds (San Antonio, 2004) all found that students from the
minority cultures were more at risk of negative educational outcomes.

It has been suggested that some of the difficulties experienced by
students who are members of ethnic minority groups are due to their increased
vulnerability to the negative issues of transition because of a lack of congruity in
their mesosystem. This means that students from minority groups may
experience conflict between the social expectations of their school environment
and the cultural norms of their home environment (Reyes, Gillock, Kobus, &
Sanchez, 2000). Issues that ethnic minority students may face include difficulty
maintaining their sense of identity when their culturally appropriate social skills
and ways of interacting are not the accepted norm in their school environment
(San Antonio, 2004). In an attempt to conform or be part of the school
community, minority students may adopt some of the social customs common
to the school community. If these social norms conflict with the behaviours and
beliefs of a student’s cultural heritage, this can lead to family disagreements
and a weakening of the family support for students during periods of transition
(Wampler, Munsch, & Adams, 2002).

Many of the education research projects conducted in the USA utilised
the data collected in the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) that
commenced in 1988. The United States Education Department commissioned
the NELS project to collect information that would provide trend data on critical
transitions experienced by students as they transferred to middle or junior high
school (aged 11–12 years), then to high school (aged 14–15 years), followed by
a move into higher education or the work force (aged 17–18 years) (National
Centre for Education Statistics, 2009, July). The USA school grade system varies between states however, in general, American children start their informal education in pre-kindergarten at the age of 4–5 years, or kindergarten aged 5–6 years. For example, in the State of Maryland, formal education begins with Grade 1 at the age of 6–7 years and continues through to Grade 5 (10–11 years of age). Middle school starts with Grade 6 (11–12 years of age) and ends with Grade 8 (13–14 years of age). Students then graduate to senior college at 14–15 years of age to complete Grade 9 through to Grade 12 (17–18 years of age). In the State of Washington, middle schools and senior colleges follow a Grade 7–9 and 10–12 configuration.

The NELS project produced the NELS:88 database which has been frequently used in educational research over the years. NELS:88 data was based on information gathered from 24 599 eighth grade students (13–14 years of age) over four follow-up periods: 1990, 1992, 1994 and 2000, by which time most of the participants had left school at least eight years previously (National Centre for Education Statistics, 2009, July). The method of data collection used in the NELS project included self-report surveys administered to students, their teachers and families. Information was collected concerning students’ academic and social lives, perceptions of the school environment, teachers’ characteristics and teaching style (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991).

An aspect of transition investigated by Schiller (1999) using the NELS:88 data base was the feeder schools. The term feeder schools refers to a group of primary or middle schools whose graduating students transition to the same senior school. In some instances, the school that students transition to is dictated by education policy that restricts them to enrolling in schools within
their local district. Independent or private schools may accept students based on criteria such as religious affiliation. In the feeder school study, Schiller examined the academic trajectories of 12,000 NELS:88 participants who graduated from various feeder schools to a senior college. Findings indicated that students who graduated with a large cohort from middle school to a senior college tended to maintain their academic standing within their cohort, that is, high achievers remained high achievers. However, students who achieved low grades in middle school tended to achieve higher grades in senior college if they graduated from middle school with a small group of peers. It is possible that students who transfer to a new school where their reputation, academically and socially, has not preceded them may feel more able to establish new academic identities for themselves (Schiller).

Based on the assumption that residential mobility is associated with poor educational and social outcomes, Swanson and Schneider (1999) investigated the effect that moving house, changing school or a combination of both might have on the educational achievement and social outcomes of students. They used the mathematics achievement scores, behavioural records and high school dropout rates from the NELS:88 data base. Results indicated that moving residence, changing school and a combination of moving and changing affected students in different ways. Moving and/or changing school early in a high school career (Grades 8 to 10, aged 16–15 years) could lead to gains in academic achievement and commitment to staying at school until completion. However, they found that educational and residential mobility in the final years of high school could lead to increased problematic behaviours in some students.
Swanson and Schneider (1999) suggested that this may be due to the disruption of social support from peers and neighbourhood friends, which resulted in these students acting out their stress. They also recognised that pre-existing behavioural issues may have accounted for some of the relocation of students in the later years of high school. Student dropout rates before completion of tenth grade, at the age of 15–16 years, increased for students who changed schools early in high school (between Years 8 and 10). As previously mentioned, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems theory suggests that demands placed on an individual in one microsystem (relocation of residence) may conflict with the demands in other microsystems (school) and result in stress to the individual operating in those systems.

Conversely, the students who had experienced transition early in their high school years were more likely to remain at school during the final years of high school than students who remained in the same school throughout. Therefore, students who had survived the disruption of transition during their first two years of high school appeared to be more motivated to remain at school to the completion of Year 12 than students who had not changed schools. For that reason it was suggested that the period immediately after transition was important to students' continued engagement with education and retention to completion (Swanson & Schneider, 1999).

The NELS:88 data was utilised by Reyes et al. (2000) to research the impact of transition on student retention. In this study, the Self Perception Profile for Adolescents and the School Sentiment Index scores from the NELS:88 data were used to examine the impact of transition from Years 8 to 9 on the school completion of 107 minority and low income status students from
two urban schools. The results indicated that most of the students experienced some lowering of their GPA after transition, with the students who eventually exited the school system prematurely experiencing the greatest deficits.

What this research was not able to define was whether a student's academic failure was an existing phenomenon at the time of transition or a result of the transition experience. It is difficult to ascertain whether students who are experiencing difficulties academically naturally start to disengage with education because of a lack of progress and eventually leave school early, or whether students who do not form a connection with school academically or socially start to fail because of a lack of engagement.

In an exploration of the experiences of 209 young Australian students who had left or were about to leave high school early, Smyth and Hattam (2002) found a culture of escalating detention and suspension among students who perceived themselves to be differentially treated. The students felt they did not fit the model of student expectations that the school required of them and were therefore identified as being troublesome. Once labelled as a problem student, they believed that they were singled out for minor offences that model students were allowed to get away with. As expressed by Smyth and Hattam: "It was hard not to be left with the impression of a suspension, exclusion, expulsion policy that was putting these young people on a fast track out of the school" (p. 390). Students who return to school after an exclusion period are faced with the need to catch up on missed lessons whilst not falling behind with current work, which makes their task of being a model student harder.

A lack of academic success in the early years of education has also been linked to students leaving school prematurely. Academic difficulties in the first
years of school may lower a student's sense of efficacy and self-esteem, which can lead to poor academic effort, continued failure and may ultimately result in them exiting the school system before completion of their high school education (Lamb et al., 2004). In a report aimed at improving student retention in Australia, Lamb et al. found that some students make the decision to leave school early in their high school career. A large percentage of Year 9 students (14-year-olds) who stated that they did not intend to stay at school until the completion of Year 12 fulfilled their intention, indicating that disengagement from education may occur prior to the transition to senior education. It is difficult to identify the specific factors that lead to a student's early exit from education. Lamb et al. (2004) suggested that it may be a combination of social and demographic, regional and economic, school environment and departmental policy issues that negatively influence students' engagement with the education process.

Summary

This chapter examined the consequences of changes to the education policy in Western Australia from an ecological perspective. In terms of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), events in the exosystem (amendments to education policy) influence the microsystems (school structure) and, therefore, the educational experiences of students. The new three-tier structure of education in Western Australia (primary school, middle school and senior college) enforces an additional school transition on some students which may expose them to some of the negative issues associated with transition experiences. Research has found that transitions may result in decrements to
academic achievement and lowering of self-esteem, due to a loss of familiar social support (peers and teachers). Conversely, for some students, transition to a new school facilitates the establishing of a new identity free of the academic and social expectations placed on them by their previous school. In the following chapter, the interplay between students' transition experiences, school retention and the influence of the school environment will be examined.
Chapter 3

School Features

Aims of the Chapter

Schools differ on features such as the physical and social environment and administrative characteristics. In this chapter, the influence of these features on students' academic progress will be examined. In particular, the relationship between school environments and student engagement and motivation to achieve academically will be discussed. Additionally, the association between the school environment, transition and students' disengagement with education will also be examined.

School Structure

Student behaviour and educational attainment varies between schools and Rutter et al. (1979) suggest that these differences are significantly linked to school structure variables. The school variables were categorised by Rutter et al. as the physical and administrative functions or school processes. The physical and administrative functions encompassed features such as the size of a school (student numbers), the composition of the student body (gender and age), student to staff ratio, age of the buildings, available space and whether the school administration was supported by the local authority or had religious affiliations. The difference in the source of administrative support was believed to influence the effectiveness of the school administration, in that schools with
religious affiliations in London (the context of the study) tended to rely on volunteer support which offered less continuity than local authority paid support.

The school processes explored by Rutter et al. (1979) included the emphasis placed on academic issues (homework, teacher expectations, amount of time spent on teaching), encouragement and discipline, working conditions for students, opportunities for participation and responsibility, and the organisation, autonomy, supervision and skills of the teaching staff. Collectively, these processes may be referred to as a school's social culture or ethos (Rutter et al.).

To investigate how schools influence a child's progress, Rutter et al. (1979) collected academic achievement tests and behaviour questionnaires completed by teachers for 2,730 students, interviews with 219 members of staff and observations of school life from 12 secondary schools in the inner London area. The study utilised results of a comparative survey conducted four years earlier among primary school children in the London area to establish a baseline for participants' characteristics prior to commencing secondary school. When assessing participants' progress through secondary school, researchers were able to determine to what extent observed changes in behaviour were due to their baseline characteristics or the influence of their secondary school experiences.

The research strategy was to examine student outcomes in terms of attendance, educational attainment, behaviour and delinquency using repeated measurements after allowing for individual baseline characteristics. The schools included in the study were then assessed on the characteristics of their physical and administrative functions or identified school processes. Finally, student
outcomes were correlated with the particular characteristics of the school that the students had attended using Spearman’s rank correlational analysis.

The results of the study indicated that the physical variables such as school size, available space, condition of the school buildings and the administrative characteristics did not appear to greatly influence students’ experiences. What proved to be influential were the social aspects of the school environment, emphasis on academic progress, teaching style that favoured incentives and encouragement and opportunities for students to take responsibility for their progress (Rutter et al., 1979).

Differences in the social environment between primary schools and secondary, or senior, schools relate to class grouping. High schools are often organised around subject areas rather than being age-based. In primary school settings, students remain in the same classroom with the same students and teacher for most of their school day whereas high schools tend to have designated areas where students study particular subjects. Often the subject classes comprise a mixture of students with the result that students do not necessarily attend all classes with the same group of students. This influences the social environment of a school in that it tends to be less personalised because of the continual changes in classroom, teacher and classmates experienced by students throughout the school day. This may account in some way for a decline in academic grades that some students experience after transitioning to secondary education (Eccles et al., 1993). For less confident primary school students, this change in social environment might challenge their reliance on the familiar for feelings of security and confidence which, in turn, limits their participation in class and engagement with the education process.
The importance of the social environment in motivating students, in particular the supportive relationships between students and their teachers, parents and peers, was examined by Wentzel (1998). Results suggest that supportive teachers who appeared to emphasise social and academic aspects of teaching were believed to influence students’ engagement with education. Family support was influential in academic goal orientation and support from peers was found to influence motivation and pro-social behaviour (Wentzel). The interplay between the school environment and student participation and engagement will be examined further.

Environment and Engagement

Students’ engagement with school and the education process impacts on their school experiences. Research has sought to understand the role of school engagement and its relationship to students’ motivation and achievement. In a comprehensive review of the research conducted by Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004), it was reported that engagement was best defined as a metaconstruct with cognitive, behavioural and emotional aspects. Thus, a student’s engagement with school may be based on one, two or all three of these aspects, depending on the interaction between their own individual characteristics and the school environment.

Cognitive engagement, as defined in the literature reviewed by Fredricks et al. (2004), referred to a student’s investment in education as evidenced in self-regulated behaviour, placing value on learning and endeavours to gain knowledge and mastery. Behavioural engagement referred to a student’s participation in education and included compliancy with rules and attendance
requirements, class and extra-curricular participation and academic perseverance. Emotional engagement was characterised by an interest in, and an affiliation to, the school.

Several studies included in the review pertaining to school engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004) reported that behavioural engagement was positively associated with achievement and decreased the likelihood of students dropping out of school early. It was found that students who did not exert much effort in class, failed to complete homework and had more discipline problems were more likely to drop out of school early than those who showed more behavioural engagement.

The review (Fredricks et al., 2004) failed to find many studies investigating the association between emotional engagement and achievement; however some studies indicated that there was a correlation. Conversely, the review documented links between aspects of cognitive engagement, such as completing work and remaining attentive in class (endeavours to gain knowledge and mastery), and achievement. In summary, Fredricks et al. suggested that the most consistent findings were that a student's engagement with education had a positive influence on their achievement and acted as a preventive factor against dropping out of school prior to completing secondary school. In particular, an emotional connection to peers and teachers protected students from disengaging from education permanently.

An emotional connection to school may be related to a Sense of Belonging (SoB), which is an element of the McMillan and Chavis (1986) Sense of Community (SoC) construct. MacMillan and Chavis identified four elements to the SoC construct: membership, influence, reinforcement and shared
emotional connection. The issue of membership is underpinned by a SoB to a community. In order to experience the benefits that result from being part of a community, members must first have a sense of their place in the community. Similarly, working with and for a community as a functioning member is usually associated with a SoB to that community (Baker, Terry, Bridger, & Winsor, 1997; Goodenow, 1993a).

A SoB is based on feelings of safety within the boundaries set by a group and a personal investment in that group. Baumeister and Leary (1995) reviewed the literature pertaining to SoB and found much evidence of a strong association between the need to belong and behavioural, emotional and cognitive patterns and general health. A lack of SoB was linked to feelings of loneliness and social isolation which had a negative influence on general health and well being. They concluded that the need to belong was a primary human motivation of great influence.

It has been suggested that the perception that an environment is not welcoming may override an adolescent's social skills and personal characteristics and discourage them from participating in and developing a SoB to a community (Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler, & Williams, 1996). In an extension of the findings from an earlier study, Pretty et al. enlisted 234 adolescents aged 13 to 18 years from social settings (movie theatres, fast food outlets etc.) located in an eastern maritime Canadian city. The aim of the study was to investigate the relationship between adolescents' feelings of loneliness and their SoC and experience of social support. Participants completed the revised 12-item Sense of Community Index (SCI) (Perkins, Florin, Rich, & Wandersman, 1990). Two versions of the SCI were administered: one asked
questions about the block (neighbourhood) and neighbours, and the other asked the same questions about school and the students. In addition, and because of the links suggested between SoC and subjective well-being, measures of the Subjective Sense of Well-being (Davidson & Cotter, 1991) were taken. Social support was measured using the Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviours (Barrera & Ainlay, 1983) and loneliness was assessed using the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russel, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980).

The data was analysed by multiple regression and correlation analysis that indicated that SoC measures were useful in assessing the Microsystems (neighbourhood, school etc.) in which adolescents aged 13 to 18 years operated. It was also found that there was a relationship between adolescents’ SoC and feelings of loneliness and subjective well-being, and between perceived social support and SoC (neighbourhood and school). Pretty et al. (1996) suggest that these results indicate the importance of SoC in prevention programs that address adolescent loneliness and other mental health issues. These results highlight the importance of the social environment of senior schools as adolescents begin to access social support from peers and teachers more than from family and neighbours (Pretty et al.).

The organisational and structural aspects of the school environment were also found to be influential in school engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). The structural factors that reportedly positively influenced students’ involvement and engagement with school included voluntary choice in tasks, clear and consistent goals, opportunities to participate in school policy and management, and cooperative ventures between students and staff. What may be inferred from these results is that school environments that allow students some
autonomy and encourage cooperative efforts where responsibility for school processes are shared between staff and students are more likely to maintain students’ engagement with the education process.

Traditionally, schools operated on the premise that teachers actively taught and students passively learned, which limited a student’s opportunity to develop a sense of ownership or to be empowered by their education experience. As adolescents mature, one of the developmental processes they experience during puberty, according to Erikson’s psychosocial development theory, is identity versus role confusion (Berger, 2006). In order for adolescents to establish an identity that they will carry through to adulthood, they experiment with different selves. To explore aspects of self, adolescents need to be allowed to make some choices for themselves, for example, determining the clothes they wear, the music they listen to, and subjects they want to study at school. Allowing adolescents autonomy in life choices allows them to understand the consequences of their decisions and how they will fit with their developing sense of self (Akos, Queen, & Lineberry, 2005).

If, as found by Fredricks et al. (2004) and Rutter et al. (1979), allowing students to have choice in their school experience aids their engagement with school, it may prove useful as a preventive measure against disengagement with education.

**Transition and Disengagement**

A lack of emotional connection to school may lead students to disengage from the education process and, in some instances, seek solace in groups of similarly disenfranchised peers (Goodenow, 1993a). The influence of the social
Transition to Senior College

environment of schools in students' motivation and achievement, and a desire to identify students who may be at risk of disengaging from education, were instrumental in the development of the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale by Goodenow (1993b). The PSSM explores students' feelings of acceptance, influence, respect, peer and teacher relationships and belongingness. In developing the PSSM, Goodenow (1993b) found that the students who developed a strong SoB to school were more likely to remain engaged and academically motivated and less likely to leave school before completing their education.

The issue of transition and school completion was investigated in a study conducted by Heck and Mahoe (2006). The records of 12,972 participants from the NELS:88 database were used to investigate high school dropout rates and the possible link to transition experiences based on the influence of the school environment and processes. The student sample originated from 984 different high schools, thus allowing the examination of between-school and within-school measures. The between-school measures of context and structure included school type (public or private), location, student composition and number of students. Academic and social organisation variables used measures of faculty stability, curricular structure, classroom academic organisation, support programs and school improvement programs. The within-school measures included student social category, middle school academic variables, mobility before attending high school, grade point average (GPA), educational aspirations, academic growth at high school, achievement tests, curricular profile, attendance pattern, behavioural records and type of relationship with teachers.
The data was subjected to an ordinal regression in order to demonstrate the interrelationships between the variables (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). In relation to school structure and successful transition (as signified by academic progress after transition), the results showed that students who had attended public schools, especially urban public schools, experienced less post-transition academic success than students who attended private schools. Similarly, schools with larger numbers of students from ethnic minority groups had greater incidence of post-transition academic difficulties among their students. Students who attended schools where discipline issues were accentuated and attendance rates were problematic were also more likely to experience post-transition academic difficulties.

The school characteristics that appeared to aid successful transition experiences for students were related to well-articulated coursework and structured classrooms in which academic progress and achievement were emphasised. Additionally, schools that offered transition support programs such as orientation days for new students and buddy or big brother/sister programs where senior students provide mentoring and help to establish social networks, increased the chances of post-transition academic success for their students (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). The results of this study indicate that there is a relationship between transition experiences and between-school and within-school variables. However, what is not clear is whether the issues that emerged such as lower attendance rates, behaviour problems and academic difficulties were a result of or a precipitating cause of negative transition experiences.

