The role of student engagement in the transition from primary to secondary school

This Learning Curve presents results from the 2015 primary and 2016 secondary NSW *Tell Them From Me* student surveys to examine the relationship between a student's sense of belonging at school and other measures of student engagement over the primary to secondary school transition.

The results show that students' sense of belonging in Year 7 is significantly influenced by their prior sense of belonging in primary school, their relationships with peers and teachers, and the support for learning they receive at school and at home. These findings are discussed in further detail along with a broad range of strategies and practices schools can implement that may assist students in the transition from primary to secondary school.

Key findings

- There is a decline in student engagement during the transition from Year 6 to Year 7. This includes a decline in students' effort in learning, valuing of school outcomes and their sense of belonging at school.

- Students from low-SES backgrounds and Aboriginal students experience a greater decline in sense of belonging from Year 6 to Year 7.

- Students' sense of belonging in Year 7 is influenced by their prior sense of belonging in primary school.

- Students who report positive friendships and teacher-student relationships in primary school are more likely to report a positive sense of belonging in early secondary school.

- Students who experience bullying in Year 6 are less likely to have a positive sense of belonging in Year 7.

- Students' relationships with peers and teachers at the beginning of Year 7 are also positively associated with their sense of belonging in Year 7.

- Support for learning at school and at home are both positively associated with a positive sense of belonging in Year 7.

Why is the transition from primary to secondary school important?

The transition from primary to secondary school marks a significant change for most students. It usually involves an adjustment to a new, generally larger school, where students go from being the oldest in the school to the youngest. Students in secondary school have multiple classes with different teachers and classmates, as well as an increase in workload, responsibilities and travel to and from school. There are also significant changes in peer groups. One of the major challenges facing students moving from primary to secondary school is making friends and 'fitting in' at their new school.

The move across school settings and the changes that come with it can have positive and negative effects on students. The transition process requires students to adapt previously learned behaviour patterns to fit with new demands in more challenging environments. Some students rise to these challenges and are excited about the upcoming changes and opportunities. Many students, however, feel anxious in the face of such changes (Maguire & Yu 2014).

How well students cope with the transition to secondary school can have ongoing implications for their emotional and academic development (Zeedyk et al. 2003). Poor adjustment to secondary school has been associated with disengagement and non-completion of school (Hanewald 2013). The primary-secondary transition is also important because of the impact it may have on engagement and learning in the middle years of secondary school, in particular the 'dip' in engagement that is often seen in these years (NSW DET 2008).

Sense of belonging at school across the primary-secondary transition

A strong sense of belonging has been positively associated with academic achievement (Anderman & Anderman 1999). It can also have a positive impact on a student's motivation (Gillen-O'Nell & Fuligni 2013) and self-efficacy (Roeser et al. 1996). On the other hand, students who have a low sense of belonging may feel alienated at school, which may in turn cause poor achievement and eventually non-completion of school (Archambault et al. 2009).

School belonging is also important to broader wellbeing outcomes. It has been positively associated with higher levels of happiness, self-esteem, improved coping skills and lower emotional distress (Vieno et al. 2005), and inversely related to incidents of disruptive behaviour, bullying and risk-taking behaviours (Allen et al. 2016).

Students' sense of belonging at school can be an important factor when adjusting to a new school (Vaz et al. 2015). During the primary to secondary school transition, students may report liking school less (Barber & Olsen 2004), have lower perceptions of the quality of school life, and a reduced sense of belonging (Pereira & Pooley 2007).

Some groups of students appear to be at greater risk of a poor transition. For example, students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as those with problem behaviours and fewer friendships prior to starting secondary school may be more vulnerable during transition, have more adjustment problems, and consequently may have a lower sense of belonging in their first year of secondary school (Anderson et al. 2000, West et al. 2010).

Transition can also pose specific problems and concerns for students who do not belong to the majority culture within the school (McGee et al. 2003).

Understanding the types of students who are at risk of a poor transition, and the factors that support a successful transition, can strengthen existing school-based programs to support and improve students' experiences as they move from primary to secondary school, and ensure schools' resources are directed where they are needed most.

Sense of belonging at school

The term school belonging refers to a student's perception of being accepted, valued and included in their school setting by their peers and by others in the school. It is sometimes referred to as school connectedness or bonding to school.