It is unlikely that a student who is already considered to be academically at risk and who has disengaged with education will suddenly re-engage in a
new school where the environment and people are unfamiliar. This highlights that previous research did not investigate the thoughts, feelings and motivations of the participants; these remain unknown. Therefore, it is difficult to identify whether educational stress, such as falling grades, results in a student disengaging from education or if educational disengagement leads to a student’s lack of academic effort.

It is evident in the research reviewed that aspects of the school environment impact a student’s school experiences which, in turn, influence transition experiences and, ultimately, school retention. As discussed earlier (on p. 21), research by Smyth and Hattam (2002) examined the culture of Australian schools from the perspectives of ex-students or those who were on the point of withdrawing from high school studies. The research was a qualitative enquiry employing a voiced research epistemology and portraiture analysis strategies that allowed students to express their personal reality of a school culture that led them to disengage, or contemplate disengaging, from school before completion of high school. The researchers were able to categorise three types of school culture from the descriptions provided by participants: aggressive, passive and active school cultures. The features that constituted an aggressive culture included a strong discipline policy that was seen to support students who were willing to conform to the expectations of following the set curriculum through to university entrance. In this way, the authoritarian school culture was not perceived as being supportive of diversity in educational ability, alternate post-school pathways or pastoral care that catered to students’ emotional well-being.
A passive school culture was identified by Smyth and Hattam (2002) as having the appearance of a student-friendly environment that in practice failed to engage students, with unimaginative curricula, teaching and assessment practices that had little relevance in their lives. Although passive schools offered pastoral care, problems were dealt with from the aspect of being within the individual student and not as a school environment issue.

An active school culture was characterised as extending outwards into students' lives to develop an environment that respected the diversity of the student body and aimed to ensure all students experienced success at school. Active schools embraced popular youth culture, which was embedded into the curriculum where possible. The power in the student–teacher relationship was made more equitable by the incorporation of a flexible curriculum and timetabling that acknowledged differences in learning styles. In this way, students who required a slower paced, but equally detailed, instruction were not marginalised or left behind.

The environmental aspects of school culture found to be influential in students' continued engagement with the school by Smyth and Hattam (2002), and earlier by Rutter et al. (1979), are malleable and could be manipulated to provide the best possible environment to benefit all students.

**Summary**

This chapter examined the differing features of school environments in relation to students' motivation and engagement. Differences in school environments were found to be associated with variations in students' behaviour. In particular, the emphasis placed on academic effort,
encouragement from staff, discipline policy, student autonomy, and teaching processes was found to influence student outcomes. However, the physical features of schools, such as the size of the school and condition of the buildings, did not prove to be influential in student outcomes. An important aspect of the school environment was found to be the emotional climate characterised by the support of teachers who emphasised the social and academic aspects of education which, in turn, influenced students' engagement with education. Recognition of the developmental issues that adolescents experience during their transition to secondary education and the relevance of their lives outside school to the social environment of the school will be examined in the next chapter.
Aims of the Chapter

According to systems theory, changes in the environment affect individuals as much as intrapersonal changes impact on the environment. Adolescence is a period of developmental change and these changes impact the microsystems (school and home) in which adolescents operate. During this period of pubertal change, adolescents also experience changes in microsystems as they transition from primary to secondary education. This chapter will explore the influence of life transitions in the lives of adolescents as well as the interaction between school transitions and adolescent developmental processes.

Stressful Life Transitions

School transitions can be life-changing events for students. In order to accommodate such an event, it may be necessary for students to make adjustments to their social, emotional and psychological state, which may be a source of stress whether the student perceives the event as desirable or not (Felner et al., 1983). The psychosocial stress that is associated with transition may result in an increase in levels of hormones such as cortisol and epinephrine, which reduce the ability of the body’s defence mechanism, the immune system, to fight disease. Stress is also a known precursor to
Transition to Senior College

psychological distress such as depression (Caltabiano, Byrne, Martin, & Sarafino, 2002).

Life changing-events were central to the Holmes and Rahe Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS), which was based on information collected in research on the development of disease. Their research involved the examination of the medical histories of over 5000 patients, during which it became evident that many of the research participants had experienced life-changing events prior to the onset of their illness or disease (Hobson et al., 1998). The SRRS consists of a ranked list of 43 life events that appeared most often in the medical histories. Changing schools was included on the original SRRS and was attributed a value of 20 points (out of a possible 100 points), indicating that the event required a moderate amount of readjustment in the life of students who were transitioning from one school to another.

Although transition experience rated a moderate score (20) on the SRRS, when combined with other issues, such as puberty in adolescence, the influence may be far greater (Hobson et al., 1998). Adolescence is considered to mark the start of a child's transition to adulthood; it may commence as early as 10 years of age and continue until the age of 17 or 18 years (Berger, 2006). The physical changes that mark the start of puberty are visible in increased body size (weight and shape) and, in males, the appearance of facial hair and a lower voice tone. There can be time differences between the commencement of biological maturation at age 10 or 11 years, and emotional and cognitive maturity, which may only be achieved by the end of adolescence at 17 or 18 years of age.
Developmental Issues of Adolescence

Many developmental theories have been proposed to explain the way that human behaviour changes with age. Table 4.1 provides an overview of major developmental theories describing the processes that an adolescent may experience during the period marking the transition from childhood to adulthood.

Table 4.1

Developmental Theories Covering the Period of Adolescence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychodynamic (Freud)</td>
<td>Latency</td>
<td>6–12 years</td>
<td>Psychosexual energy used to conform to socially acceptable pursuits (schoolwork and same-sex friendships).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Genital</td>
<td>12 years +</td>
<td>Sexual maturation leads to developing heterosexual relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive (Piaget)</td>
<td>Concrete operational</td>
<td>7 years–early adolescence.</td>
<td>Logical thinking about current experiences develops.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Formal operational</td>
<td>Adolescence</td>
<td>Abstract and hypothetical thinking develops.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychosocial (Erikson)</td>
<td>Industry vs. inferiority</td>
<td>6 – puberty</td>
<td>Psychosocial strength of competence develops from dealing with feelings of inferiority.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identity vs. identity confusion</td>
<td>Puberty – young adulthood</td>
<td>Developing sense of self helps resolve identity confusion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Berger, 2006; Rathus, 2006)
Developmental theories indicate that there are biological, cognitive and socio-cultural influences that accompany the psychological changes resulting from a child's transition to adulthood.

The biological influences as explained in Freud's psychodynamic theory include sexual maturation and the accompanying change in body size and shape (Berk, 1999). Sexual maturation or puberty tends to commence at a younger age in girls, who are inclined to mature earlier than boys of the same chronological age. However, puberty is an individualistic experience that not only varies between genders but between different cultures as well (Berger, 2006). It has also been noted that during the last century, the average age at which puberty commences has been decreasing (Windle et al., 2009). The variations between individual rates of maturity can give rise to adolescents' concerns about body image. Adolescents may become self-conscious of their changing appearance if their physical development is either ahead or behind that of their peers. However, by young adulthood differences in rates of maturation tend to disappear and become indistinguishable (Rathus, 2006).

Eccles and Midgley (1988) described the impact of development on adolescents' school experiences as a stage-environment fit that can result in positive or negative outcomes. Negative outcomes, according to Eccles et al. (1993), are a result of a lack of synchrony between the developing adolescent's needs and their social environment, be it school or home. The maturing adolescent, as indicated in the theories of development, experiences a range of social, emotional, intellectual and physical changes. In particular, issues of identity, sense of self, and the development of ideals and role models are of concern to an adolescent (Potter, Schilsky, Stevenson, & Drawdy, 2001).
Aspects of the high school environment were identified by Eccles et al. (1993) as having the potential to interact negatively with an adolescent's endeavours to become an independent adult. These include the lack of opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, as is the case in the traditional style classroom, and greater constraints on behaviour which challenges a developing desire for autonomy. The loss of the security of familiar classmates and teachers when transferring to high school is especially significant at a time when peers become an important influence in a young person's life. These issues can lead to a decrease in intrinsic motivation which may result in an increased incidence of misconduct (Eccles et al.).

**Transition and Development**

With the establishment of middle schools (Years 6–10, ages 13–15 years) and senior colleges (Years 11–12, ages 16–17 years) in Western Australia, the students who attend these schools experience an additional transition in their secondary education. The question of whether the second transition from middle school to senior college presents the same threat to a student's psychological, social and educational well-being as other transitions has received little attention in the research. This question was addressed in an examination of the psychosocial adjustment to middle school and high school by Akos and Galassi (2004). Their study explored students' perceptions of the difficulty of transition, the source of help they received during transition and whether they had a SoB to their new school. The participant sample consisted of 173 students of mixed gender and ethnicity recruited from sixth grade of a middle school and 320 students of mixed race and gender recruited from ninth
grade of a high school in the same south-eastern school district in the USA. Participants completed a school transition questionnaire developed by the researchers to retrospectively assess a variety of information relevant to the aims of the study.

The results of the survey indicated that, in general, respondents viewed their transition experiences positively. The exception to this generalisation was among students from a minority ethnic group who, as discussed earlier in this review, experience more difficulty than students from ethnic majority groups. Gender differences were found in connectedness to school with girls indicating a stronger post-transition connection to middle school than boys. Conversely, boys expressed a stronger post-transition connection to their new high school than girls (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Reasons suggested for these differences were linked to the source of support in transition. For girls, post middle school transition, support included members of the family, who may be a more reliable and less transitory source of support than the peers who were cited as a source of support during transition to high school. Boys cited family other than parents and peers as sources of support during transition.

Similar results were found in a study of the transition experiences of 82 ninth grade students (average age 14.2 years) by Barone et al. (1991). The study examined the attendance records and GPA scores, and participants completed a battery of tests pre and post-transition to a high school in the USA. The tests probed life experience, problem-solving skills, perceived social and school support, quality of school life, level of anxiety, post-transition task difficulty and non-verbal cognitive ability. The results showed that the social support of family and friends, combined with support from school, was
correlated with greater satisfaction with school, less anxiety and less difficulty with post-transition tasks. In general, decreases in GPA and attendance levels were found across all participants; however, greater decreases were found among boys and students from minority ethnic groups (Barone et al., 1991). These results highlight the developmental differences between boys and girls, who, in general, mature earlier than boys, and the difficulties experienced by students from minority ethnic groups.

A study of the impact of transition to senior high school among poor urban youth in the USA was undertaken by Seidman, Aber, Allen and French (1996). Utilising data collected in a longitudinal study (Adolescent Pathways Project) of students attending public school in the American cities of Baltimore, Washington, and New York, Seidman et al. examined the transition experiences of 330 senior high school students from predominantly low income populations. As mentioned previously in this review, in the USA the grouping of grades and ages in the middle school/senior college establishment varies from state to state between a Grade 6–8 and 9–12 configuration or a 7–9 and 10–12 configuration. The study undertaken by Seidman et al. was a repeated measures design with two waves of data collection. The first was conducted with students in their pre-transition year which was Grade 8 or 9 depending on the location of the school that participants attended. The second period of data collection was conducted 10–12 months later when participants had transitioned to Grade 9 or 10 at a senior high school (Seidman et al., 1996).

The study sought to explore the effect of transition on student's self-esteem using the self-worth subscale of the Harter Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (Harter, 1988). Student's expectations of academic efficacy, as
indicated by responses to hypothetical situations, were examined together with actual academic performances. In addition, participants' perceptions of the effect of daily hassles were examined. Daily hassles were operationalised as academic tracking that influences the choice of subjects studied and, therefore, post-school opportunities, learning and adhering to the rules at a new school, and adjusting to new peer groups and their influence. The instruments used to explore these concepts were modifications of the Daily Hassles scale (Seidman et al., 1995) and Peer Values scale with elements of the Adolescent Values Inventory (Allen, Weissberg, & Hawkins, 1989). Participants’ perception of the social support they received from school staff and peers was also investigated using a modified version of the Social Support Rating Scale (Seidman et al., 1996).

Data was processed using a combination of analysis of variance (ANOVA) and multiple regression statistical techniques. The results of the study did not uncover any decrease in participants' self-esteem after transition. They did, however, indicate decreases in participants' GPA, a decline in participation in extracurricular activities and a reduction in perceived support from school staff. In addition, the results showed that participants perceived an increase in daily hassles and academic demands after transition to senior high school (Seidman et al., 1996).

The post-transition self-esteem levels and source of support during school transition were examined in a mixed-method study by San Antonio (2004). The exploratory research project incorporating qualitative and quantitative methods examined the experiences of 30 students from diverse economic backgrounds during 18 months in which they transitioned from
elementary to middle school. Participants were from two different rural communities located in the north-eastern USA. On completion of seventh grade (age 12 years) at local community elementary schools, participants transitioned to a central regional middle school. A group of 16 participants, 8 boys and 8 girls, were recruited from an elementary school located in an affluent tourist town. Similarly, 14 participants (7 boys and 7 girls) were recruited from a school in a community which experienced economic hardship. Purposeful recruitment ensured that students who were struggling academically, socially or behaviourally prior to the study (Grade 6) were not selected as participants. In this way, the researcher ensured that all participants were matched in these domains regardless of their socio-economic status (SES). Therefore, any changes in participants’ behaviour or psychological state were not related to predisposition issues.

San Antonio (2004) utilised a mixed-methods data collection strategy including group and individual interviews, observations and quantitative questionnaires to gain an understanding of the adjustment experiences of the participants. Her aim in conducting the research was to discover what resources students used to help them adjust during the transition from a rural education setting to a central middle school located in a relatively affluent area. Using systems theory as the framework for enquiry, San Antonio established that a combination of social and family support, school environment and policy, teacher quality and individual characteristics shape a student’s adjustment to a new school. Social influences identified in the participants’ microsystems included relationships between students, between students and teachers and between students and their families. Social influences considered in the
mesosystem were academic grouping, leadership roles and participation patterns. At the macrosystem level, San Antonio examined the cultural, economic and socio-political structures that indirectly influence the school social structures.

Participants who were deemed to have transitioned successfully were found to have benefitted from high academic expectations and personal support from family, their community and their elementary school which had, in conjunction with the middle school, actively prepared students for their transition (San Antonio, 2004). Potential threats to successful school adjustment included academic grouping based on ability and a culture of commercial consumerism among the student body. Ability grouping was found to promote an egalitarian atmosphere in classes of higher academic ability, where students felt they were treated as valued members of the school community. Students of lower ability, who were often from the lower SES community, experienced minimal academic expectations from teachers, and a controlled and less stimulating classroom environment.

Ability grouping also influenced participation in sport and extracurricular activities. Participants who were raised and educated in a low-SES community, where funding for recreation equipment and qualified coaching was scarce, had not had the opportunity to develop the same skills as students from the more affluent community. Consequently, positions in social and sporting teams at middle school were mostly awarded to students of higher SES. The effect of the disparity in the academic and sporting achievement tended to hamper integration between the students from the different communities (San Antonio, 2004).
The results also indicated differences in levels of self esteem between the genders and between the SES groups (San Antonio, 2004). The results of the administration of the Hare General and Area Specific Self-Esteem Scale (1996) indicated that the self-esteem levels for the participant group as a whole remained relatively stable over the transition period. However, boys from the lower SES community school and girls from the higher SES community school had lower self-esteem levels than the group average. A possible explanation offered by San Antonio for lower self-esteem levels among boys from low-SES households was that 50% of all participants had experienced parental separation; boys in such families may have assumed responsibility for the household in the absence of a male family figurehead. The need to take on adult roles beyond their development capabilities could have resulted in feelings of inadequacy (San Antonio, 2004).

Students from lower SES households also found that maintaining a sense of identity was challenged when their social norms were vastly different to those of the majority groups in the student community. Conversely, students from more affluent schools appreciated the diversity of the student community as this diversity made them feel less pressured to compete in issues of style of dress and social popularity. However, the lack of emphasis on social image was also believed to have contributed to the lower self-esteem levels in girls from high-SES households who may have felt they had lost their social standing. San Antonio (2004) found that the need for secure friendships was valued more than status within the school community; therefore, the need to gain a sense of belonging to a group was paramount to all participants.
The subject of students’ perceptions of support was also raised in the consultation process undertaken by the Western Australian Department of Education and Training (2005) that resulted in the changes in school policy mentioned previously. The feedback from students who participated in the consultation process was that positive interactions with supportive staff engendered feelings of mutual respect that encouraged learning endeavours. It has been suggested that the social and emotional environment at senior colleges reflects that of adult education (Polesel, 2002). The adult environment at senior college tends to encourage more mature and responsible behaviour in the social and educational domains, which in turn has been shown to improve student behaviour and educational attainment. The ethos of senior colleges that encourage a collaborative process between teaching staff and their students would appeal to an adolescent’s growing sense of self and desire for autonomy and power to influence their own future.

In a case study of three senior colleges in New South Wales, Polesel (2002) utilised data collected in a 1996 Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs study that sought students’ perceptions of the learning environment at the senior college they attended. Polesel also combined this data with information gathered in two New South Wales DET studies conducted in 2000 and 2001. The senior colleges that Polesel reported on included a collegiate college with several feeder middle schools, a purpose-built senior college that shared a multi-campus site with a University and a TAFE college and a senior college that had a dedicated artistic and vocational curriculum that was not available at other institutes. This college also offered an
alternate style of education to students who found that the authoritarian behaviour codes of traditional schools did not aid their learning process.

The main findings from the study identified that stakeholders (principals, teachers, students and parents) in all three colleges identified some common benefits in the senior college model of secondary education. The first was the ability of the limited-grade (Year 11–12) campus to offer a broad curriculum that catered to the needs of a diverse student body. Particular mention was made of Vocational Education and Training (VET) that assisted the less academically inclined students to gain experience in skills that could improve future employment opportunities. The atmosphere of the senior colleges was described as an adult learning environment with students being given the freedom and responsibility to manage their own education. Consequently, students displayed more mature and responsible behaviour and teacher/student relationships were mutually respectful and more relaxed. In addition, Polesel (2002) suggested that there was a change in the teacher/student relationship in senior college, with a move away from the traditional hierarchical authoritarian style of interaction to a more collaborative relationship.

A criticism by senior students of traditional Year 8–12 high schools was that teachers tended to be preoccupied with the behavioural issues of younger students and as a consequence did not have the time to develop a more collaborative relationship with the senior students. From a parental point of view, the benefits of senior colleges were that they provided more support, structure and guidance from staff members (Polesel, 2002).
Summary

Adolescence is marked by the changes associated with puberty. Developmental theories suggest that during puberty adolescents strive for autonomy and a sense of self as they develop an adult identity (Berger, 2006). It is during this time of personal development that they undergo the transition from primary to secondary education. Transition research suggests that the developmental concerns of adolescents (as outlined in Table 4.1) can interact negatively with the environment of senior schools which require students to conform and place constraints on behaviour. Some of the negative outcomes of transition experiences are the lowering of academic grades and a decline in participation. In addition, the loss of the social support of familiar classmates and teachers of primary school can diminish students’ self-esteem and feelings of safety in the less personal environments of secondary schools. However the move to a new school helps some students to establish new identities that are free of the academic and social expectations of their primary school.

The following chapter will describe the context and purpose of the current research. It will explain the methodology utilised in phase one and present the results of the analysis of data collected.
Chapter 5

Phase One

Aims of the Chapter

The aim of this phase of the research process was to consider the transition experiences of students who attend a senior college in Western Australia. An exploratory qualitative research design was employed to investigate the thoughts, feelings and reality of the participants' transition experiences. The chapter commences with an exploration of the methods used in qualitative research and considers the use of such methods in transition research. The context and purpose of the current research will be reviewed and the methodology utilised in phase one will be described. The findings will then be presented and discussed in relation to the literature.

Qualitative Research Methodology

It is not always possible for participants in quantitative research to express their feelings or point of view when their input is constrained by forced choice responses or information sought through the completion of questionnaires and psychometric tests. Quantitative data may indicate participants' reported levels of personal characteristics such as self-esteem but does not provide an explanation of the levels of self-esteem. Qualitative enquiry helps researchers to understand the "how and why" by canvassing the in-depth experiences of the informants in the enquiry, thereby examining phenomena holistically in context (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).
Qualitative research methodology is determined by the type of knowledge that is being sought, the source of the knowledge, and how the knowledge is generated (Crotty, 1998; Daly, 2007; Morse & Richards, 2002). Five classic psychological enquiry paradigms have been compared in Table 5.1 across issues of ontology, epistemology and methodology. Ontology refers to the assumptions that individuals make about the nature of reality, epistemology is the theory of how knowledge is created, and methodology refers to the strategies that researchers use based on their ontological and epistemological beliefs. Quantitative researchers usually support the assumption that there is one truth that is the same for everyone and they attempt to uncover that truth by manipulating the environment. Qualitative researchers support the assumption that there are many realities and that individuals construct their reality as they interact with the environment, therefore, methodologically, qualitative researchers interact with their participants in their natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

Positivism was the paradigm that informed early psychological enquiry. It supported the use of scientific methods to discover objective truths (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). Positivistic research sought to test pre-identified hypotheses in controlled experimental conditions in which variables were manipulated to produce measurable quantitative data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Post-positivism arose in the 1960s as a challenge to the positivists’ belief in absolute objective truths by placing value on language, culture and subjective reality (Daly, 2007). As a result post-positivistic research may involve the collection of qualitative as well as quantitative data (Crotty, 1998).
### Table 5.1

*Comparison of Classic Research Paradigms*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paradigm</th>
<th>Ontology</th>
<th>Epistemology</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positivism</td>
<td>One verifiable reality.</td>
<td>Objectivist, one truth independent of individual experience.</td>
<td>Experimental, quantitative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-positivism</td>
<td>Possible realities not easily verified.</td>
<td>Moderate objectivist.</td>
<td>Experimental, quantitative/ qualitative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical theory</td>
<td>Emergent implicit reality.</td>
<td>Transactional/subjectivist.</td>
<td>Interpretive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructionism</td>
<td>Reality constructed by individuals.</td>
<td>Transactional/subjectivist.</td>
<td>Interpretive/ exploratory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory</td>
<td>Reality co-created.</td>
<td>Subjectivist/objectivist, knowledge acquired during lived experiences.</td>
<td>Interpretive/ exploratory.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Lincoln & Guba, 2003, p. 258)

Post-positivism signalled a departure from objective/explanatory to subjective/interpretive research that required the researcher to personally engage with their participants in order to interpret their lived experiences. This
led the way for the development of critical theory, constructionism\(^2\) and participatory methodologies (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). Critical theory emerged from a desire among social researchers to challenge the status quo and include contextual issues such as cultural, economic and socio-political circumstances as well as issues of gender in research methodology (Lincoln & Guba). The epistemological stance of critical theory is that knowledge is developed over time, based on historical, social and political forces (Kinchenlo & McLaren, 2003), and is often used to highlight the experiences of the disempowered in order to bring about social change.

Constructionism is underpinned by the principle that knowledge is constructed by individuals during transactions in their social world. This methodology is used in exploratory research projects that attempt to understand individuals’ perceptions of their experiences (Schwandt, 2000). Participatory methodology is based on the belief that knowledge is co-created; therefore, research is conducted collaboratively between the researcher and the participants and may be used to effect change in projects that use participatory action research (Patton, 1990).

The field of qualitative enquiry is evolving and the classic paradigms as identified by Lincoln and Guba (2003) were reconstructed by Cresswell (2003) into the five traditions of biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study. These traditions were then deconstructed to three

\(^2\) Daly (2007) suggests that constructivism is the individual cognitive process of making meaning while constructionism is the interactive construction of meaning. However not all of the authors cited in this thesis make this distinction, therefore the terms constructionism, constructionist and constructivism will be used to describe the process by which individuals make sense of the experiences gained in interaction with their social world.
epistemological influences: objectivism, constructionism and subjectivism (Crotty, 1998) or alternatively labelled by Schwandt (2000) as: interpretivism, hermeneutics and social constructionism. However, Daly (2007) suggests that in recognition of the difficulty of conducting research that adheres strictly to one or other of the objective or subjective research paradigms, the dichotomy is better viewed as a continuum from strictly objective to subjective with varying degrees of each stance in between. Under this model the use of quantitative or qualitative methods of data collection are not tied to the positivist (objective) vs. post-positive (subjective) epistemologies. Multi-method research is possible under this model with quantitative and qualitative methods complementing, rather than antagonising, one another in the mid-ground between the objective and subjective extremes. Qualitative research (for example, interviews and observations) may be used to uncover theoretical relationships which can then be verified using quantitative methods such as surveys (Sells, Smith, & Sprenkle, 1995).

Traditionally, research in education was conducted from a positivist perspective, as evident in the review of previous research outlined in this paper. Much of the research focussed on GPAs and attendance statistics, and utilised empirical tests to uncover the facts surrounding students' experiences of issues such as transition. In more recent times, researchers have examined transition from students' points of view in subjective interpretive research methodologies. Education is essentially a social experience involving interactions between students and teachers (Dewey, 1963); therefore, it lends itself to research conducted from a social constructionist standpoint.
Social Constructionism

Social constructionism honours the constructionist premise that individuals make meaning of their own reality and emphasises the interactive process that aids the construction of knowledge as individuals engage with the world they are interpreting (Holloway, 1997). In order to examine participants' realities, proponents of social constructionism believe that direct involvement with them in their world allows the research findings to emerge by way of a partnership between the researcher and the researched (Holloway). Therefore, the intended product of social constructionist research is constructed meaning, based on the views and experience of the participants as interpreted by the researcher (Cresswell, 2003). The data in constructionist research may consist of utterances, words, observations, visual representations (photographs or video) or documents. A combination of any of the data sources may be used to construct a more complete understanding of the research phenomena. However, most studies will involve the use of interviews conducted either in person or over the phone, with groups or individuals (Morse & Richards, 2002).

Interviews bring researchers and participants together in an interaction that has the potential to elicit in-depth information. Interviews are known as "...conversations with a purpose..." (Holloway, 1997, p. 94) and are often rich in language descriptive of the participant's day-to-day reality which provides an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences in a world that may be unknown to the researcher (Smith, 1995; Holloway, 1997). A structured interview is guided by a schedule of questions developed by the researcher; it is therefore limited in its ability to uncover unusual or unexpected information. Unstructured or semi-structured interviews that pose an open question about
the research topic allow the researcher the opportunity to follow the lead of the interviewee to explore issues as they arise in the "conversation with a purpose" (Breakwell, 2000). Interviews are enhanced by purposeful sampling of participants to maximise the value of data collected to the research objectives (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2000), with the selection of participants being guided by the quality of information they possess relative to the topic under investigation (Patton, 2002). Data collection (interviewing) may continue until such time as no new or unusual information emerges (Holloway, 1997).

**Analysing Qualitative Data**

Analysing qualitative data can be achieved in a number of ways. Hansen (2006) suggests four main approaches: narrative, discourse, content and iterative/thematic analysis. Narrative and discourse analysis are used to produce a representation of how participants view their world based on the language or text used to tell their story. Narrative analysis is used in health research to help understand patients' experiences of illness. Discourse analysis is used in critical methodologies that research issues of power imbalance, for example, in feminist enquiries (Hansen, 2006).

Content and iterative/thematic analyses are flexible processes whereby themes are identified in the data. The strategy used in content and iterative/thematic analysis involves applying open codes to concepts in the data that are identified as having similarities (Hansen, 2006). Early analysis of initial data collected is used to inform interview schedules or prompts in subsequent interviews. Once the data has been coded, a précis process commences whereby codes are examined, expanded upon and combined, where
appropriate, to form categories, and categories are further examined and combined until there are distinct but related major categories that satisfy all aspects of the data collected (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These are the strategies used in grounded theory research, which is an example of iterative/thematic analysis (Hansen, 2006).

**Grounded Theory**

The earliest proponents of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1973), positioned the processes as objectivist in nature by stressing the neutrality of the researcher, who reduces the data to propose an external reality (Charmaz, 2000). However, Strauss and Corbin (1990) moved grounded theory into the subjective qualitative field by representing the actual views of participants in the research, thereby giving them a voice (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). Charmaz added the element of many realities by incorporating a constructionism paradigm to the grounded theory methodology. Grounded theory research, therefore, seeks to produce a meaningful interpretation of reality that honours the different perspectives of the informants in the research (Daly, 2007).

Grounded theory from a constructionist stance does not adhere to the objectivist requirement that a researcher attempt to eliminate any personal bias in analysing or reporting data (Charmaz, 2000). In constructionist grounded theory, participants are studied in their natural settings and the researcher is an integral part of the data collected (Charmaz). To increase the openness of the interpretive processes of grounded theory, the researcher is encouraged to
operate in an environment of reflexive practice by maintaining a detailed diary of each stage of data collection and analysis (Daly, 2007; Hansen, 2006).

Reflexivity encourages researchers to consider their role in the research process and how their attitudes and assumptions may affect the participants, the information they impart and the interpretation of that information (Holloway, 1997). The maintenance of a comprehensive research diary, or audit trail, is used to record the progressive thought process that forms part of the reported outcomes of the project (Holloway). Thorough documentation of the research project promotes a transparency of process that facilitates informed judgment on the credibility of the research findings (Berg, 1989).

**Current study**

The establishment of senior colleges in the education system in Western Australia is a relatively new concept. The separation of high school education into middle years and senior years has implications for students as they experience an additional transition to an unfamiliar education facility on completion of Year 10. The current study sought to understand how the additional transition during the senior school years was perceived by students. In addition, it was anticipated that in discussing their experiences, participants would provide some information on the structural, administrative and emotional environment of the college that may have influenced their transition experiences. Feiner et al. (1983) advised that in the area of prevention, much emphasis is placed on stressful life events that produce negative consequences. To be proactive in the area of prevention, the focus should also be on events that positively influence outcomes (Feiner, et al.). The current
research provided an opportunity to examine the positive elements of the environment at Ceremonial Senior College\(^3\) (CSC); the college had incorporated many of the recommendations contained in the DET (2005) report, *Creating the future for our young people: Raising the school leaving age*.

The methodology used in the current research will be discussed in detail; however, in order to clarify and support the methods and methodology used in a research project, the advice offered in the literature is that researchers should clearly articulate the assumptions they make about reality and human knowledge (Bowen, 2005; Crotty, 1998). Additionally, to produce a strong project that is likely to be viewed favourably, it is advisable to clearly convey the purpose and context in which the research was conducted and the nature of the knowledge expected as an outcome (Daly, 2007; Mills et al., 2006; Pitman & Maxwell, 1992).

**Research Framework**

Based on the assumptions that social interaction is fundamental to the construction of knowledge, and that truth and meaning are constructed by individuals in conscious interaction with their world, the theoretical perspective that informed the research methodology in this project was social constructionism. Constructionism underpins the premise that an individual's reality is formed as they engage with the world they are interpreting (Holloway, 1997). The knowledge that was expected as an outcome of the research was a theoretical model of the way that transition had been experienced by the

---

\(^3\) The anonymity of the senior college will be protected by the use of a pseudonym. Similarly, the identity of other schools and the individuals mentioned by participants in interviews will be protected by the use of pseudonyms.
participants in the enquiry. Therefore a constructionist grounded theory analysis, as proposed by Charmaz (2000), was deemed to be the appropriate strategy to employ in order to develop a theoretical model of transition.

Triangulation of information was achieved by using a mixed-method strategy that employed interviews and surveys. The findings from phase one of the research were used to develop a survey (described in Chapter 6) that was administered in phase two of the research with the aim of clarifying the findings from the initial phase.

**Research Context**

The setting for this study was a senior college in the Northern Metropolitan Education District of Perth, WA. The opening of the college was an outcome of a 1999–2000 Local Area Education Planning (LAEP) project. The LAEP project resulted in the establishment of a middle school that catered for students from Year 6 through to Year 10 and a senior college specifically for students in Years 11 and 12. The middle school commenced operations in 2002 with enrolments into Years 6 and 7 only. The school paced its expansion of additional class years with the progress of the initial students. The senior college, CSC, opened in January 2003 with 324 students who chose to relocate from traditional Year 8–12 high schools in the surrounding area. In 2006, when the first graduates from the middle school were enrolled, CSC had 667 students; in 2008 this had increased to 773. The college achieves attendance and retention rates that exceed the state average. Attendance rates of Year 11 and 12 students at CSC are 89% and 92% respectively, whereas the Western Australian state averages are 87% for Year 11 and 91% for Year 12. The
percentage of Year 11 students who continue on to Year 12 at the college is 73% whereas the state average retention rate of Year 11 students is 67%. Academically, in 2007, 98% of Year 12 students achieved secondary graduation and the median tertiary entrance score achieved by Tertiary Entrance Examination (TEE) students was 76.95% (DET, 2009).

The success of the school, as evident in student outcomes, may be attributed to the organisational structure employed by the college which reflects many of the recommendations that arose from the DET (2005) community consultation report, Creating the future for our young people: raising the school leaving age. The school offers a flexible learning environment that is more suited to young adults than the traditional high schools. As evident in the DET consultations with stakeholders, traditional schools that educate students aged from 12 to 17 years are obliged to maintain a less accommodating regime. This is necessary to address the needs of younger students who may be developmentally less self-regulatory. CSC employs a mentor program in which one teacher is allocated to mentor a small number of students. The mentor oversees the day-to-day performance and progress of each of their mentees (students) and assists in maintaining the overall social, emotional, spiritual and academic wellbeing of each student.

The diversity of courses at the CSC offers opportunities for young adults to prepare for a range of post-secondary pathways, including further education, training or employment. The college offers four types of courses or programs: Courses of Study (COS), University Pathway Examination subjects (preparatory studies for TEE), Wholly School Assessed subjects (WSA), and Vocational Education and Training (VET). COS and TEE preparation programs consist of
subjects that are examined externally for the purposes of university entrance. WSA programs consist of subjects that are assessed at the school level and which may contribute to alternate entry pathways to university. VET programs are governed by the Australian Quality Training Framework and prepare students to apply for further training pathways such as TAFE, and may be an advantage for students seeking alternative entry pathways to university. Structured Workplace Learning (SWL) is an integral part of VET programs and offers students the opportunity to gain industry experience whilst studying. The assessment of SWL is achieved through a combination of college and workplace components.

The flexible learning environment at the senior college allows it to operate on a four-day week with extended hours to facilitate a lesson-free day mid-week. The lesson-free day allows VET students to attend structured work placements, traineeships, TAFE College and other community organisations to extend their college education with employment experience. All students have access to the college on lesson-free days for consultations with teaching staff or to use the facilities such as the library. The physical environment of the college complements the innovative organisational features. The college’s architecture and facilities have been recognised as being among 65 of the world’s best designs, as featured in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (2006) Compendium of Exemplary Education.

The college was chosen as the research context primarily because the student body comprised both students who had transitioned from a middle school and students who had transitioned from traditional high schools to the senior college catering for Years 11 and 12 exclusively. Thus, canvassing the
transition experiences of both groups of students presented an opportunity to develop an understanding of the influence of the additional transition, whether enforced by the division of high school into middle and senior schools or undertaken voluntarily. In addition, the college utilises many of the strategies recommended in the consultation process on raising the school leaving age. Therefore, it also presented an opportunity to examine the effect these strategies might have on students' transition experiences.

**Phase One Methodology**

Personal individual interviews were utilised, as conducting interviews in person in the environment in which participants interact daily facilitates an increased familiarity with their world and a greater understanding of the contextual underpinnings of research (Holloway, 1997; Smith, 1995).

**Participants**

Purposeful sampling of participants was guided by the quality of information they possessed relative to the topic under investigation (Patton, 2002). Demographic data (see Table 5.2) was collected to ensure that the sample was representative of all variations in terms of originating school, type of course being undertaken and gender. The process of gathering participants commenced in the first term of 2006 when the first graduates from the associated middle school transitioned to the senior college. From a potential participant pool of students who were willing and had parental permission to participate, 16 students were interviewed. The final sample consisted of male and female students who had transitioned from a local middle school or various
traditional high schools and were studying either for TEE or VET subjects and Arts coursework.

Table 5.2

Demographic Characteristics of Participant Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>( n )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender – Male</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Female</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic orientation – TEE</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Non-TEE</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Originating school – Traditional (Years 8–12)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Middle school (Years 6–10)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( N = 16 \)

Materials

As this was an exploratory study, a brief interview schedule (Appendix A) was used to guide interviews, including with two main questions and a number of prompts. The order and content of questions and prompts varied as the interview process progressed, allowing the interviewer to seek expansion on insights gained from participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). To enhance the reflexivity of the research, a contact summary schedule, as recommended by Lyons (2000), was used to record any issues that arose or relevant observations made during interviews that had the potential to influence interpretation of the data; this schedule formed part of the audit trail.
Procedure

An information letter (Appendix B) introducing the researcher and outlining the purpose of the project was supplied to the principal of the senior college. On receipt of the principal's permission to proceed with the research, information letters and consent forms were distributed through the school administration system to all Year 11 students (Appendix C) and their parents (Appendix D) inviting them to be involved in the study. The information letters explained the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of the research process. Participants were advised of the voluntary nature of their participation and their freedom to withdraw from the interview at any stage without adverse consequences. Students who had parental permission and were willing to participate were asked to register their interest with the Student Services department of the college.

Interviews were conducted in an office located in the Student Services department of the college during class time. The office was deemed to be a suitably neutral environment as it was frequently accessed by students for consultations with student advisors and visiting health professionals. Interviewees were chosen by student administration staff based on availability and ease of access of students at the times available for interviewing. Prior to the commencement of interviews participants were required to produce a signed consent to participate from their parent or guardian, and to sign a participant’s consent form. Interviews commenced with the gathering of demographic data and general conversation in order to foster rapport between the researcher and the participant. Participants were advised that an audio-recording would be made of interviews and of their right to decline to answer
questions or to withdraw from the interview at any stage without any adverse consequences.