Students' feelings of belonging at school, alongside positive relationships with peers and teachers, are essential for student wellbeing. These relationships are characterised by constructive interactions that provide genuine support for students and help them build social and emotional skills. The NSW Department of Education has a strong commitment to students' belonging and connectedness at school and it is a key element of the Wellbeing Framework for Schools.

In the *Tell Them From Me* student survey, sense of belonging is derived from students' responses to a set of questions about their perception of school, including if they feel like they belong at school, if they feel accepted at school, and if they get along with others at school. The data are scaled on a 10-point scale, and students with a score equal to or above 6 are considered to have a positive sense of belonging.

Tell Them From Me findings

Analysis of the NSW *Tell Them From Me* data shows that while most students are highly engaged in primary school, there is a decline in many measures of student engagement between Year 6 and Year 7. For example, the percentage of students who value school outcomes and who are trying hard to succeed declines across the transition from primary to secondary school and continues to decline into the middle years of schooling (Figure 1).

Students' sense of belonging also declines between Year 6 and Year 7 (Figure 1). This decline is greater among students with low-SES backgrounds (bottom quarter in the state) and Aboriginal students. For example, 73 per cent of low-SES students have a positive sense of belonging in Year 6 which drops to 64 per cent of students in Year 7. In contrast, 85 per cent of high-SES students have a positive sense of belonging in Year 6 and this increases to 86 per cent in Year 7. Aboriginal students report a 10-percentage point drop in sense of belonging between Year 6 and Year 7, whereas non-Aboriginal students report a 2-percentage point decrease (Figure 2).

At the school level, students who attend non-metropolitan and low-SES schools also show a notable decline in their sense of belonging across the primary-secondary transition (Figure 2). On the other hand, students who attend high-SES schools (top quarter in the state) and those who move into selective or single-sex high schools show a slight improvement in sense of belonging in Year 7 compared to Year 6 (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Student engagement across primary and secondary school

Break in data series: the wording and number of primary and secondary survey questions for these measures vary slightly, but are broadly comparable