Participants were asked about the initial transition period and how they perceived, and were interacting, in the social milieu at their new school. The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of open-ended questions that allowed participants the freedom to relate their experiences and perceptions. The researcher used the opportunity to probe any topics of interest that emerged during the interviews (Berg, 1989; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

The interviews were conducted in a reflective environment in which the interviewer diarised thoughts and intuitions regarding the participants and the interview process. In addition, transcription and preliminary analysis of interviews commenced before the course of interviews was complete, thereby allowing issues of interest that emerged during initial interviews to be investigated in subsequent interviews.

Data analysis

All audiotapes of interviews were transcribed and subsequently read and re-read to increase familiarity with the data. The grounded theory coding processes proposed by Charmaz (2006) and illustrated in Figure 5.1 commenced with open coding of each individual line of the transcripts of interviews. Open coding involves the examination, analysis and categorisation of the participants' actions and statements, to promote a comprehensive understanding of their experience (Charmaz). A descriptive list of categories was developed from the open coding and, to ensure that the data was adequately represented by the categories, the process of focussed coding
Figure 5.1. Strategies used in analysing qualitative data to produce a representation of participants' transition experiences.

...
The analysis of the data in the current research is organised around three main themes: transition issues, aspects of the college environment and personal aspects. Table 5.3 represents the main themes, with sub-themes, that emerged from the analysis of the data.

**Table 5.3**

*Themes Common to Participants’ Transition Experiences*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transition issues</td>
<td>Lesson-free day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Open school policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respect and responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentor program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspects of the college</td>
<td>Support and accessibility of staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>environment</td>
<td>Teacher/student relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student/student relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal aspects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Transition Issues**

The influence of changes in school attended, place of residence or both during the final years of high school has been found to lead to increased behavioural issues and to students prematurely exiting the education system (Swanson & Schneider, 1999). Among the participants interviewed in this study, the feelings about, or attitudes toward, the transition they had made to CSC were in most cases extremely positive:
So when I came there (Crossways) it's like 1,600 children, it's just way too much. I really didn't like the school, I was getting depressed. So I definitely was going to get out of there. So I came to a school, Folkton, which is down the road and I didn't like it either but that was just for grade 10. So when I came to Ceremonial the first time I thought this is what I am used to, you know this is a great school. There were a few things that I didn't like but I had to, you know, you've got to at a new school, you know, it's a different culture new experiences new things to do so I decided this is a very good school... (P01;20)⁵.

Has it changed for you from the first few weeks here?

It has (changed) for me yes because I have settled down more and I have found new friends and people and I have got more into my work. It does take a while for you to get into the working habit because they are a lot different to other schools but you get ahead fairly quickly if you apply yourself and if you take the opportunities presented (P01;40).

Contrary to the findings of research by Felner et al. (1981), which suggested that repeated school transitions may increase the risk of school failure, this student had experienced a number of changes, including international relocation, but exhibited a positive attitude toward the transition and the adaptations required. For some participants the positive attitude to the transition was present before enrolling at CSC:

---

⁴ To protect the identities of people or educational establishments named by participants during the interviews, pseudonyms will be used when including quotes.
⁵ Refers to interview transcript of Participant 1; line 20.
⁶ IQ denotes interviewer questions that have been added to enhance understanding.
I heard some good things about it that's the reason why I wanted to come here, not really for the special programs, more for the resources they have here because it is a pretty new school and it's got all the science labs and the library and all that. There are many computer areas, there are some upstairs and some in the library and some other areas, and I haven't seen the whole school yet because it is pretty big (P04;67).

Aspects of the College Environment

The college resources and facilities were highly rated by participants and as mentioned previously the college's architecture and facilities were featured in the OECD 2006 Compendium of Exemplary Education as being among the world's best designs. The college facilities are also matched by some organisational innovations employed at the college.

Lesson-free day.

The college operates on a four-day week and this was, not surprisingly, an aspect of school organisation that most participants viewed as highly beneficial. The reasons given for students' appreciation of the lesson-free day were varied:

The day off is good it allows you to catch up on your work, I come in to school sometimes but I also have a part-time job (P03;19).

Another student observed that in comparison with their previous school:

I am more up to date here with my work because of the lesson-free day (P14;13).
For students involved in VET studies and SWL, the lesson-free days presented an opportunity to undertake tuition at other educational institutes or to gain work experience without compromising their study schedule:

*We go out to a workplace on a placement one day a week which is on a lesson-free day when no one else is at school so I don’t miss out on any classes like most other schools will. Yeah it is beneficial and it has given me some idea of what I want to do in my future, it is not an apprenticeship just work experience* (P08;12).

In this instance, the participant appreciated the long-term benefits of the lesson-free day which allowed them to attend SWL, the practical component of VET courses, and therefore gain a practical perspective on future aspirations. As was the experience of the young hairdresser featured in Chapter 1 of this paper, the opportunity to gain realistic work experience may be the channel to a successful career. Similarly, VET studies were identified by students, teachers, principals and parents who participated in research by Polesel (2002) as aiding the prospect of post-school employment for students.

In the current research, students who did not have SWL activities to attend used the lesson-free day to get extra help with studies or to keep up to date with work:

*The teachers are keen to help, they have after school programs which you can go to get help with homework, they have extra help on lesson-free days because we have a day off as a study day because we work later on Tuesday and Thursday, so I come into school to get extra help or*
you can stay home and work from, do homework at home so it is good if you have any extra question or you're not sure of something you can go in and ask for help (P07;5).

Lesson-free days were also appreciated by those students who had unavoidable absences from school:

I did (come to school) in first term because they had tutorials and you could get help from teachers but I found I got distracted by my friends a bit so I stay at home to do my homework but if I need specific help I come in. Recently I was off school and missed two tests so I was able to make them up on the lesson-free day (P02;78).

The decision to avoid the distraction of friends and be proactive about completing work made by this participant is indicative of the mature behaviour that Polesel (2002) observed among senior college students. Alternately, lesson-free days were claimed to help avoid absences:

If you need extra work or study it definitely helps a lot and I don't have any days off school “chucking sickies”\(^7\) anymore because you have your break in between, you don't get tired and stuff (P15;13).

**Open school policy.**

The school policy at the senior college is described as open because students are free to leave the grounds during the school day. At recess and lunch-time and when students have a free period, they are allowed to spend

---

\(^7\) This is a colloquial term for taking a leave of absence without necessarily being sick.
their time where they choose on the understanding that they attend all of their classes on time. This means that students are able to access the local food outlets and parks at lunchtime; for many of the students this promoted a sense of trust:

_They trust you a lot more, you know how we are allowed out of bounds at school, we are actually allowed to do that so we’re not breaking school rules or doing something wrong (P16;30)._  

The environment created by the open school policy is similar to the learning environment of tertiary education establishments where students take responsibility for their own academic progress. Polesel (2002) found in his study of three senior colleges that the students who were given the freedom to manage their own education behaved in a more mature and responsible manner:

_I like it, you get to go where you want at lunch-times and stuff, and you get lots of responsibility. They don’t have to know where you are all the time, they can say go and use a computer somewhere and you can just do that and be by yourself (P06;5)._  

To support students in assuming the responsibility that is part of the open school policy, CSC employs strategies to foster their engagement with the education process. CSC students are assisted to establish goals for their future and encouraged to maintain progress toward them. An emphasis on academic effort and progress was found to aid successful transition and engagement (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). For some students the level of encouragement to work
was appreciated; they saw it as being in their best interests for future studies or employment. According to many of the students, this was one of the best aspects of the way that the senior college was run:

...you come here and they, it's like they are strict but they're .... It's all good because they want us to have a good future not just ... they really push you to get into uni after and TAFE and have a good job and everything set out so you're not just sitting there with nothing which is really good in a way. They make you, like if you don't get a task in on time you would get like an ND or something and you don't want that (P11;68).

Many students recognised the responsibility that accompanies the freedom to go off campus during the day. The responsibility of being accountable for attending lessons on time was linked to a sense of approaching adulthood by one student:

I definitely have more responsibility here, sometimes that's a bit scary but then it is pretty cool, it is getting you ready for your adult life (P13;22).

**Respect and Responsibility.**

Respect and responsibility were aspects of college life that emerged in the majority of interviews. The two concepts were linked; the responsibility given to students for their own behaviour indicated, and fostered, respect: respect for themselves, respect for each other and respect for the staff at the college. This sub-theme is strongly linked to the lesson-free day and open
school policy as these aspects of the school appeared to foster respectful and responsible attitudes in the participants as is evident in the following comments:

*It’s a good school, one of the best schools I’ve been to, they give you high responsibility which if you don’t act responsibly you lose it (P07;04).*

*I find that you get a lot more responsibility and the work’s more ordered and set out and I enjoy the work’s(sic) a lot better, it’s all set out so you know what you’re doing so you can plan ahead so you plan more for your tests. They actually give you a lesson plan at the start of the year to show you basically what you will be doing, it’s a rough outline, it’s good to have all the text books already prepared and you know what’s basically you’re in for when you go in there (P07;22).*

In contrast, the environment at another participant’s former school limited the opportunity to assume responsibility for their own progress:

*We weren’t given much opportunity it was structured, you have to do it this way and we weren’t given any choice (P02;21).*

The freedom to make choices with regard to school-work is influential in students’ engagement with their education (Fredricks et al., 2004). A lack of autonomy and constraints on behaviour oppose an adolescent’s desire to behave and be treated as an adult (Eccles et al., 1993)

The discipline policy employed at the college is also instrumental in encouraging students to conduct themselves in a reliable mature way:
They (the rules) are fair, we get extra responsibility like we are allowed out of the premises as long as we are back in time for class. So basically I like the rules because you need some kind of structure (P07; 45).

One unexpected aspect of the responsibility and respect theme was the pride attached to achievement:

Every semester they hand out colours awards, you get a certificate and a badge to wear so that you can be recognised, but people at this school actually wear them, I don't think they would at other schools (P02;57).

Conversely, for one student, the responsibility of guiding academic progress personally was not appreciated:

I guess it's more relaxed 'cos the teachers don't pressure you as much to do work which I guess can be a good thing but a lot of the time it is a bad thing with some people. I guess it could be a bad thing for me because my work ethic sucks (P08;62).

This comment may indicate that the participant was not quite ready to take responsibility for his own behaviour. The participant had attended private schools prior to transitioning to the high school. He felt that private schools gave value for money by forcing you to learn:

I have always been to private schools, I mean it is definitely good but in some cases it is not. ... I mean there is nothing really to tell I mean the teachers there (at private schools) they are ... obviously because you are roughly paying $25 per day to go to school at ... and they are really like
"you have to learn" they make you learn, there was more direction from them and for me that was better (P08;73).

For this student, the private school experience may not have encouraged self-discipline and independent work habits. The hierarchical authoritarian style of interaction in some traditional high schools (public and private) tends to limit students' opportunity to assume responsibility for their own behaviour (Polesel, 2002). The mentor program at the college attempts to address issues of autonomy and self-reliance for students.

**Mentor program.**

All new students attending the college are assigned to a mentor group that meets twice a week with a designated mentor teacher. The emotional welfare and academic effort of mentees is overseen by the mentor teacher who has access to the academic transcripts of mentees and maintains lines of communication with their teachers and family. The comments from participants about the mentor program varied. Most students understood the value of being kept informed about school events and issues during mentor time; however, there were different views on whether the balance of mentor time was an opportunity to do work or to build social networks. The comments from participants reflected three different aspects: the actual mentor class time, the mentor group and the mentor teacher.

Mentor class time was deemed beneficial by some of the more motivated students, who saw it as a good opportunity to start on homework and to access teachers for help:
... and the mentor is absolutely wonderful, it's an hour out of schooling when you can just sit down and do your homework so that's very good, I always use it (P01;129).

However, mentor class was labelled a waste of time if the business conducted did not take up the whole hour allotted:

No we had form, mentor is more like, I don't think mentor is really necessary to be honest; well I am a student councillor so when everybody has mentors we go have a meeting. We talk about the upcoming events and assemblies and things like that. Other than that I think mentor is just (shrugs). A lot of people finish off work in mentor which I think that's what we use our lesson-free days for and to be honest, you know how we finish at 4:20 on a Tuesday and Thursday, our mentor (class) goes for an hour and we usually get let out 15 minutes after (it starts) so you have like an hour and a half lunchtime when we would rather just be leaving at 3:20. Mentor is good in a way, like you get an hour to do nothing but it gets really boring and the day drags (P11;80).

From the aspect of fellow mentor group members, some mentees were fortunate to be grouped with students studying the same subjects which provided them with a support base:

My mentor group includes all people who do intro calc and our mentor is a maths teacher which is good because we can get help from her (P02;44).
Students who transferred from schools individually rather than in a large group from middle school were able to make friends in their mentor class:

*Having mentor class because you are not in there to do work during that class, you’re there to get help and talk to people and make friends and stuff (P06;81).*

*You have friends everywhere then and that’s good. The other girls who came from Craghill they stick together now, it depends on what they’re like really. When I first started here my mentor teacher said make sure I talk to people and don’t just be like I want to be left out so that was alright and got me started talking to people (P06;136).*

Transition support, including mentoring, is associated with more successful transition experiences and post-transition academic success (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). Similarly, school engagement is aided by clear and consistent goals (Fredricks et al., 2004). It may be deduced then that the mentor program at CSC has a role in maintaining students’ engagement with education and in making their transition experiences less stressful.

Mentor teachers were generally viewed by participants as a support academically and emotionally, meeting with their mentees early in the year to help them set their academic goals and subsequently helping them keep on track with these during the term:

*(IQ) Do you know what you want to do in the future?*

*I would like to do medicine but I am not too sure about that. Here they help you choose your subjects for it (the course you want to take) and*
they help me keep my TER\textsuperscript{8} up high. Our mentors help us go through it and just occasionally we will go through it and see how we are going (P06;55).

Mentors are also supportive of the personal goals of their mentees: They are good, you can go to other mentors during mentoring if you have a problem that they can help with. We have personal and academic goals and it was okay to talk to mentors about personal goals (P05;32).

Help and encouragement are offered and extra work given if deemed necessary. One student did not see this as a punishment but as genuine assistance to help achieve the goals he had set:

On the mentor system it is on the computer so they can look it up and help you if you are having problems. They can give you more work to do to help you. I don’t see that as punishment (P03;28).

The other task that mentor teachers perform is to promote a sense of community by keeping students informed about events in the collage such as additional tutorials, social events etc. Mentoring was attributed with bringing the students together as a community:

Probably mentor group we sort of come in and say any issues or we’ll talk about what’s coming up and if there is any issues with people in the class or they’re not performing very well, kids might come up with issues

\textsuperscript{8} Tertiary Entrance Rank reports a student’s rank position relative to all other students entered for Tertiary Entrance Examinations.
they have and then they can talk about it in mentor with the teacher or with the group as a whole. It is more about academic, like if people missed a class or they have been absent in that class or they have had a poor performance the teacher will say well what's happening and try and get them back on track (P07;73).

From the point of view of emotional support students did feel they were able to call on mentor teachers for help:

*The mentoring here the teachers speak to us more and I can talk to my mentor teacher about any troubles I have and I like that* (P12;21).

Discussing accessing mentors for academic and personal issues elicited these comments:

*A little bit of both, not really much personal but they're cool teachers so we talk socially about personal stuff* (P10;72).

*... they are always there to approach if you need help.*

*(IQ) School help or personal help?*

*School help, you've got your mentor to help you with anything else.*

*(IQ) So you would go to them with personal issues?*

*Yeah* (P04 25).

**Personal aspects**

As Dewey (1963) previously advised, education is a social experience between students and teachers. Personal aspects of the transition experience refer to the emotional environment of the college as characterised by the
relationships established among the students and between the staff and the students. These relationships were aspects of the school that participants identified as being important to their sense of belonging to the college community. A strong SoB to college may act as a preventive measure against loss of motivation, disengagement and early exit from the education system (Goodenow, 1993b). Participants in the research felt that they were respected and responsible members of the college community.

**Support and accessibility of staff.**

The mentor program at the college encourages students to seek help from teachers whenever required and this has led students to value the support and accessibility of staff at the college:

*Yes the staff is very good, they all know their fields very well, they are accessible in mentor time after school or we can actually contact them by email* (P07; 98).

A general question about the school elicited this comment:

*i find it very good that it's an open school it's very free like you have a problem you can go to a teacher and they will be more than happy to help you they (pause), you can ask them one question you can ask them a thousand they will be there happy with a smile on their face ready to answer anything* (P01;34).
Some students who had transitioned to the college had done so voluntarily, based on advice they had from other students who attended the school and who valued the support offered by staff:

...I was looking forward to the school, the school’s really good, my sister came here she said it was good. The teachers here when her exams were on the teacher came to our house to help her, they want to teach us (P06;49).

Students also commented on the genuine interest and concern shown by teachers for students to gain the most from their lessons:

Well I find comparing it to the other schools I have been at there is no comparison. With say Crosslands their education is very good and it is very high but over here I would say the work is more structured. They relate everything to one another so in a way that you can take it in as a student, whereas at Crosslands was difficult, you know they used to jump around and they didn’t explain what they said, not that I have anything against Crosslands but I just found it very difficult to learn because I had to catch up as well. But coming here they break down everything and they make sure you understand and the teachers walk around and ask “do you understand that?” they look at you working and they are very helpful (P01;49).

...they are really interested in you and they are always there to approach if you need help (P04;24).
The willingness with which teachers offered help was appreciated by participants:

*The teachers are keen to help, they have after school programs which you can go to get help with homework (P07;5).*

The support of the school community and the opportunities available to students were also recognised:

*I really like this school, if you need any help teachers are always here, if you are having trouble with anything people are always there to help you. You get a lot of opportunities here as well you are given a lot of freedom. You are given responsibility and if you break that responsibility you don’t have the opportunities of people who use it well (P02;4).*

When asked for a comparison between the staff at a former school and those at the college, a student replied:

*... it’s good that they push you to do stuff like your homework and that, whereas at Recorder they never did, so if I went to Recorder for Year 8, 9, 10, I would be going nowhere in 11 and 12 (P11;66).*

The style of relationships between staff and students is influenced by the type of support offered by teachers:

*Lot more friendly here, in Queens Cross they focus more on getting work done, not really helping and they rushed through it. The teachers here are much more like your friends. We can send emails to them any time and they answer (P05;27).*
Transition to Senior College

**Student/staff relationships.**

Some participants described the relationship that they had with the college staff as being characterised by respect and equality. Polesel (2002) suggested that there was a shift in the relationships between teachers and students at senior colleges from the traditional authoritarian style to an egalitarian style. For participants in the study, the adult-style interaction with teachers contrasted with the lack of respect that some teachers from more traditional high school appeared to have shown toward their pupils. This comment from a participant explains the point:

*I wanted to come here it is heaps better here. Just everything, I didn't enjoy Recorder really. The teachers treat you with more respect here more like adults. I don't really like school and if I had stayed at Recorder I probably would have left by now. But I want to graduate first then get an apprenticeship (P14;7).*

The respectful attitude was also evident in the way that students approached and interacted with their teachers:

*Oh yeah I like them, I like Miss Glover but she left. The relationship between staff and students is good; people here treat teachers with a lot more respect. There was respect between teachers and students at Recorder but there is more here because we are older more mature I guess. The teachers treat everyone fair so (P16;76).*

The mature atmosphere, created perhaps by the respectful relationships between staff and students, was commented on by many participants:
It is good, you can have a joke with the teachers and they will stop what they are doing to help you if you need it. It is a not a strict atmosphere at this school it is more relaxed and adult. It is definitely a school you want to stay at (P15;18).