Students trying hard to succeed

Positive sense of belonging

Students who value school outcomes

*Percentage of students*

School year
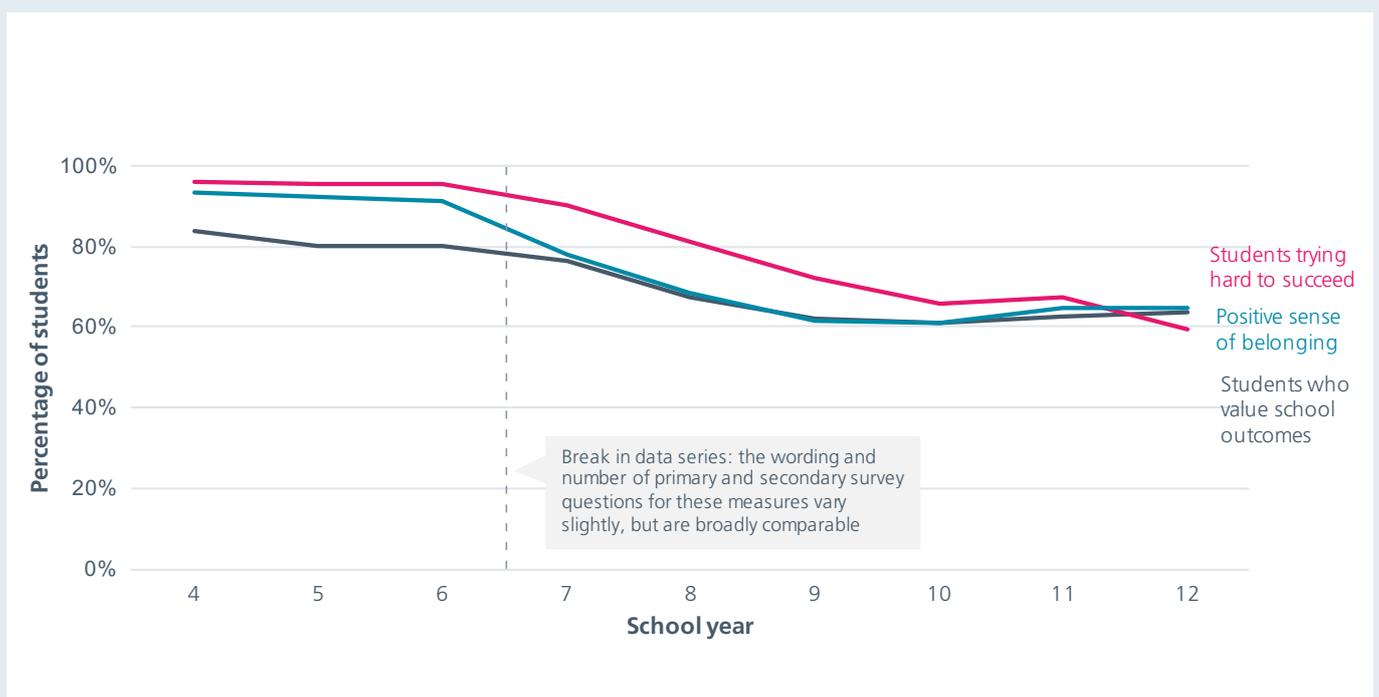
Figure 2: Percentage of students with positive sense of belonging in Year 6 and Year 7 by student and school type
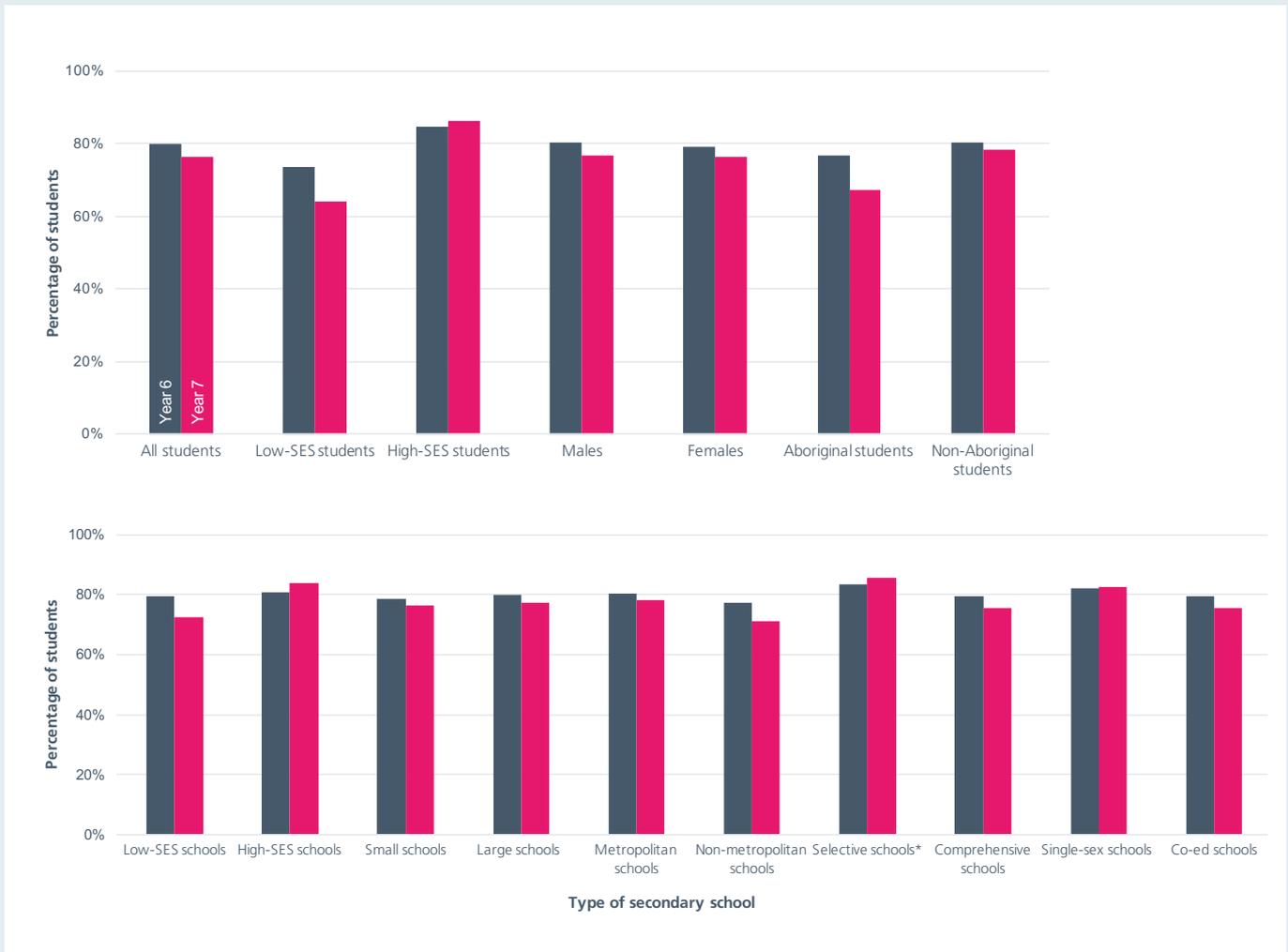
*This does not include partially selective schools