The approachability of staff helped to break down a common mind-set that students have that teachers are of a different human species:

You can talk to the teachers it is not as if they are completely different people, you can have like a “friend talk” to them but you can get the help you need, they are approachable (P02;35).

The positive relationships between staff and students are fostered and maintained by the discipline strategies used at the school:

The teachers seem (pause), if you abide by the rules they seem to respect you for that. The rules are pretty (pause), I can understand the rules like they are just the basic rules like take your hat off inside, it’s manners and that. I think the main rule that they try and put across is that if we respect them they’re going to respect us back so (P09;28).

On the subject of discipline another participant observed:

I like it, they treat us very mature although a lot of kids kind of abuse that but I think it is really good the way they treat us, like some teachers I don’t get along with but you can’t get along with every teacher (P10;76).
This comment indicates that the participant had a mature appreciation of the dynamics of relationships that do not always develop out of preference but can be maintained out of respect.

**Student relationships.**

The adult-style interactions between teachers and students were mirrored in the relationships that had developed among the students. All students interviewed were new to the college and had transferred from other schools; therefore, they were able to make some comparisons on how the student body integrated and how they related to one another.

*They are very friendly, a lot easier to talk to than at Queens Cross which was a private school. I was surprised that most of the students act really well, there is not as many people fooling around as I would have expected* (P05;20).

A participant who had attended school in another country made a favourable comparison with his previous school, which he held in high esteem:

...it's what I am used to like Bassland (country emigrated from) they promote mutual respect which is important because then everyone respects each other and creates an environment for students to work together (P01;28).

The respectful attitude of students was evident in some unexpected pro-social behaviour:
It was very friendly and everyone was just respectful and stuff. Like I know I fell over in the first week and I expected everyone to laugh but no one did and some guy helped me up. He was very nice (P04;14).

Supportive peer relationships were found to influence pro-social behaviour among high school students (Wentzel, 1998). The respect for individual differences and the lack of violent confrontation was also an element of the social environment at the college commented on. The student body was described:

Pretty good there's a very big mixture of different kids so 'cos there's like 400 Year 11s and I don't really like that I think it would have been better if it was just a smaller group but it's fine we get along fine. There is a little bit of just normal stuff like, oh yeah they're that group they're this group but not really fights or anything and no one really hates anyone else just because they're in a different group so (P10;32).

... I have friends in Year 12 and we are friends out of school. Everyone is pretty friendly here there is no aggro (P16;100).

The selective nature of the college that specifically caters for students in Years 11 and 12 was attributed with influencing the relational atmosphere at the college. Many students commented on the fact that the college environment was more in the style of a tertiary education campus:

Well there's more of a variety here I mean it's a lot bigger we've got nearly half of Moreton School in just two years. It's definitely better
Transition to Senior College

because there's more maturity they're all our age there's no little kids running around or anything like that (P09;84).

The open school policy was also linked to the mature relational environment:

I like that we have more space here. The canteen is open all the time so you can go in there and get stuff anytime and you can study in there. We are not treated like little children anymore (P12;25).

The college was compared favourably with a traditional Year 8–12 high school with respect to the different discipline style possible in a school that caters for the senior grades (Year 11 and 12) only:

That (previous school) was a lot different it was kind of like being in primary school. The teachers had to know what you were doing and it was always sit here and do your work (P06;26).

The move away from the more authoritarian style of teaching that exists in traditional schools is influential in creating the respectful, collaborative relationships between staff and students that characterises an adult learning environment (Polesel, 2002).

Summary

The transition experiences of participants in this research were predominantly positive and this was attributed to aspects of the college environment and personal aspects that participants identified as beneficially
impacting on their transition experiences. None of the 16 students interviewed expressed any regret at having made the transition to CSC; many indicated that they chose to attend the college because of its reputation as a good school. Two participants commented that they were doubtful that they would have stayed at school to complete Year 12 if they had not transitioned to CSC from their traditional Year 8–12 senior high school.

The overall ethos or culture of CSC was described as a mature learning environment that encouraged students to take responsibility for their education and fostered respect among staff and students. The administrative features and the culture of schools are aspects of students’ transition experiences that can be adjusted and improved to benefit all students; therefore, it is important to gain an understanding of which aspects assert the most influence. Phase two of this research project seeks to triangulate the findings from this phase and to clarify the contribution that the themes identified made to students’ successful transition experiences.
Phase Two

Aims of the Chapter

Phase two of this research aims to further explore the results of phase one analysis by incorporating the findings into a transition survey. The survey was administered to a sample of Year 11 students at Ceremonial Senior College who were asked to rate their transition experiences. This chapter describes the rationale and research design for this phase of the research. It discusses the methodology used and the results of the analysis of the data, and concludes with a summary of the findings.

Research Questions

The data gathered in interviews with participants in phase one was interpreted to yield a set of themes that described aspects of the college organisation and personal aspects of the environment that participants found helpful in making a successful transition. The research questions addressed in this phase of the research are:

1. Are the transition experiences of a subsequent cohort of CSC Year 11 students similar to those of phase one participants?
2. Do certain aspects of the CSC environment contribute to successful transition experiences?
3. Do the variables gender, previous school attended and academic course impact the transition experience?

**Rationale and Research Design**

To address the research questions posed in the second phase of the research project, a mixed-methods design using quantitative and qualitative methods was utilised. A survey (Appendix E) developed from the transition themes identified by participants in phase one was administered to students who attended Year 11 at CSC in the year following the initial data collection. In this way, data was gathered from a different source to provide a triangulated perspective on transition experiences.

Triangulation is a checking process whereby a phenomenon is investigated from an alternate perspective to confirm the validity of research findings (Nagy & Viney, 1994; Patton, 1990; Pitman & Maxwell, 1992). The purpose of triangulation is to enrich the understanding of the phenomena being researched by gathering data from different sources, by using the different perspectives that multiple researchers bring to a project or by examining the phenomena from different methodological perspectives (quantitative and/or qualitative) (Daly, 2007). The survey, being a quantitative method of obtaining transition data, represented a different methodological strategy.

A survey was deemed to be an appropriate process to collect data in this phase of the research because it provided the means to collect data from students in a short time frame (Robson, 2002). There are several different types of surveys that generate data by observing behaviour, reviewing records or interviewing participants; however, in this study a self-report survey was used.
(Fink, 1995). The need to minimise the interruption to the participants' daily school routine whilst encouraging them to participate in the survey were important considerations in conducting this phase of the research. A self-report survey satisfied the need to minimise disruption as it could be completed by participants at their convenience, and ensured anonymity for the respondents, which is believed to encourage candid responses (Robson, 2002).

To ensure the validity of a survey, the content should be stated in language and terms that can be understood by all respondents in the same way (Fowler, 1995; Robson, 2002; Salant & Dillman, 1994). In addressing the issues of question wording and response style, the survey in the current study consisted of statements that reflected the language used and comments made by phase one participants in describing their transition experiences. In responding to the survey statements, the participants in phase two expressed their agreement or disagreement with the transition experience of participants in phase one. These responses provided a triangulated perspective to address the first research question regarding similarity of transition experiences in a different cohort of students.

A multiple regression analysis was employed to investigate the relationship between successful transition and the aspects of the school environment examined in the transition survey. Multiple regression is a statistical technique that investigates the relationship between a single dependent variable and several independent variables (Coakes & Steed, 2007; Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998; Tabachnik & Fidell, 2007). Regression analysis can be used to investigate how well a set of variables are able to predict a particular outcome, which in this research relates to how well the
features of the college environment predict successful transition among students. The results of the multiple regression analysis of survey responses addressed the second research question regarding the relative contribution that the features of the college environment made to students’ successful transition experiences.

The third research question regarding the influence of demographic variables was addressed in a between-subjects design utilising independent sample t tests to investigate whether there was a significant difference between the mean successful transition scores of the individual demographic groups. The use of Parametric tests with ordinal data is a contentious issue in psychological research (Fife-Schaw, 2000). The argument against the use of these tests suggests that Psychological test measures, such as those used in a Likert scale, only indicate a ranking order and do not imply an exact measure of difference between ranks (Fife-Schaw). However it has been suggested that good psychological measures may be considered to lie on a continuum between ordinal and interval level measurement (Minium, King & Bear, 1993). The use of means and t tests in this phase of the research was deemed suitable as the data, although measured on a Likert scale, was considered to reflect an interval scale with the distance between points being similar (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2007). Parametric tests such as the t test are also relatively robust and resistant to violations of the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance (Harris, 1998). The strategies discussed were utilised in addressing the research questions posed in phase one.
Phase Two Methodology

Participants.

Participants (n = 91) were recruited using stratified sampling. Stratified sampling techniques are used to ensure that specific population characteristics are represented in the sample (Martin, 1996). Demographic data (see Table 6.1) was collected to ensure that the final sample of 91 participants was representative of the population in terms of originating school, type of course being undertaken and gender. The sample recruited represented 26.76% of the 340 students enrolled in Year 11 at the college in 2006.

Table 6.1

Demographic Characteristics of Total Participant Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender – Male</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Female</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Originating school – Traditional (year 8-12)</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Middle school (years 6-10)</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic orientation – TEE</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Non-TEE</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 91

The exact number of participants required for the study was based on the number of independent variables (5) to be included in the multiple regression analysis. The formula that was used to ascertain the number of participants necessary for sufficient power in the analysis was $8n + 50$ where $n$ represents
the number of independent variables (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Using this formula the minimum number of participants required was 8(5) + 50 = 90.

**Survey development.**

The themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis of data from phase one formed the basis of the transition survey (Appendix E). A list of potential statements that probed features of the main themes was developed. The list which contained 24 statements was reviewed by a postgraduate supervisor to determine the clarity and relevance of questions. The statements were reviewed and refined. Some statements were deleted as they were considered repetitive and did not add to the survey instrument. The following statements were deleted:

- I feel comfortable and settled at CSC.
- I feel connected to the community at CSC.
- I think the teachers at CSC treat us like adults.

The final survey instrument comprised 21 statements. The list of developed statements was also submitted to the manager of the student services department of CSC for examination and verification prior to being administered to participants.

The dependent variable, successful transition, was examined in two statements:

- I feel like I belong to the school community at Ceremonial Senior College.
- I want to come to school and study at Ceremonial Senior College.
These statements were believed to represent attitudes that maintain students' continued engagement with education. The desire to belong to a community signifies acceptance, respect, inclusion and support from members of the community, which in turn serve to eliminate feelings of alienation and lack of connection (Goodenow, 1993b).

The independent variables included in the survey were represented by a varied number of statements; one statement for each sub-feature of the variable (See Table 6.2). As there were an unequal number of statements per variable, the mean of the combined scores on the statements for each variable was used in the statistical analysis. Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they agreed/disagreed with each statement using a Likert rating scale of five points with 1 representing strong agreement, 3 being neutral and 5 indicating strong disagreement. Participants were invited to add any additional comments regarding their personal transition experiences in a space provided on the survey.
### Table 6.2

*Features of the independent variables explored in transition survey questions.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Sub-feature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentor program</td>
<td>Transition help (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Keep on track with goals (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social contact (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benefits of program (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson-free day</td>
<td>Complete assignments (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part-time employment (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Access teachers (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Free time (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open school policy</td>
<td>Freedom (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult environment (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responsibility (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher support</td>
<td>Encouragement to work (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accessibility (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Help with all problems (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Approachable (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Goal setting (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Open and relaxed (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respect among students (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respect between teachers and students (18)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses indicate the survey statement that relates to the sub-features of the variable.
**Procedure.**

The principal was provided with a letter of information outlining the nature of the research project (Appendix F), and requesting permission to administer the questionnaire to Year 11 students. The principal agreed to the research, and letters of information and consent forms (Appendix G) explaining the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of information and processes, were distributed to parents and guardians of Year 11 students. Students who obtained parental consent were invited to complete the survey and were supplied with an information letter (Appendix H) that included a statement which removed the need for participant consent.

In accordance with the usual practice at CSC of posting student surveys on the college intranet, the information technology department placed the transition survey on their student intranet. Eligible students (those with parental consent and in Year 11) were invited to complete the survey in their own time using the computers on the CSC campus. Survey responses were controlled by the use of personal identification numbers (PINs) that restricted students' access to the survey to one occasion only, but did not link survey responses with students’ PINs. To complete the survey, participants were asked to place an X in the boxes that best represented their experiences in relation to the statements contained in the survey, and to add additional information and comments at the end of the survey if they wished.

**Data analysis.**

1. Are the transition experiences of a subsequent cohort of CSC Year 11 students similar to those of phase one participants?
To address this question the raw data was extracted from the college intranet in the form of an Excel spreadsheet; the scores on survey statements indicated the level of agreement participants had awarded to each statement. If the score on a statement was \( \leq 2 \), this indicated that participants agreed with the statement (1 = strongly agree and 2 = agree). A score of \( \geq 3 \) indicated that participants had no opinion or disagreed with the statement (3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = disagree and 5 = strongly disagree). To summarise the data, Excel functions were used to calculate the mean of all scores for each statement; thus, the means indicated the transition experiences of phase two participants.

2. Do certain aspects of the CSC environment contribute to successful transition experiences?

To address this research question regarding the relationship between transition and the aspects of the college and personal aspects identified in phase one, the raw data was entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows version 17 for further analysis. Transformation of the raw data was performed using the SPSS transform variable function to combine the scores on statements that related to the same transition themes. To maintain the integrity of the response scale (1–5), six new variables; transition, mentor program, lesson-free day, open school policy, teacher support and relationships, were computed based on the mean of combined scores (see Table 6.2 for variable statement groupings). For example, the mean score for the dependent variable, transition, was calculated by adding the scores awarded by participants for statements 1 and 16 and dividing the result by 2.
As with the scores on the individual statements, a combined variable mean $\leq 2$ indicated that participants agreed with the statements about this variable, while a mean of $\geq 3$ indicated that participants had no opinion or disagreed with statements concerning this variable. Thus, the scores on the combined variables indicated the level of agreement that survey respondents afforded the transition themes. To investigate the relationship between the dependent variable and all independent variables statistically, the data was analysed using a standard multiple regression analysis.

3. Do the variables gender, previous school attended and academic course impact the transition experience?

The third research question concerned the influence of demographic characteristics on transition experiences. Means and standard deviations of the dependent variable, transition, were calculated using SPSS version 17 functions, for each of the gender, previous school attended (middle or traditional high school), and course studied (TEE or non-TEE) groups. The data was analysed using independent $t$-tests to determine if significant differences existed between the groups in the scores of the transition variable.

The independent comments added by participants to the online survey did not specifically address the research questions of this phase; however, they represent the unique transition experiences of phase two participants and were analysed qualitatively by using grounded theory processes as described in phase one of this research project.
Results

Research question 1: Are the transition experiences of a subsequent cohort of CSC Year 11 students similar to those of phase one participants?

The scores recorded on survey statements (Appendix E) indicated the level of agreement expressed by participants in this phase of the research, with the transition experiences of phase one participants. The survey instrument demonstrated good internal consistency (21 items; $\alpha .81$) Preliminary analysis of the data revealed that the mean scores on all survey statements (see Table 6.3) was in the range 1.32–2.60 (scale 1–5, where 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree), indicating support for all statements. The most positive support (lowest mean) was for statements 5 ($M = 1.32$), 13 ($M = 1.47$) and 19 ($M = 1.54$), which all concerned the open school policy (the college allows students to go off campus during lesson-free periods and breaks), while the least support (highest mean) was for statement 9 ($M = 2.60$) which concerned the mentor program.

Both of the statements concerning successful transition were scored positively: statement 1, $M = 1.91$ and statement 16, $M = 1.81$. In summary, participants in this phase of the research in general recorded scores that indicted their agreement with the survey statements that described successful transition and the college features that assisted them in transitioning successfully.
Table 6.3

Mean of Raw Scores for Survey Statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I feel like I belong to the school community at CSC.</td>
<td>1.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The mentor program helped me to settle in at CSC.</td>
<td>2.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Having a lesson-free day means I can keep up to date with assignments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and tests.</td>
<td>1.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I feel the teachers at CSC encourage me to work hard.</td>
<td>1.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I like being allowed off campus during school time because I can choose</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>where I spend my free time.</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Having a lesson-free day as means I can work a part-time job.</td>
<td>2.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The CSC campus environment is friendly and relaxed.</td>
<td>1.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The teachers at CSC are always willing to help me.</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. The mentor program helps me to stay on track with my learning goals.</td>
<td>2.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Having a lesson-free day allows me to get help from teachers if I</td>
<td>1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>need it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. The students at CSC seem to treat each other with respect.</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I feel I can talk to the teachers at CSC about any problems I have.</td>
<td>2.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I think that being allowed off campus during school time makes me feel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that I am treated like an adult.</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. The teachers at CSC are always approachable.</td>
<td>1.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Having a lesson-free day means I have more free time to do what I want.</td>
<td>1.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. I want to come to school and study at CSC.</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. The Mentor Program helped me to make new friends at CSC.</td>
<td>2.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. I think the teachers and students at CSC show respect for one another.</td>
<td>1.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. I like being allowed off campus during school time because I feel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responsible for my own behaviour.</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. The teachers at CSC help me to set goals for my future.</td>
<td>2.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. I think that the mentor program at CSC beneficial for the students.</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Scoring on a Likert scale of 1–5, where 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree.
Research Question 2: Do certain aspects of the college environment contribute to successful transition?

Data was entered into SPSS for Windows version 17 and transformed to produce combined variable means (see Table 6.4). Results indicated that the greatest support (lowest $M = 1.44$) was shown for the open school policy variable. The highest mean ($M = 2.39$), and therefore the least positive response, was for the mentor program.

Table 6.4

Mean, Standard Deviation and Range of Transition Survey Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean(SD)</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>1.85 (0.60)</td>
<td>1.73 – 1.98</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor program</td>
<td>2.39 (0.93)</td>
<td>2.20 – 2.59</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson-free day</td>
<td>1.98 (0.68)</td>
<td>1.83 – 2.12</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open school policy</td>
<td>1.44 (0.52)</td>
<td>1.34 – 1.55</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher support</td>
<td>1.97 (0.68)</td>
<td>1.83 – 2.11</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>1.93 (0.65)</td>
<td>1.80 – 2.07</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A standard multiple regression investigated the relationship between the dependent variable (DV), transition, and the independent variables (IVs): mentor program, lesson-free day, open school policy, teacher support and relationships. The data was screened prior to analysis to check for accuracy and normality of distribution. The case processing summaries indicated that there were no missing cases in the data.

Kilmogorov-Smirnov tests of normality and Shapiro-Wilk statistics indicated that the DV, transition, and the IV lesson-free day both violated the assumptions of normality with a significance level of .000, $p < .05$. Two cases,
participants 16 and 33, were identified as extreme univariate outliers on the box plot of the DV (Appendix I) and one case, participant 80, was identified as an extreme outlier on the box plot of the IV lesson-free day (Appendix J).