Sense of belonging in primary school

Tell Them From Me students' sense of belonging at school encompasses their perception of school, including if they feel like they belong at school, if they feel accepted at school, and if they get along with others at school.

Students who report having a positive sense of belonging in Year 6 are more likely to have a positive sense of belonging in Year 7 than students who report a negative sense of belonging in Year 6 (Figure 3). After controlling for students' characteristics (e.g. SES status, gender and ethnicity) and school environment, the odds of a student who had a positive sense of belonging in Year 6 also having a positive sense of belonging in Year 7 is more than three times higher (3.33) than students who had a negative sense of belonging in Year 6 (Figure 3).

This finding is supported by other research. West et al. (2010) found that students who enjoyed primary school were more likely to have a successful transition to secondary school. Lester et al. (2013) found that feelings of primary school connectedness strongly predicted both feelings of connectedness in secondary school and students' mental health over the transition period.

Implications for primary schools - foster a sense of belonging in primary school

This finding from *Tell Them From Me* in NSW highlights the importance of primary schools fostering a strong sense of belonging in their senior students prior to their transition to secondary school.

Multiple areas of a school setting can influence students' sense of belonging at school, including: teachers, parents, peer groups, school environment and school policy and practice (Libbey 2004). Recent research has found that teacher support has a strong effect on school belonging. Students who believe they have positive relationships with teachers, that their teachers are caring, empathic and fair, and help resolve personal problems, are more likely to feel a greater sense of belonging than those students who perceive negative relationships with teachers (Allen et al. 2016).

Implications for primary and secondary schools - collaborate across the transition from primary to secondary school

The evidence suggests that the relationship between secondary schools and feeder primary schools is an important factor in the transition between primary and secondary school. Some examples of practices that may strengthen these relationships are:

- building relationships and collaboration between senior primary and junior secondary teachers

- aligning curriculum, teaching programs and assessment practices, for example: using 'bridging units' for Year 6 and Year 7 students; holding regular cluster meetings for senior primary and junior secondary teachers; and having joint professional learning about curriculum

- transferring student learning and wellbeing information (particularly regarding at-risk students) across the primary-secondary transition.