The procedures for dealing with outliers described in Tabachnik and Fidell (2007) were followed. The scores recorded by participants 16, 33 and 80 on the other variables were investigated; as they were within expected ranges, it was decided that the cases were a legitimate part of the sample and should remain in the analysis. To alleviate the influence of the outliers in subsequent analysis, the scores for the outlying cases were altered to reduce, but still indicate, their deviation from the sample mean. In accordance with the recommendations in Tabachnik and Fidell (2007), the extreme scores were reduced to be one unit higher than the next most extreme score in the distribution. Thus, the score for case 16 on transition was reduced from 4.50 to 4.00, the score on transition for case 33 was reduced from 4.00 to 3.50 and the score for case 80 on the variable lesson-free day was reduced from 4.75 to 4.50.

Table 6.5 displays the correlations between variables. All the IVs, except lesson-free day, correlated significantly with the DV, transition at \( p < .001 \). The correlation between the DV and IV lesson-free day was positive at \( p < .01 \). The IVs teacher support \( (r (91) = .69, p < .001) \) and relationships \( (r (91) = .67, p < .001) \) were both strongly correlated with the DV and the correlation between these two IVs was similarly high \( (r (91) = .68, p < .001) \); however, as the bivariate correlation was less than .7, all IVs were included in the regression analysis (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2007).
Table 6.5

Correlations Between All Survey Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Transition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Mentor program</td>
<td>.42***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Lesson-free day</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Open school policy</td>
<td>.50***</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Teacher support</td>
<td>.69***</td>
<td>.49***</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.62***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Relationships</td>
<td>.67***</td>
<td>.45***</td>
<td>.33***</td>
<td>.54***</td>
<td>.68***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 91, ** p. < .01, ***p < .001

The initial regression analysis computed Mahalanobis’ distances to assist in identifying potential multivariate outliers. One outlier that exceeded the critical $x^2$ value of 20.52 ($p < .001$), case 41 = 22.83 ($p < .05$), was identified. An examination of the raw scores recorded by this participant indicated negative responses (> 3) on statements relating to the teacher support variable, but relatively positive ($\leq$ 3) responses on the remaining survey statements. Therefore, as the outlier appeared to be a legitimate part of the sample based on scores on the majority of IVs, the influence was considered to be minimal and the regression analysis included all cases (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2007).

The results of the multiple regression (see Table 6.6) indicated that the multiple $R$ for regression was significantly different from zero: $F (5, 85) = 21.06$, $p < .001$, and 55% of the variability in students’ ratings of their transition experience was explained by their scores on the IVs. However, the only IVs that contributed significantly to the prediction of the DV were teacher support, $(t (85) = 3.40, p < .001)$ and relationships $(t (85) = 3.46, p < .01)$. The IV teacher
support made the strongest unique contribution of 7% (calculated as part correlation squared (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). i.e. $26^2$) with the IV relationships' unique contribution being 5% ($0.23^2$). The other IVs did not account for a statistically significant amount of variance in the DV transition.

Table 6.6

*Standard Multiple Regression of College Administrative and Relational Variables on Transition Experiences*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentor program</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson-free day</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open school policy</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher support</td>
<td>.34***</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept (constant)</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

*Note: $R^2 = .55$; Adjusted $R^2 = .53$; $R = .74$*

**Research Question 3: Do the variables gender, previous school attended and academic course impact the transition experience?**

To address this question, independent samples $t$-tests were conducted to investigate if there were significant differences in the mean scores on the transition variable between the demographic groups. Assumption testing on the distribution of the transition variable prior to analysis revealed potential outliers on box plots across the demographic groups; however, no extreme scores in excess of 3.3 standard deviations were indicated.
As *t*-tests are relatively robust and resistant to violations of the assumptions of normality, it was decided to proceed with the analysis (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2007). Table 6.7 displays the means, standard deviations and ranges of the demographic groups for the dependent variable, transition. Examination of the means for the gender groups revealed that females rated transition more positively (*M* = 1.79) than males (*M* = 1.94); however, the difference was not statistically significant (*t* (89) = 1.15, *p* = .25). Similarly, the analysis revealed no significant differences between the means on transition scores of the previous schooling groups (*t* (89) = .35, *p* = .72), and academic course (*t* (87) = −.21, *p* = .84). Therefore, the demographic variables gender, previous school attended and academic course do not appear to relate to the transition experiences of the participants.

Table 6.7

*Mean, Standard Deviation and Range of Transition Scores for Demographic Groups*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1.94 (.66)</td>
<td>1.70 – 2.18</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.79 (.52)</td>
<td>1.66 – 1.92</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Originating schooling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>1.86 (.53)</td>
<td>1.71 – 2.01</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>1.82 (.62)</td>
<td>1.61 – 2.02</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic orientation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEE</td>
<td>1.83 (.52)</td>
<td>1.69 – 1.98</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non TEE</td>
<td>1.86 (.64)</td>
<td>1.65 – 2.06</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Qualitative Data Analysis**

The independent comments added to surveys by respondents were analysed using the coding strategies of grounded theory analysis as described in Chapter 5. The comments were read several times to develop an understanding and familiarity with the content. The comments were then analysed and categorised in an open coding process. A descriptive list of categories was developed from the open codes. And, to ensure that the data was adequately represented by the categories, they were examined and expanded where necessary with reference made to the original data. The categories were analysed and, where pertinent, amalgamated until a condensed but representative list of concepts remained as (see Table 6.8).

**Table 6.8**

*Themes Common to Participants’ Independent Comments*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentor program</td>
<td>Retaining mentor teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentor time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open school policy</td>
<td>Adult atmosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson-free day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In general, the comments added by respondents related to the transition themes contained in the survey. The theme that was mentioned most often in
the independent comments concerned the mentor program employed at the school. Other themes included; the open school policy of the college and the adult atmosphere that it engendered, the lesson-free day, the support from teachers and the merits of the senior college environment. Each of these will be described below.

**Mentor program.**

The mentor program and mentor teachers attracted mostly positive comments; however, some negative comments were recorded. Many of the comments centred on whether students should retain the same mentor teacher for the two years of senior college, which was not a feature of the mentor program questioned in the survey. It is presumed that the topic had been raised by the college administration and that students used the survey to express their opinion on the subject.

Positive support for retaining the same mentor teacher was reflected in comments supporting specific teachers:

*My mentor teacher has a sense of humour which is good, he’s not a grouch.*

*My mentor teacher is pretty sick aye,*[^9] *he is not one of those teachers who say they treat us like adults but then don’t.*

*My mentor is really laid back and the teacher respects each student.*

Negative comments about mentor teachers were less frequent but for one respondent it did not appear to matter which teacher mentored them:

[^9]: This comment is a colloquial term meaning the teacher was considered to be quite good.
I think all mentor teachers are the same. They hunt you for absence notes. They keep you in. They tell you when another teacher is going to hunt you down for work. What's the point of changing who does this?

Other negative comments about the mentor program were generally concerned with the amount of time spent in mentor group:

Mentor should be cancelled, if not it should be in the morning and more shorter.

The mentor system is good but I feel it is not necessary to stay back an hour every Tuesday and Thursday.

The mentor program is an aspect of CSC that seems to polarise student opinion. For those students who do not use the mentor sessions to access extra academic help or who do not feel the need of support from their mentor teacher, the time is considered to be wasted. These students may be academically and socially competent and may not need extra help:

Mentors educational advice [sic] and direction does not fit with my personal choices and situations.

Students may be engaged in VET studies and occupied with work external to the school environment:

I have SWL so yeah its [sic] not much of a catch-up/homework time for me.
Or students may be academically disinterested and therefore do not see the benefit of the additional help and support offered:

*Mentor group does not help me at all.*

*What's [sic] the mentor programme?*

Other comments concerning the mentor program indicated that the relationships that the students had developed with their mentor teachers were mutually respectful and friendly, reflecting the care and support that the mentor program was designed to engender:

*I really enjoy my mentor [sic] I have made a wide range of friends and have a good communication relationship with my mentor and tourism teacher.*

As mentioned previously, the equitable and collaborative relationships that develop between students and teachers in senior colleges suit the adult identity that adolescents are striving for (Polesel, 2002).

*Open school policy.*

Similarly, participants commented on the way they were treated as adults and related this to the freedom associated with the open school policy:

*I like how we get treated like adults by being let out of school when we have a free period.*

*I like the freedom.*

*We all get treated like adults and it makes me feel like I am in a community.*
However, a note of caution was sounded by one respondent who said of the open school policy:

*I do like it but some people take advantage of it.*

Development is an individual process that progresses at different rates depending on an individual's gender, ethnicity and environment (Berger, 2006). The participants in this research ranged in age from 15 to 16 years. However, emotionally and cognitively they may have ranged between pre-pubescent and young adult. It is, therefore, expected that some participants may not have had the emotional maturity to respond in an adult way to the responsibility conferred on them by the open school policy.

*Lesson-free day.*

The comments concerning the lesson-free days were reflective of the benefits identified in phase one of having time to undertake SWL placements, attend TAFE College and ensure their work is completed. For one respondent, the ability to ask for extra help on the lesson-free day had an added benefit:

*It means I can go in and ask for help without feeling like a nerd.*

This comment reflects the recognition by a number of participants that the environment at CSC differed from that of other high schools. Students felt encouraged to take the necessary steps to succeed academically and, as was mentioned in phase one findings, be proud of their academic achievement.
Teacher support.

There were many instances where appreciation was expressed for specific teachers who were obviously well-liked by many of the students. Unfortunately, the comments did not indicate particular characteristics that the teachers possessed that accounted for their popularity.

College environment.

The identified merits of the senior college model employed at CSC did not suit or impress all students, especially those students who had perhaps already disengaged from the education process:

I just plain don’t like school!

However, many students described the college as a “great” school with excellent facilities and a welcoming atmosphere. For some students, this contrasted favourably with other high schools:

Ceremonial Senior College is better than my old school.

I think this school is a very positive school, I’m proud to be part of the school.

I think the school [sic] is a very positive thing when i [sic] tell people out of the school what school i [sic] go to and the benefits i [sic] have they are very interested [sic]and fascinated at what we seem to take for granted im [sic] proud to be part of the school.

Not only did the school facilities impress respondents, the relational atmosphere attracted this comment:
It's amazing how a school in such an area packed with teenagers can exist with no fights or gangs.

CSC is a great school and I [sic] really love being apart of the relaxed and friendly atmosphere [sic].

The following section integrates the qualitative and quantitative results of phase two of the research findings.

**Summary**

There were three questions addressed in this phase of the research. The first question: Are the transition experiences of a subsequent cohort of CSC Year 11 students similar to those of phase one participants? allowed triangulation of results from phase one. The results of the statistical analysis of the survey data indicated that phase two participants had responded positively to the transition survey. The mean scores for all survey statements were in the range 1.32 – 2.60 (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree). In addition, most respondents indicated that they had transitioned successfully to the senior college with a mean score of 1.85 on statements that described successful transition. From these results it appears that the transition experience is similar for a subsequent cohort of Year 11 students attending CSC. This result suggests that the aspects of the college that influenced students' transition experiences remained relatively stable through phases one and two of the research and, in view of the positive scores recorded on the survey, were perceived as beneficial to participants' successful transition to CSC.
The second research question addressed was: Do certain aspects of the CSC environment contribute to successful transition? The survey statements that scored the highest were all related to the open school policy variable. Strong support was indicated for the freedom \((M = 1.32)\), adult behaviour, \((M = 1.47)\) and responsibility \((M = 1.54)\) aspects of being allowed off campus during the school day. The combined variable for open school policy scored the most positive mean \((M = 1.44)\). The analysis of the independent comments reflected the results obtained in the survey. Participants concurred with the support for the open school policy and remarked on the trust they felt was afforded them in being allowed off campus. However, the results of the multiple regression analysis indicated that the open school policy \((\beta = .05, p > .5)\) did not significantly contribute to successful transition. It may be assumed that although students favoured the open school policy it had not influenced their experience of transition.

Overall, the combined mean for lesson-free day was positive \((M = 1.98)\). However, the statement that suggested that participants could work part-time on their lesson-free day was not scored positively \((M = 2.46)\). This result may have occurred because respondents who were not working part-time could not relate to the statement and therefore awarded a negative score. Qualitatively, the lesson-free day aspect of the college attracted positive comments from students who used the day to attend work experience or to access extra help from teachers. However, as with the open school policy variable, the multiple regression analysis indicated that the IV lesson-free day \((\beta = -.01)\) was not a significant contributor to successful transition.
The mentor program scored the least support \((M = 2.39)\) for a combined theme. It also attracted the highest and therefore the least positive response to a survey statement that suggested that mentor time helped participants to stay on track with their learning goals \((M = 2.60)\). As mentioned previously, many of the comments added to survey responses concerned the possibility of a change of mentor teacher each year which was not addressed in this survey. The comments were not necessarily a reflection of the transition experiences being investigated in this research; however, the mentor program was a topic on which the student body appeared to be divided, with support and opposition to the program being expressed. The absence of conclusive support for this transition theme was evident in the results of the multiple regression analysis which indicated that the mentor program was not a significant predictor of successful transition \((\beta = .05)\).

The results of the multiple regression analysis indicated that the only transition themes, as explored in the survey, that were significant predictors of the DV, transition, were teacher support \((\beta = .38, p < .005)\) and relationships \((\beta = .36, p < .005)\). It was evident from the current study that CSC had developed a supportive, relaxed school environment, partly due to the support and attitude of the teachers. The qualitative component of this phase reflected the appreciation that many students had for particular teachers and for the relaxed, non-aggressive atmosphere that existed among the student body.

The final question addressed the influence of demographic variables (gender, previous school attended and academic course taken) on transition. Independent t-tests comparing group means indicated that there were no significant differences in the mean transition scores between the different groups.
groups. Therefore, a student's gender and whether they attended a middle school or a traditional Year 8–12 school prior to transition or whether they were TEE or non-TEE students did not appear to differentially influence their experiences on transitioning to CSC.

In summary, the findings from this stage of the research suggest that a subsequent cohort of Year 11 students at CSC had similar transition experiences to those of phase one participants and that, for the majority of participants, the transition experience was positive. With regard to the aspects of CSC that participants in this phase of the research found most helpful in their transition experience, there was some inconsistency between the survey responses and the results of the quantitative analysis. The mean scores on the open school policy variable indicated strong support from participants for the concept. However, when the influence of this variable was examined in combination with all other variables, it was not a significant predictor of successful transition.

Many of the students supported the policy that allowed them to leave the college campus during the day. For many, it may have been the first time within the school environment that they had been trusted as an adult to behave responsibly thus supporting their developmental need for increasing autonomy (Berger, 2006). However, for students who may not have been fully engaged in their education, the desire to escape the confines of the campus would also result in a positive score on the open school policy variable but not necessarily on the transition variable.

The school environmental characteristics that were most influential were the support offered by teachers and the relaxed/but respectful relationships that
exist between teachers and students. In the final chapter, these results will be discussed in relation to the findings from phase one of this research.
Transition to Senior College

Chapter 7

Discussion

Aims of the Chapter

Transitions occur throughout a person’s lifespan, from the first attendance at day care or formal education through to retirement from employment in later years. Humans are faced with the need to adjust to the changes that are a part of transition from one stage in life to another (Felner et al., 1983). In this research, the personal experiences of students were examined to understand the impact of one such transition to a senior college. This chapter will summarise and discuss the research findings. A preliminary theoretical model of transition experiences will be suggested, and implications for further action and research will be presented.

Research Summary

The focus of this research project was educational transition and how it is experienced by students. The project was developed in the light of changes to senior education implemented by the Department of Education and Training (DET) in Western Australia in 2005. The changes included raising the regulated school leaving age to 17 years and the establishment of middle schools providing for Years 7–10 (ages 12–15 years) and senior colleges for the final Years 11 and 12 (ages 16–17 years). The effect of these changes was an additional transition in the senior school years for students who graduated from
primary school to a middle school and on completion of Year 10 transitioned to a senior college to complete their education. The student body at the senior college where the research was conducted included students who had transitioned from a middle school and students who had transitioned from a Year 8–12 senior high school in order to complete Years 11 and 12. Participants were drawn from the entire Year 11 student body and included students who had transitioned from a middle school and those from a traditional senior high school.

The research employed a mixed-methods design conducted in two phases. Phase one was an exploratory qualitative enquiry consisting of interviews in which participants were asked to share their experiences and feelings about their transition to the college. A social constructionist framework informed this stage of the research and the interview transcripts were analysed using the coding strategies of grounded theory. The research question addressed in this phase of the project was:

*What are the transition experiences of students who attend a senior college in Western Australia?*

As a form of triangulation of findings from phase one, a survey was developed to confirm the interpretation of the data. A representation of the transition experiences of informants in phase one was used to develop a transition survey that consisted of positively worded statements about transition and the aspects of the school environment that the phase one participants cited as beneficial to their transition experience. The survey was posted on the student intranet at the senior college in the year following phase one data collection. Year 11 students with parental permission were invited to complete
the survey in which they were asked to rate their agreement/disagreement with the survey statements. Participants were also invited to add independent comments to the survey.

The research questions addressed in the second phase of the research were:

1. Are the transition experiences of a subsequent cohort of Ceremonial Senior College (CSC) Year 11 students similar to those of phase one participants?
2. Do certain aspects of the college environment contribute to successful transition experiences?
3. Do the variables gender, previous school attended and academic course impact the transition experience?

A standard multiple regression was used to determine how much each of the aspects of college environment (predictor variables) contributed to students’ successful transition experiences. To investigate whether the demographic variables gender, previous school attended and academic course had any significant influence on transition experiences, independent sample t tests were calculated on the mean transition scores of the demographic groups. In addition, the independent comments added to the survey responses were analysed using the same framework and strategies used in the analysis of phase one interview transcripts.

A discussion of the combined findings from phases one and two of this research will commence with an exploration of the transition experiences of all participants. The influence of demographic variables and aspects of the school
environment in transition experiences will then be considered and related to previous research.

Transition Experiences

Transitions necessitate an adaptation to the changes that accompany a move from one situation or environment to another (Felner et al., 1981; Hobson et al. 1998). Previous research has suggested that when students transition from one school to another, the required adaptation to a new environment may leave them susceptible to negative educational, social and personal outcomes (Barone et al., 1991; Eccles et al., 1993; Seidman et al., 1996). It was evident in the lives of the participants interviewed in phase one that change was a constant. Some participants had changed schools a number of times before their final transition to CSC and, for a few students, these transitions had been accompanied by a change in residence and country of residence. However, the participants did not express much negativity regarding the changes they had experienced other than the loss of close friendships.

The loss of familiar social connections has been cited as one of the issues that render students who undergo school transition at risk of negative consequences (Felner et al., 1983). In this research, some participants had transitioned with a large cohort from a middle school and had, therefore, retained their peer support and social network. For those students who had transitioned individually from other high schools, many attributed the mentor program and the support from staff with helping them to build new social networks which assisted them to adjust to their new school. This supports
previous research that transition programs that include mentoring support assist students to transition successfully (Heck & Mahoe, 2006).