Figure 3: Student engagement in Year 6 (pre-transition) associated with a positive sense of belonging in Year 7
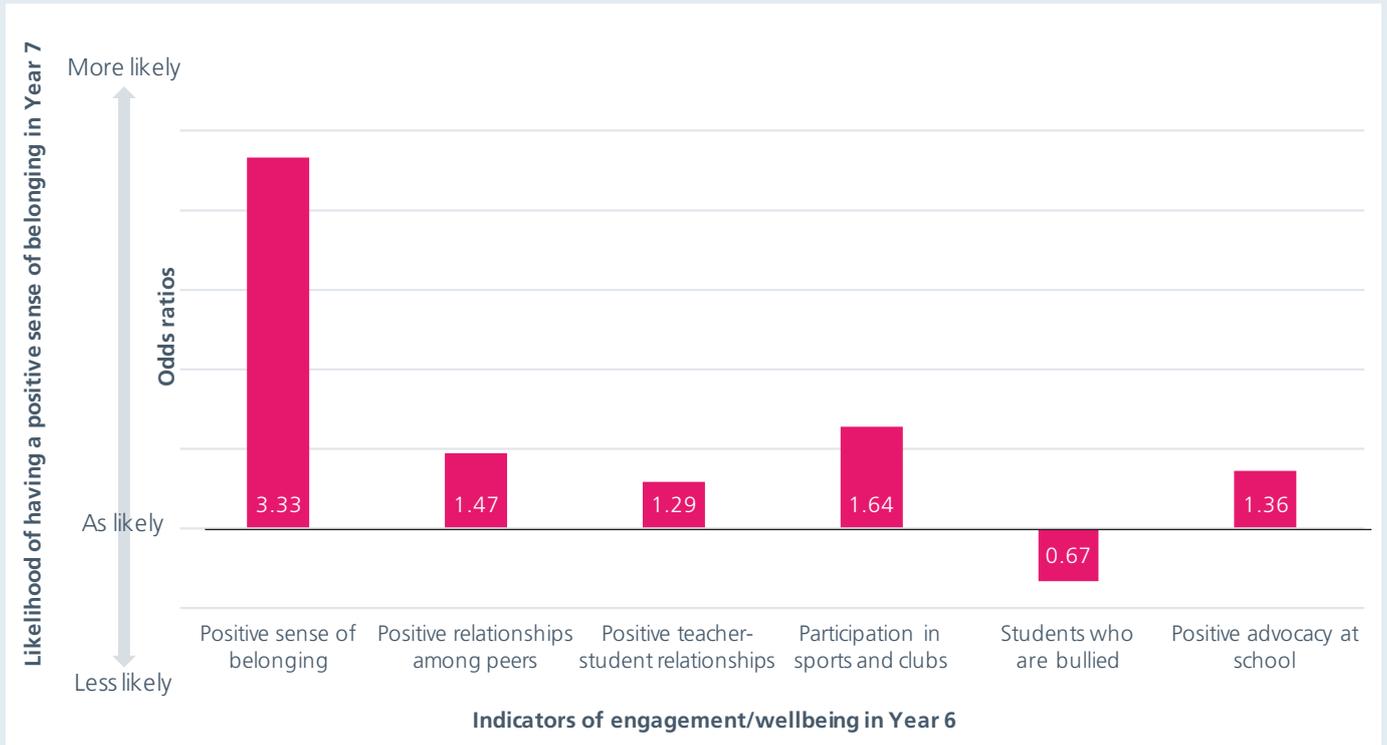
Note: All results are statistically significant. Model controls for individual characteristics and primary school-level characteristics[1]

Figure 4: Student engagement in Year 7 (post-transition) associated with a positive sense of belonging in Year 7
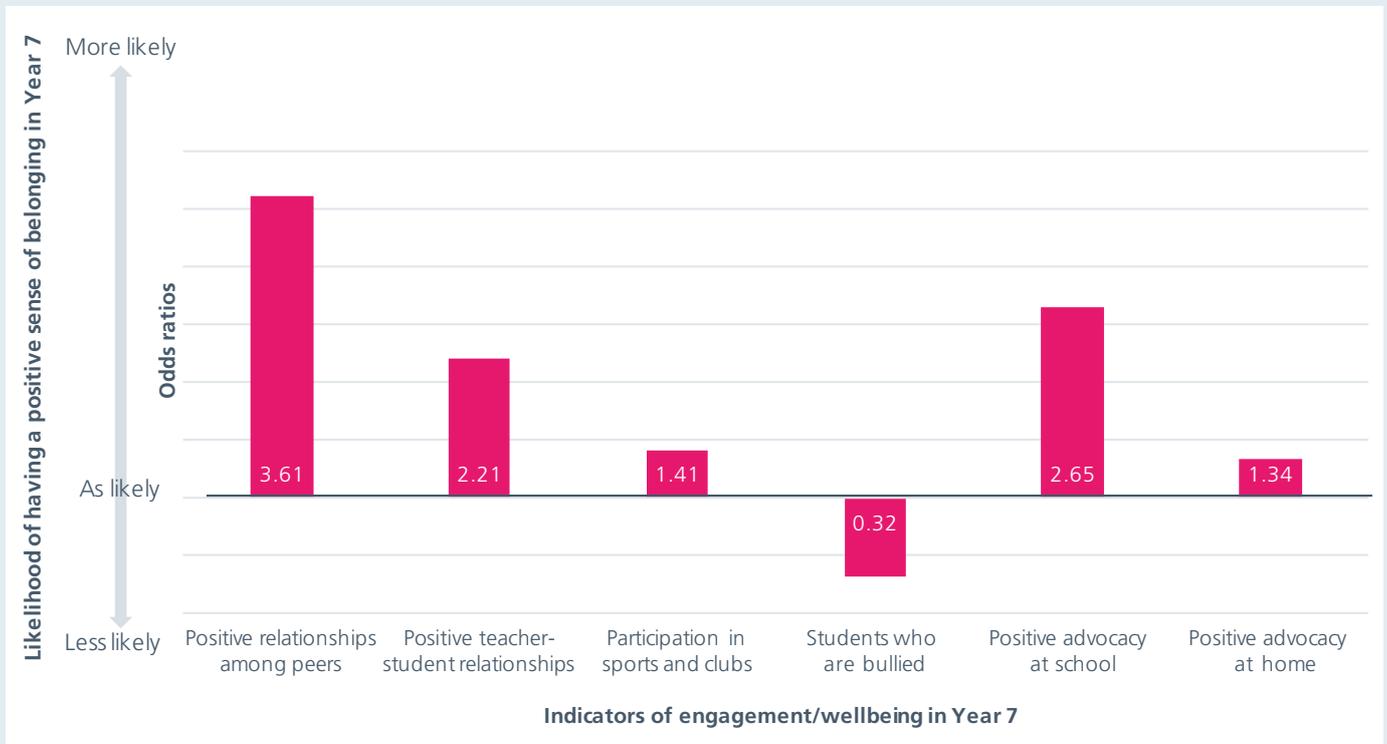
Note: All results are statistically significant. Model controls for individual characteristics, secondary school-level characteristics and students' prior sense of belonging.