Some participants expressed the opinion that enduring changes made them stronger, increased their social circle and helped develop coping strategies that would assist in adjusting to changes in the future. In contrast, Felner et al. (1981) found that repeated transitions increased the risk of academic decline and increased absenteeism, especially among students from ethnic minority groups. The measures used in the Felner et al. (1981) study, GPA and attendance records, were believed to indicate students’ adaptation and satisfaction with their new school. There was little evidence among the 16 phase one participants that they had struggled to adapt or were dissatisfied with their move to CSC. Similarly, of the 91 participants in phase two, the majority recorded scores in the “strongly agree” to “agree” range in reply to the survey statements that described having a sense of belonging to the college and wanting to attend CSC. Independent comments gathered in phase two compared the college favourably with previous schools attended, and participants described the college as a positive school of which they were proud.

The developmental maturity of the students in the current research may account for the lack of negative post-transition experiences. At the age of 15–16 years, perhaps participants had developed coping skills as a result of being desensitised to the negative influences of transition by their prior transition from primary education to middle school or a traditional high school. Seidman et al. (1996) also suggested that the structural (administrative and academic) differences between junior high (middle school) and senior high school (senior
were minimal compared to those between primary school and junior high school. Therefore, students transitioning to a senior college should find the adjustment to the college regime less demanding than the initial adjustment to secondary education undertaken in Year 8.

The transition to senior high school, at the age of 14 years, was also found to be less detrimental to a student's self-system than the earlier transition to junior high school at the age of 9 years (Seidman et al., 1996). The average age at which an adolescent starts to experience the biological, cognitive, emotional and social issues associated with puberty has been gradually decreasing over the last decade and, according to Windle et al. (2009), at the age of 15 years teenagers are considered to be in mid-adolescence. The participants in this study (aged 15–16 years) are likely to have made progress in defining their self-system. Additionally at the age of 15 years most adolescents start to rely on the support of peers rather than family and are establishing themselves as individuals distinct from their family. These life experiences help adolescents to develop a more independent and adult identity (Windle et al., 2009). The transition to CSC appears to have presented participants with an opportunity for social and psychological growth as suggested by Felner et al. (1983). The transition to a new school where students' reputations, academically and socially, have not preceded them may allow them to establish new and more mature identities (Schiller, 1999).

**The Influence of Demographic Variables in Transition**

To ensure that the participant sample in this research was representative of the student population, demographic information relating to gender, previous
school attended and type of course being studied was collected. The information was used to investigate whether there was a relationship between demographic variables and transition experiences.

**Originating school.**

One of the implications of the changes to the structure of high school education in Western Australia was that the introduction of middle schools and limited grade senior colleges resulted in an extra transition experience for students attending a senior college. To investigate whether the approach to transition influenced the experience, a comparison was made between the experiences of students who were obliged to graduate from middle school to senior college and those who moved from a traditional Year 8–12 senior high school.

There were no discernable differences in transition experiences of phase one participants who had transitioned from middle school or from a traditional Year 8–12 high school. There were, however, minor differences relating to individual circumstances rather than to the overall transition experience. Students who had not transitioned with a large cohort from the middle school were faced with the need to form new friendships. Schiller (1999) found that students who had graduated from various feeder schools to a senior college with a large cohort tended to maintain their academic standing, whereas some students who graduated with a smaller number of fellow students did not. The reason suggested for these differences was that the students who transitioned with a small cohort may have been preoccupied with establishing new friendships rather than concentrating on academic issues (Schiller). At CSC, the
task of establishing social contacts was made easier by the mentor program which provided isolated students with an opportunity to make initial contact with other students in their mentor class. Mentor time is not a formal lesson and, as such, is a non-threatening environment in which students are free to make and maintain social contacts.

Some of the participants who had transitioned from a traditional Year 8–12 high schools indicated that they had chosen to undergo the additional transition to the senior college based on positive recommendations from older siblings and acquaintances who attended the college. These students found the college fulfilled their expectations and this was attributed with maintaining students' engagement with education. Engagement with education, and particularly behavioural engagement, is associated with a decreased likelihood of exiting the school system before completion of high school (Fredricks et al., 2004). Some of the participants admitted that they were not sure whether they would have stayed at their previous school to complete Year 1; from this, it can be assumed that the environment and strategies of their previous school failed to maintain their interest in education. Support during transition was made available to these students in the mentor program, which assisted them to establish social networks whilst also encouraging them to maintain academic progress. These strategies have been shown to increase the chances of successful transition and educational engagement (Heck & Mahoe, 2006).

In phase two of the research, participants indicated their transition experience by rating survey questions which described successful transition on a scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). To investigate whether participants who had transitioned from middle school and traditional Year 8–12
high school had experienced their transition to CSC differently, the mean scores on the dependent variable, transition, for each originating school group were compared. Although there was a small difference in the means (middle school: \( M = 1.86 \); traditional: \( M = 1.82 \)), the results of \( t \) tests conducted indicated that the difference was not statistically significant (\( t(89) = .35, p = .72 \)). Therefore, it was concluded that the difference was due to individual variation within the groups rather than a real difference between the groups. In this research, the mandatory transition from a middle school to the senior college did not appear to influence students’ transition experiences in a different way to the voluntary transition from traditional Year 8–12 high schools.

**Gender.**

As with the originating school groups, the \( t \) test conducted on the mean transition scores (males; \( M = 1.94 \); females: \( M = 1.79 \)) of the gender groups in phase two did not reveal any significant difference (\( t(89) = 1.15, p = .25 \)). Similarly the qualitative analysis of phase one data also found that gender had no obvious effect on transition experiences. This result does not support the findings of San Antonio (2004) who explored the transition experiences of high school students (aged 12–13 years). San Antonio found an interaction between socio-economic standing (SES) and gender that led to a decrease in self-esteem after transition among boys from low-SES groups and girls from high-SES groups. The SES of participants in the current study was not gathered as part of the demographic data; however, the area from which students of CSC are enrolled is not characterised by great variation in residents’ SES therefore,
a lack of discernable variation in SES among participants may account for the contradictory findings.

The gender differences in transition experiences found previously by Barone et al. (1991) and Akos and Galassi (2004) related to primary and middle school students. Participants in the Barone et al. (1991) study were an average age of 14.2 years and the results indicated that male participants experienced greater decreases in GPA, post high school transition. Similarly, the participants in research by Akos and Galassi (2004) were aged from 11 to 13 years and it was found that girls felt more connected to middle school after transition than boys. Boys tend to enter puberty later than girls (Berger, 2006) which may account for the greater post-transition problems experienced by the younger boys as found in these studies. In the current research, students were 15 to 16 years of age and Rathus (2006) suggests that differences in maturation rates are not as discernable as in early adolescence; therefore, gender influences in school experiences are less likely to be apparent. This was supported by the current study.

A Sense of Belonging (SoB) to school and perceived source of support during transition were also attributed with influencing gender differences in transition experiences by Akos and Galassi (2004). During transition to middle school, girls reported that they found the best support came from family members whereas boys relied on their friends for support (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Eccles et al. (1993) advised that in later adolescence both genders tended to rely on their peers for support rather than family; therefore, there are likely to be fewer gender differences in perceived support during transition among older adolescents. Developmentally, the participants in the current study
were more likely to have resolved some of the identity issues that adolescents face during puberty (Berger, 2006; Rathus, 2006) and, cognitively, be more able to focus on their future goals rather than dwelling on the source of support and the loss of the familiar environment of their primary school (Berk, 1999; Eccles et al., 1993). Therefore, the lack of significant difference in transition experiences between the males and females in the current study is not an unexpected outcome.

**Academic pathways.**

In phase two of the research, there was a difference between the scores awarded by participants following a Tertiary Entrance Examination (TEE) academic course ($M = 1.83$) and those taking Vocational Education and Training (VET) ($M = 1.86$) on the survey statements concerning transition experiences. When the means were compared in an independent sample $t$ test, the results indicated that the difference was not statistically significant ($t (87) = -.21$, $p = .84$) and could not be attributed to the different academic pathways that participants were following. However, some differences relating to the use of lesson-free time were found between the two groups in phase one analysis. Students who were studying TEE subjects differed in their opinions as to the use and utility of the lesson-free day and mentor class. These students utilised the free time to ensure that they were attaining their goals academically in relation to their TEE assessment. Students engaged in VET studies and Structured Workplace Learning (SWL) appreciated the lesson-free day for the opportunity it presented to attend work experience or alternate education facilities.
The TEE students interviewed in the current research commented positively on the structure of work and the assistance they received from staff to keep them focused on their set goals, which is indicative of the investment and participation in education categorized as cognitive and behavioural engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Cognitive and behavioural engagement with education was found to support students during transition. Well-articulated coursework, structured classrooms and an emphasis on academic effort were also identified by Heck and Mahoe (2006) as improving the chances of post-transition success for students. This was supported by the current research which found that the diversity of the curriculum that supported TEE and SWL studies, and the flexible lesson plan that allowed students to attend external education and training facilities, had a positive influence on their transition experience.

It was apparent from interviews in phase one of the research that the environment created at the senior college also contributed to participants' successful transition.

**Senior College Environment**

The college was described by students as a mature learning environment in which they felt they were treated as adults. It would appear that the college achieves the stage/environment fit described in research by Eccles and Midgley (1988). They suggested that a mismatch existed between the developmental needs of adolescents and the environment of traditional high schools, which led to negative transition experiences. The strategies and environment of an adult learning community are a better match with adolescents' growing adulthood than the traditional high school, where the emphasis is often on regulated
behaviour and conformity (Polesel, 2002). Consequently, being treated as responsible adults at the college reinforced students' identity as young adults rather than as high school adolescents (Rutter et al., 1979). Transitions undertaken in the final years of schooling at the age of 15–16 years appear to be uncomplicated and even beneficial to students' emergent adult identity when the environment of the receiving school is that of an adult education facility.

The environment at CSC is based on a flexible curriculum, aspects of which were identified by phase one, and subsequently endorsed by phase two, participants as having supported them during their transition.

**Flexible Curriculum**

A comprehensive and flexible curriculum was identified as being one of the most beneficial aspects of the limited-grade senior college model of education by participants in research by Polesel (2002). Smyth and Hattam (2002) defined a comprehensive and flexible curriculum as constituting an active school culture which extends outwards into students' lives to develop a respectful environment. The culture of CSC is an example of an active school culture that aims to meet the needs of individual students, with a comprehensive range of subjects catering for the academic demands of studying for entry into tertiary education, and offering units in media, art and technology, and VET studies.

VET programs demonstrate respect for the diversity of students' academic aspirations by providing relevant training opportunities for non-TEE students so that the obligatory final two years of schooling are beneficial to their future (Polesel, 2002). CSC has employed organisational strategies that
complement the diverse curriculum offered at the college. The strategies that constitute a flexible curriculum are the lesson-free day, open school policy and the mentoring program.

**Lesson-free day.**

The college operates on a four-day timetable with a weekly lesson-free day. The survey scores of phase two participants for this aspect of the college environment was positive at $M = 1.98$ based on a Likert scale of 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree. This strategy is of particular benefit to VET students as it allows them to attend tertiary education or SWL work experience placements but not miss any classes. Students take responsibility for their own education by choosing whether to utilise the lesson-free day to obtain work experience, engage in part-time employment, complete assignments or have a break from work. It has been found that school environments in which students have a sense of autonomy are more likely to maintain students’ interest and engagement with education (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Another aspect of the lesson-free day that students commented on was that they were less inclined to have “sick days” because the free day helped them keep up to date with work and minimised fatigue or disinterest in school work. The stress of working toward TEE is similar to working toward deadlines in the workplace. The TEE scores that students attain determine the university courses that they will qualify for; therefore, emphasis is placed on working consistently throughout the final years of senior education. Similarly, for some VET students the need to achieve good results in their work placements whilst also maintaining their in-school grades requires them to work consistently to try
and secure an apprenticeship or traineeship on completion of their senior schooling. As mentioned previously, the lesson-free day presents an opportunity for students to broadening their future employment opportunities.

**Open school policy.**

The open school policy at the college also confers responsibility on students to regulate their own behaviour and to respect the trust placed in them. Smyth and Hattam (2002) attributed a shift of power in the student–teacher relationship to the flexibility in curriculum and timetabling. They suggested that the power in the relationship was made more equitable when students assumed responsibility for their education. The trust afforded students at CSC of allowing them the freedom to leave the school campus during the school day requires them to act in a responsible and mature way by ensuring they return in time to attend lessons. The open school policy at the college gives students more freedom than is experienced in most high schools, where leaving campus during the school day is usually against school rules and a punishable offence. It is not surprising that participants in phase two scored the concept positively ($M = 1.44$).

This is comparable with the findings of Rutter et al. (1979) and Polesel (2002), which suggested that an adult learning environment gave students more freedom and encouraged mature and responsible behaviour from them. School environments have been found to be influential in the school experiences of students (Rutter et al.). The social environment of schools was examined by Wentzel (1998), who found that it was especially important in engaging students. An unwelcoming school environment can prevail over students’ social
skills and personal characteristics and discourage them from becoming involved with the school experience (Pretty et al., 1996). In the current study, it was apparent from participants' comments that CSC had created a suitably mature school environment that may serve as a model to other senior colleges.

**Mentor program.**

Another feature of the comprehensive and flexible curriculum employed at CSC is the mentor program. The survey responses to questions about the mentor program were the least positive ($M = 2.39$); however, in phase one, it was attributed with assisting students to establish social networks in the initial transition period. Social networks are an important part of transition support that increases the likelihood of successful transition to a new school (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). Goodenow (1993a) suggested that a lack of emotional connection to school may result in students disengaging from school and exiting the education system early.

The mentor program featured often in the independent comments added to phase two survey responses. The comments that did not support the program concerned the amount of time spent in mentor sessions and the scrutiny from the mentor teacher regarding late assignments. A few of the less academically motivated, non-TEE students felt that, although mentor time was beneficial, it should be of shorter duration to allow for an earlier finish to the day. This may be reflective of the coursework associated with the non-TEE curriculum, which is partly based on work placements undertaken off campus thus reducing the on-campus workload of VET students and their need to consult teachers about academic issues. Positive comments from students
outnumbered the negative ones, with many citing the merits of particular mentor teachers. The participants' apparent ambivalence toward the mentor program can perhaps be summarised by the following comment from a participant in phase two:

*Mentor is useful to you if you are a good student that tries hard. If you choose not to use it, that's your problem.*

The beneficial aspects of the mentor program that assist the development of an adult learning environment and which emerged from phase one interviews included the relaxed but respectful relationships that were developed with teachers, and the social contacts established with other students during mentor lessons.

It is proposed that the flexible curriculum strategies of lesson-free day, open school policy and the mentor program described herein promoted the personal aspects of the college environment, which proved to be the most influential variable in participants' successful transition.

**Personal Aspects**

The personal aspects of the college environment included staff support, positive relationships between staff and students and mutual respect and responsibility. The support and accessibility of staff are related to the mentor program and lesson-free day because of the opportunity that these features of the curriculum offer students to access staff for assistance outside normal class time. Similarly, the mentor program fosters supportive relationships between students and staff, especially with mentor teachers, and between students in
the same mentor group. The intent of the mentor program is to form small, stable, caring groups facilitated by a mentor who is charged with looking after their mentees' individual needs, both academic and personal (DET, 2009). For adolescents who may be struggling with a developing sense of self, the care and respect conveyed in the mentor program creates an ideal environment in which they can experience mutually respectful adult-style relationships (Potter et al., 2001). The importance of the social connections that mentor programs foster was supported in research conducted by Heck and Mahoe (2006) and evident in comments from participants in the current research, who particularly appreciated the support during the initial transition period in the first weeks of semester one.

The open school policy of the college was instrumental in promoting an atmosphere of respect and responsibility, which was a feature of the college environment that many participants commented on. The aspects of respect and responsibility were also linked to the relationships that participants had developed with their peers and with the college staff. In summary, the personal aspects of the college environment represent the attributes of an adult education campus, identified by students and staff in the Polesel (2002) research as one of benefits of the limited-grade senior college model of education. Participants in the current research observed that it was easier to develop mature relationships with staff who were not preoccupied with enforcing disciplinary control over younger students. Similarly, Fredricks et al. (2004) and Wentzel (1998) advised that an emotional connection to peers and teachers was shown to have a positive influence on student achievement and acted as a
preventive factor against permanently disengaging from education, especially during transition.

The importance of the emotional environment in students' transition experiences was supported in results of the multiple regression analysis that determined the relative predictive ability of the themes identified in phase one analysis in successful transition. The results indicated that 55% of the variance in transition scores could be predicted from the independent variables \( R^2 = .55 \). However, the only independent variables that indicated a significant predictive contributed to transition were the relationships \( t(85) = 3.46, p < .01 \) of the college and the support from teachers \( t(85) = 3.406, p < .001 \).

The open school policy, lesson-free day and the mentor program variables did not statistically contribute to participants' transition experiences. However, as discussed above, they contributed to the development of an adult learning community to which the majority of the students participating in this research appeared to have developed a Sense of Belonging (SoB). Goodenow (1993b) credited a SoB with maintaining students' engagement with education and acting as a preventive factor against early withdrawal from school. SoB is one of the elements of the McMillan and Chavis (1986) Sense of Community (SoC) construct (see Figure 7.1). A SoC comprises four elements: membership, influence, reinforcement and a shared emotional connection (MacMillan & Chavis).

The membership element of SoC is evident in the SoB and desire to study at the college expressed by participants. Common symbols such as colours badges (recognition of achievement academically, socially or in the sporting arena), were willingly adopted (refer transcript P02;57), as were the
Figure 7.1. The strategies and environment of Ceremonial Senior College that embody a sense of community.

boundaries set in the discipline policy. The power afforded to students in the open school policy is indicative of the influence element of SoC. Students expressed feelings of respect and responsibility at being allowed off campus during the school day. The flexible and comprehensive curriculum adopted at the college addresses the needs of all students and, as previously stated, appears to support diversity and satisfy the reinforcement element of a SoC.

Finally, the shared emotional connection was evident in the support from teachers and mutually respectful relationships between teachers and students that were commented on by students. The strategies of the flexible curriculum employed at CSC appear to have created an educational community that students identify with and have a SoB to. A school environment that; respects the diversity of students by offering a diverse curriculum, allows students to
assume responsibility for their academic effort and behaviour and supports them socially and academically, has a positive influence on students' transition experiences.

**Theoretical Model of Transition**

The analysis of phase one data provided an insight into the way that transition was experienced by the participants. It indicated the aspects of the college environment that had promoted successful transition and that perhaps had prevented some of the negative outcomes, suggested by previous research, that accompany school transitions. The aspects of the college environment that constituted a flexible curriculum and the personal aspects identified in phase two were further examined to determine the relative importance of these variables. When comparing the results of the regression analysis with the approval ratings of the variables from completed surveys, it became apparent that there were some discrepancies.