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1   Data was checked to ensure that multicollinearity was not a problem. Multicollinearity occurs when two or more predictor variables in a regression model are highly correlated, which may lead to unreliable calculations of individual predictors.

Peer relationships and experiences of bullying

There is a substantial instability in friendships across the transition to secondary school and losing friendships is often cited as a major concern for students. Not surprisingly, a student's friendships during the transition from primary to secondary may have a strong effect on how they settle into secondary school. Weller (2007) examined the role friendships play during the transition from primary to secondary school and found that the close friendships and peer relationships students have during the transition process are likely to affect how well they settle into secondary school and how likely they are to form new friendships. Rice et al. (2010) found that students who had stable friendships during the transition period had lower rates of disruptive behaviour and higher levels of social behaviour. Other studies have found that students who have been victims of bullying in primary school are more likely to struggle with the transition to secondary school (Bailey & Baines 2012).

The *Tell Them From Me* findings show that students' friendships and relationships with peers in Year 6 are strongly related to their sense of belonging in Year 7. The odds of students who report having positive friendships in Year 6 also having a positive sense of belonging in Year 7 are 1.5 times those of students who report that they did not have positive friendships in Year 6, once their socio-demographic characteristics are accounted for (Figure 3).

When students are in Year 7, students' relationships with peers are also, not surprisingly, strongly related to their sense of belonging at school. The odds of a student who reported positive friendships in Year 7 having a positive sense of belonging is more than three times (3.61) that of their peers who do not have positive friendships (Figure 4).

The *Tell Them From Me* findings also show that students who experience bullying prior to or after they transition into secondary school are much less likely to report a positive sense of belonging in Year 7 than students who do not experience any bullying (Figures 3 & 4)

Implications for primary schools - strengthen peer relationships

The *Tell Them From Me* findings show that peer relationships in primary school are a strong predictor of students' adjustment to secondary school. Primary schools can help students develop strategies to build relationships and work successfully with others. Some examples of good practice include:

- explicitly teaching students social skills

- creating spaces in the classroom that support and encourage students to work together

- providing opportunities for students to work collaboratively, inside and outside the classroom

- creating opportunities for students to act as peer tutors or helpers.

Implications for secondary schools - support peer relationships

When students transition to a new secondary school they worry about not seeing their friends from primary school, how to make new friends, and how to 'fit in' with older students. Teachers can play an important role in supporting peer relationships. Some examples of practices that may strengthen peer relationships are:

- creating opportunities for senior primary students to engage with junior secondary students, or older secondary students to engage with new Year 7 students to develop 'buddy' or peer support relationships

- making opportunities available to students to interact either with students within their year group or with older students through home room organisation

- implementing activities in the classroom to help students get to know each other, for example, teachers may create 'class team groups' in Year 7 to foster strong relationships between smaller groups of students

- holding transition camps at the beginning of Year 7 to build relationships among Year 7 students.