The aspects of the school for which participants indicated support and the predictive contribution that these made to the regression model did not concur. Participants showed strong support for the open school policy and lesson-free day; however, according to the results of multiple regression analysis, these aspects did not necessarily influence positive transition experiences. It was the personal aspects of the college environment, the support from teachers and the respectful relationships between staff and students that appeared to positively influence the transition experience. However, even though some of the variables were not statistically significant individually, in combination with one another they contributed to the students'
transition experience. The final process in grounded theory analysis is theoretical coding which identifies relationships between categories (Charmaz, 2000). As a product of the theoretical coding of phase one data, a model of transition (see Figure 7.2) was developed to explain the relationship between the flexible curriculum strategies and the personal aspects of the college environment.

**Flexible Curriculum Strategies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson-free day</th>
<th>Support and accessibility of staff.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open school policy</td>
<td>Relationships among students and between staff and students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor program</td>
<td>Respect and responsibility.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 7.2. Proposed theoretical model of transition: aspects of the CSC environment that combined to promote the successful transition experienced by Year 11 students. The arrows represent the influence that the flexible curriculum strategies have in the personal aspects of the school environment.*
The proposed model is based on the transition experiences of participants in this research, and represents the relationships between the aspects of the college environment that influenced their transition positively. The model illustrates how the flexible curriculum strategies of the lesson-free day and the mentor program were instrumental in developing the supportive relationships between the teachers and students and, in the case of the mentor program, supportive peer relationships. These strategies brought students and teachers together in collaborative partnerships that supported the students academically, socially and developmentally, during and after transition. The lesson-free day and open school policy encouraged more respectful and responsible attitude among students, which was reflected in the mutually respectful peer relationships and staff/student relationships. These strategies exposed students to the mature relationships that are possible between responsible, reliable adults.

The model illustrates the influence of the distinctive environment developed at CSC in the lives of the adolescents who transitioned to the college. As such, it offers the administrators of the college insight into the way in which the flexible curriculum strategies have combined to develop the relational environment that has assisted students to cope with the transition. The model is advantageous because it indicates to senior college administrators the strategies that match adolescents' developmental needs and that result in an education facility that encourages their continued engagement with education.
Conclusion

The participants in this research had transitioned to a senior college to complete their high school education as required by the recent amendments to education policy in Western Australia (DET, 2005). The students who were entering the final two years of their schooling when they prepare to write exams or explore training opportunities that affect their future, in general, managed to avoid the negative issues that transitions can evoke. The retention records of the college also indicated that the students of the school were successfully completing their education with a retention rate of 73%, compared to state average of 67%, and 98% of the college’s Year 12 students achieving high school graduation in 2007 (DET, 2009).

The retention rate at CSC is significant in view of a 2006 report by Long which found that adolescents who were not engaged in full-time education or work were less satisfied with their lives, experienced more personal and financial stress, and participated less in society than their educationally engaged counterparts. For the future of the citizens of Western Australia, it is important that schools are educationally, environmentally and socially structured to support and engage students and to ensure that they remain engaged until completion of their education. From the transition experiences of the participants in this study, it appears that CSC has managed to achieve this goal to the benefit of its students. The model of transition suggests that the strategies employed have combined to improve and increase students’ opportunities for self-advocacy and for taking responsibility for their behaviour and their future, and have also exposed them to relationships built on mutual respect in an adult education community.
Contributions of the Research

Whilst it is recognised that the findings of this research may not be reflective of other local, national and international contexts they will be discussed in terms of the contribution that they offer to the development of education policy, transition theory, methodology and a theoretical model of transition.

Contribution to policy.

The Western Australian Government invested resources to determine how best to encourage students' commitment to their own education and, ultimately, their future. The consultation process undertaken to inform the DET (2005) report, *Creating the future for our young people: Raising the school leaving age*, engaged stakeholders from school administrators and teachers to students and their parents in order to understand the impact of raising the school leaving age. The recommendations that emerged from the consultation process represented the views of the recipients of policy change. CSC has endeavoured to implement many of the recommendations from the report and, based on the information supplied by participants in this research, has created a school environment that supports students during transition and maintains their engagement with education. The findings of this research add further support to the recommendations from the DET (2005) report and subsequent amendments to policy, indicating that the three-tier approach to education consisting of primary, middle and senior school levels has proved to be successful in retaining senior students to the completion of senior schooling. The extra transition that results from the three-tier format appears to be beneficial, rather
than detrimental, to students educationally and socially because of the progression from a school environment to an adult education facility.

In addition, this research has implications for future school policy with respect to the flexible curriculum strategies utilised at CSC. Strategies that provide senior students with the opportunity to be autonomous and assume responsibility for their future encourage the development of mature behaviour and respectful, egalitarian relationships with peers and teachers. The flexibility of the curriculum at CSC is progressive when compared with the more traditional, autocratic school regimes; however, the success that CSC enjoys in terms of retention and graduation rates suggests that it offers many advantages to students and administrators.

**Contribution to theory.**

Much of the transition literature reviewed in this research related to the negative academic and social outcomes that students transitioning from primary to middle or junior high school had experienced. This research suggests that this may not be applicable to students who transition to senior college establishments employing strategies that promote an adult education environment. It would appear that at the age of 15–16 years, students transitioning to senior college have the emotional maturity and coping skills that assist them to adapt to a new environment. In addition, it is suggested that the maturity of senior college students allows them to use the transition experience as an opportunity to experiment with and adopt adult behaviour and attitudes.
Methodology.

The mixed-method design used in the current study provided an opportunity to understand transition from the participants' point of view rather than from predetermined measures of the transition experience. Much of the earlier transition research relied on academic records and retention rates, thereby ignoring the personal aspects of the experience. The qualitative component of this research provided an understanding of the context of transition to a senior college by offering the transitioning students the opportunity to express their views on the process. The quantitative phase of the research provided an opportunity to verify the interpretation of phase one findings with a larger sample of students. This second phase of the research effectively triangulated the qualitative research findings by seeking verification with a different participant sample and by using an alternate research method. The mixed methodology also facilitated the development of a theoretical model of transition to senior college. In comparing and contrasting the qualitative quantitative results an understanding of the relationship between the college variables that impacted participants' transition experience was possible. The combined quantitative and qualitative methods employed in this research were used to achieving a comprehensive understanding of the impact of transition in the participants' lives.

Model of transition.

The model of transition suggested in this research relates to the specific experiences of the senior college participants in this research. It is believed to be the first model of transition proposed in relation to Western Australian senior
college students’ experiences. The value of the model is that it provides an understanding of the salient factors in senior students’ college experiences. The model identifies the college variables that relate specifically to transition experiences, and it articulates the relationship between these variables and their contribution to the transition experiences of students. The model provides the basis from which educators may identify additional strategies that satisfy the academic and social needs of senior students to assume responsibility for their future and ensure their continued engagement with education. The model may be context-specific but it provides a way forward for future research. It needs to be tested with other populations of senior students to broaden the understanding of the influence of transition in the final years of senior education.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The current study examined the penultimate transition that the participants would experience in their education. Further research could be directed at the influence that the senior college experience might have in the lives of students as they progress to further education or employment. The transition to tertiary education, where the responsibility for attending and for completing work rests with the students may be confronting for school graduates who have not experienced an adult education environment. Longitudinal studies with graduates from CSC would assist in understanding whether the strategies and environment of the senior college equips them with the skills to successfully transition to the next phase of their lives.

Research into the interaction between developmental influences and the school environment might help to determine how early in a student’s life it would
be feasible to place an emphasis on responsibility and self-determination. Lamb et al. (2004) reported that some students make the decision to leave school early on in their high school career, which would suggest that efforts to maintain students’ engagement with education might be necessary in the middle school years. Therefore, future research could be directed at the structures of middle schools to determine whether some of the identified strategies employed at CSC could be introduced earlier to encourage students to remain in school until the completion of their senior years.

**Personal Reflections**

My hope in embarking on this research was that, together with the participants in this research, we would make a contribution to educational research. Before I commenced an undergraduate degree, I had observed in my work as a teacher’s assistant that some children faltered at school not because of an apparent lack of ability or opportunity to learn but because they did not fit in; they lacked a social connection with the school environment. I became aware of the influence that the social context had in children’s education and development. Maslow’s (1970) *Hierarchy of Needs* places belonging at the third level of human needs, signifying that after the basic essentials of sustenance, shelter and safety have been satisfied, humans need to feel that they belong so that they can proceed to the higher levels of self-esteem, mastery and self-actualisation.

It is my belief that education is not just an academic process; it is also a social experience that influences how children develop emotionally. I also believe that prevention is more effective than attempts to “cure” a student’s
disengagement with education. Therefore, it is important that educators understand that children who do not feel that they are welcomed, valued or belong in a school environment may never truly commit to the education experience. Prevention efforts should be directed at examining and improving the social experience that is education, to ensure a positive educational outcome for all children.
References


Transition to Senior College


Appendix A

Interview Schedule

1. Please tell me about your school?

2. Are there any differences between this school and the last school you attended?

Prompts

a. What were your experiences when you first started at this school?

b. How would you describe the relationship you have with the teachers?
Appendix B

Letter of Information for School Principal

My name is Linda Rogerson and as part of a Doctor of Psychology degree I am seeking to conduct a research project exploring the experiences of year 11 students who have transferred from a traditional year 8 – 12 high school or a middle school to a senior college. The research has been approved by the University Human Research Ethics Committee. As the division of high school education into middle and upper schools, is a relatively new and ongoing development in West Australian education it is deemed timely to investigate the effects that the change may have. The purpose of the study is to develop an understanding of the effect that the division of high school into middle and upper school has on the educational experience of students who attend a senior college.

The purpose of this letter is to ask for your permission to conduct this research among the year 11 students at your school. The data collection will be in the form of interviews with consenting students, who have their parent’s/guardian’s consent to participate, to be conducted on the school premises. The interview will take approximately 1 hour and will be scheduled at a mutually acceptable time to all parties. If you are in agreement with this request I ask that you distribute the enclosed letters of invitation to participate to your students, and information letters to their parent/guardian, for their consideration. At the conclusion of the project a report of the results will be made available to you.

Any questions concerning this request can be directed to Linda Rogerson or by e-mail at or my supervisor Dr Lynne Cohen on If you wish to speak to someone independent of this research, please contact Professor Alison Garton

Thank you for your consideration,

Linda Rogerson
Appendix C

Invitation to Participate in Research

Dear Potential participant,

My name is Linda Rogerson and the research you are being invited to participate in is designed to investigate the experiences of year 11 students in a senior college who may have transitioned from a traditional year 8 – 12 high school or from a middle school. The research has been approved by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee.

The research offers you the opportunity to freely express your feelings about and opinion of your school environment. As a participant you will be asked to discuss your experiences at your school in an interview with the researcher. The aim of the study is to develop an understanding of the effect that the division of high school into middle and upper school has on the educational experience of students who attend a senior college. The interview will last approximately one hour and will be audio taped.

Please be assured that any information you will provide will be held in strict confidence by the researcher. At no time will your name be reported along with your interview; participants will be identified by number only, and only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the data. At the conclusion of the project a report of the results will be made available to you. Your participation in this project is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time, without penalty, and to remove any data you may have contributed.

Any questions concerning this project can be directed to Linda Rogerson on [contact information] or by e-mail on [contact information] or my supervisor Dr Lynne Cohen [contact information]. If you have any concerns or complaints about the project and wish to speak to someone independent of this research, please contact Professor Alison Garton [contact information]. Please contact the researcher, using the above contact details, as soon as possible if you are willing to participate.

Thank you for your consideration,

Linda Rogerson
Consent Form: Transition Experiences

I (the participant) have read the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in an interview, on the understanding that I may withdraw at any time, and I agree to the interview being recorded on audiotape. I agree that research data gathered for this project will be published provided I am not identifiable.

_________________________  ____________________
Participant                       Date
Appendix D
Letter of Information for Parent/Guardian

Dear parent/guardian,

My name is Linda Rogerson and the research that your child/ward is being invited to participate in is designed to investigate the experiences of year 11 students in a senior college who may have transitioned from a traditional Year 8 – 12 high school or from a middle school. The research conforms to guidelines produced by the Edith Cowan University Committee for the Conduct of Ethical Research.

As a participant your child/ward will be asked to discuss their experiences at their school, and how these may differ from their previous school, in an interview with the researcher. The aim of the study is to develop an understanding of the effect that the division of high school into middle and upper school has on the educational experience of students who attend a senior college. The interview will last approximately one hour and will be audio taped.

Please be assured that any information your child/ward provides will be held in strict confidence by the researcher. At no time will their name be reported along with their interview; participants will be identified by number only, and only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the data. At the conclusion of the project a report of the results will be made available to you. Your child/ward’s participation in this project is totally voluntary and they are free to withdraw at any time, without penalty, and to remove any data they may have contributed.

Any questions concerning this project can be directed to Linda Rogerson on [contact details] or by e-mail on [contact details] or my supervisor Dr Lynne Cohen [contact details]. If you wish to speak to someone independent of this research, please contact Professor Alison Garton [contact details]. Please contact the researcher, using the above contact details, as soon as possible if you are willing to participate.

Thank you for your consideration,

Linda Rogerson
Consent Form: Transition Experiences

I (the parent/guardian of the participant) have read the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to allow my child/ward to participate in an interview, on the understanding that he/she may withdraw at any time, and I agree to the interview being recorded on audiotape. I agree that research data gathered for this project will be published provided my child/ward is not identifiable.

__________________________  _______________________
Parent/Guardian              Date
Appendix E
Transition Survey
This is an anonymous questionnaire. Please ensure that you do not write your name or any other comments that will make you identifiable, on the questionnaire. By completing the questionnaire you are consenting to take part in this research. As such you should first read the Information Letter carefully as it explains fully the intention of the research project.
Survey Questions
Please select the response to the following questions that best describes your feelings:
1 = strongly agree
2 = agree
3 = neither agree nor disagree
4 = disagree
5 = strongly disagree

I feel like I belong to the school community at CSC.

The mentor program helped me to settle in at CSC.

Having a lesson-free day means I can keep up to date with assignments and tests.

I feel the teachers at CSC encourage me to work hard.

I like being allowed off campus during school time because I can choose where I spend my free time.

Having a lesson-free day means I can work a part-time job.

The CSC campus environment is friendly and relaxed.

The teachers at CSC are always willing to help me.

The mentor program helps me to stay on track with my learning goals.

Having a lesson-free day allows me to get help from teachers if I need it.

The students at CSC seem to treat each other with respect.

I feel I can talk to the teachers at CSC about any problems I have.

I think that being allowed off campus during school time makes me feel that I am treated like an adult.

The teachers at CSC are always approachable and willing to help me.

Having a lesson-free day means I have more free time to do what I want.

I want to come to school and study at CSC.

The mentor program helped me to make new friends at CSC.

I think the teachers and students at CSC show respect for one another.

I like being allowed off campus during school time because I feel responsible for my own behaviour.

The teachers at CSC help me to set goals for my future.

I think that the mentor program at CSC is beneficial for the students.
Appendix F

Letter of Information for School Principal

My name is Linda Rogerson and as part of a Doctor of Psychology degree I am seeking to conduct a pilot study using a transition questionnaire that seeks to understand the factors that contribute to students’ successful transition to senior college. The research has been approved by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee. As the division of high school education into middle and upper schools, is a relatively new and ongoing development in West Australian education it is deemed timely to investigate the effects that the change may have. The purpose of this study is to determine what factors are important to students’ successful transition experiences.

The purpose of this letter is to ask for your permission to conduct this research among year 11 students at your school. It is anticipated that completion of the transition questionnaire will take approximately 10 minutes. Administration of the questionnaire to students will be arranged at a time and in a manner that is convenient and will cause minimal disruption to your students and staff. If you are in agreement with this request I ask that you distribute the enclosed letters of invitation to participate to all parents/guardians of year 11 students. At the conclusion of the project a report of the results will be made available to you.

Any questions concerning this request can be directed to Linda Rogerson on [contact information] or by e-mail at [contact information] or my supervisor Dr Lynne Cohen on [contact information]. If you have any concerns or complaints about the project and wish to speak to someone independent of this research, please contact Professor Alison Garton [contact information]

Thank you for your consideration,

Linda Rogerson
Appendix G
Letter of Information for Parent/Guardian

Dear parent/guardian,

My name is Linda Rogerson and the research your child/ward is being invited to participate in is designed to investigate the factors that contribute to students’ transition experiences. Transition to a new school can be a stressful experience for students and the aim of this research is to identify what factors may contribute to successful transition. The research conforms to guidelines produced by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee.

As a participant your child/ward will be asked to complete a questionnaire that contains questions about their transition experiences at Ceremonial Senior College. The questionnaire will take approximately 15 minutes to complete and will not contain any identifying information. Completion of the questionnaire will be completed during school time in a manner that causes minimal disruption to school work.

Please be assured that any information your child/ward provides will be held in strict confidence by the researcher. At no time will their name be reported along with their completed questionnaire; participants will be identified by number only, and only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the data. At the conclusion of the project a report of the results will be made available to you. Your child/wards’ participation in this project is totally voluntary and they are free to withdraw at any time, without penalty, and to remove any data they may have contributed.

Any questions concerning this project can be directed to Linda Rogerson on [redacted] or by e-mail on [redacted] or my supervisor Dr Lynne Cohen [redacted]. If you have any concerns or complaints about the project and wish to speak to someone independent of this research, please contact Professor Alison Garton [redacted]. Please contact the researcher, using the above contact details, as soon as possible if you are willing to participate.

Thank you for your consideration,

Linda Rogerson
Consent Form: Transition Experiences

I (the parent/guardian of the participant) have read the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to allow my child/ward to complete a questionnaire, on the understanding that he/she may withdraw at any time. I agree that research data gathered for this project will be published provided my child/ward is not identifiable.

__________________________________________  __________________________
Parent/Guardian                                      Date
Appendix H

Invitation to Participate in Research

Dear Potential participant,

My name is Linda Rogerson and the research you are being invited to participate in is designed to investigate the issues that contribute to successful transition experiences. The research has been approved by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee.

As a participant you will be asked to complete a questionnaire about your experiences when you started at this senior college. The study provides you with an opportunity to contribute to research aimed at understanding the role certain issues have in the transition experiences of year 11 students in a senior college. The questionnaire will take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Please be assured that any information you provide will be held in strict confidence by the researcher. At no time will your name be reported along with your completed questionnaire; participants will be identified by number only, and only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the data. At the conclusion of the project a report of the results will be made available to you. Your participation in this project is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time, without penalty, and to remove any data they may have contributed.

Any questions concerning this project can be directed to Linda Rogerson on [contact details] or by e-mail on [contact details] or my supervisor Dr Lynne Cohen [contact details]. If you have any concerns or complaints about the project and wish to speak to someone independent of this research, please contact Professor Alison Garton [contact details]. Please contact the researcher, using the above contact details, as soon as possible if you are willing to participate.

Thank you for your consideration,

Linda Rogerson
Appendix I
Box Plot of DV Transition
Appendix J
Box Plot of IV Lesson-Free Day