Implications for primary and secondary schools - implement anti-bullying interventions

A large and growing body of research indicates that although bullying is a difficult problem to shift, school-based interventions can be successful in reducing bullying behaviours. Evidence indicates that successful anti-bullying interventions:

- take a holistic, whole-school approach
- include educational content that supports students to develop social and emotional competencies, and learn appropriate ways to respond to bullying behaviours
- provide support and professional development to teachers and other school staff on how best to maintain a positive school climate
- ensure systematic program implementation and evaluation.

For further details about effective anti-bullying interventions refer to the NSW Anti-bullying strategy and the accompanying CESE literature review 'Anti-bullying interventions in schools - what works?'

https://antibullying.nsw.gov.au

https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/anti-bullying-interventions-in-schools-what-works

Transition in practice - a middle school approach

Homebush West Public School (HWPS), in the inner west of Sydney, places a strong emphasis on preparing its students for the transition to high school. Year 5 and 6 students at this school attend 'middle school'. This involves individual student timetables that require students to change classrooms, classmates and teachers according to ability and subject. The students attest that this approach allows them to build relationships with more than one teacher and get used to differing teaching approaches and teacher expectations. It also creates opportunities for students to continue making new friends in Year 5 and 6 with whom they share different classes. For further details about the HWPS 'middle school' approach, refer to the accompanying case study.

Teacher support

Support at school refers to the degree to which students' academic and wellbeing needs are encouraged in order to foster learning. In NSW, *Tell Them From Me* measures student perceptions of their relationships with teachers, i.e. whether teachers treat students fairly, support students and get along with students. The survey also measures students' perceptions of the support they receive at school (i.e. advocacy) by asking students whether their teachers talk with them about school work or any problems they may be having, and whether they listen to what students have to say.

When students transition from primary to secondary school they go from having one or two teachers, to multiple teachers. Many students find this challenging, particularly in regard to building a relationship with each teacher. However, students who feel supported and cared for by teachers during this transition period have been found to have positive motivation towards schoolwork and to experience positive social and emotional wellbeing (Bru et al. 2010). Perceived support from teachers can also protect against the declines in student engagement that occur during the secondary school years (Wang & Eccles 2012). The *Tell Them From Me* findings show that students who report positive teacher-student relationships or high levels of advocacy at their school in Year 6 prior to transition are more likely to have a positive sense of belonging in Year 7 than their peers who report negative teacher relationships and support at school. When controlling for other variables, the odds of having a positive sense of belonging in Year 7 are around 1.3 times higher for students who had positive relationships with teachers and positive teacher support (advocacy at school) in Year 6 (Figure 3).

Once students have transitioned to Year 7, the association between positive teacher support and positive sense of belonging is even stronger. The odds of students who report positive teacher-student relationships and positive advocacy at school in Year 7 having a positive sense of belonging are 2.21 and 2.65 times that of students who report negative teacher-student relationship and negative advocacy at school respectively (Figures 3 & 4).

Implications for primary schools - prepare students for transition

An important task primary teachers have is to prepare their students for the transition to secondary school. This may include:

- having a sound understanding themselves of how secondary schools operate – including routines, structures and expectations

- developing in students the level of independence they will need to manage the requirements of the secondary school environment

- creating realistic and positive expectations in students of what secondary school will be like

- providing students with opportunities to build relationships with more than one teacher

- building positive communication practices between students and teaching staff that can be carried forward into secondary school.

Implications for secondary schools - develop strong, supportive teacher-student relationships

A particular challenge for secondary teachers is how to build positive relationships with students in a more complex organisational structure than exists in primary schools. The literature identifies several strategies that may support teacher-student relationships across the primary to secondary transition process. These include:

- small teaching teams that emphasise pastoral care and building relationships (e.g. Year 7 students may have a transition or home-room class with the same teacher each week where they cover wellbeing and important skills, such as time-management and study skills)

- ensuring teachers have time to get to know all their students, to connect with them on a personal level (e.g. identifying shared interests) and to understand any individual challenges they may be facing

- ensuring that students are aware of all the different ways teaching staff can be of support. For example, in addition to a home-room or transition class teacher, there may be other school staff, such as the head of Year 7 or another pastoral leader, who they might choose to approach for advice, support or help

- asking students for feedback. For example, students may be asked to write down what confuses or concerns them about different areas of high school. This information could be used to inform general (non-identifying) discussions in transition or home-room classes.

Support outside of school

Other predictors of a successful transition relate to a child's environment outside school. Parents play an important role in supporting students during the transition to secondary school, particularly in regard to academic and peer-related challenges (Anderson et al. 2000). At this age, parents also have the main responsibility of organising their children's extra-curricular activities, and students who participate in activities outside school during the primary years (e.g. sports, musical groups and language classes) may also have a smoother transition to secondary school (Cox & Kennedy 2008). Participation in such activities can offer students experience in managing emotions, interpersonal development, and developing social skills (Larson et al. 2006). Extra-curricular activities may also have small adult-student ratios and be less formally structured than classrooms, giving students more opportunities to interact with their peers and adult leaders and to develop their social skills (Fredericks 2014).

In NSW, students who report positive advocacy at home (e.g. students who have a family member to talk to about problems or friendship issues at school or someone who encouraged them to do well at school)[2] are more likely to report a positive sense of belonging in Year 7 than students who report that they do not have positive advocacy at home. When controlling for other variables, the odds of having a positive sense of belonging in Year 7 is around 1.3 times higher for students who report having positive advocacy at home in Year 7 (Figure 4).

Students who participate in extra-curricular sports or clubs are also more likely to have a positive sense of belonging in Year 7 than students who do not participate. The odds of a student who participates in extra-curricular sports or clubs at school in Year 6 or in Year 7 having a positive sense of belonging in Year 7 is 1.4 times that of a student who does not participate in sports or clubs (Figures 3 & 4).

Implications for primary and secondary schools - promote family involvement

Research has highlighted that students have a smoother transition to secondary school if parents provide academic encouragement and support, monitor student activities and intervene positively when help is needed (Hanewald 2013). Schools can encourage this support by:

- providing parents with information and resources about their child's transition and keeping them informed about school procedures and where to go for help and support. For example, schools could use information nights to assist parents with fostering positive parent-child relationships and positive communication skills

- supporting ongoing parent involvement (via volunteering and school events)

- providing parents with feedback about their child's progress

- engaging parents in designing and promoting school events and extra-curricular activities.

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2   Advocacy at home is only measured in secondary school.

Conclusion

Students' sense of belonging declines across the transition between primary and secondary school. The decline is larger for students with low-SES backgrounds and Aboriginal students. Students' sense of belonging in secondary school is affected both by their sense of belonging in primary school and other engagement factors including peer and teacher relationships and advocacy at school and home.

These findings highlight the need for primary schools to continue to be attentive to Year 6 students' sense of belonging at school, as well as their relationships with teachers and peers as they approach the transition to high school. Equally, secondary schools have an important role to play in fostering a sense of belonging at school and other forms of engagement and positive wellbeing among their students. Promoting these aspects of engagement will help to support students during the transition, and ultimately improve students' experiences as they move from primary to secondary school.

Future *Tell Them From Me* research

Findings from this study highlight the impact of positive peer and teacher relationships and support at school and home on students' sense of belonging in early high school. Research such as this is valuable to schools and policy makers as it identifies factors that foster wellbeing outcomes in students. It is also important to link student engagement and wellbeing during the transition process to academic outcomes in early high school. Future work will investigate the changes in engagement during the transition from primary to secondary school and the relationship they have with student achievement in Year 7.

This research also draws attention to the importance of engagement in Year 6 as a potential precursor to engagement and learning in the first few years of high school. Future research will investigate trajectories of student engagement as students move into and through high school and identify factors (individual, home, school and classroom) that might be associated with certain shifts in engagement during this critical period of schooling.

Methodology

Tell Them From Me is an online survey system used to capture the views of students on their schooling. It is aimed at students in Years 4 to 12. The *Tell Them From Me* surveys are offered to all NSW government schools. The survey covers indicators of student engagement (social, institutional and intellectual); effective classroom and teaching practices; and school and family factors that are known to influence student learning.

The analysis presented in this Learning Curve tracks 12,000 students who participated in both the Term 1 2015 primary survey in Year 6 and the Term 1 2016 secondary survey in Year 7. This analysis examines the relationships between different measures of student engagement and individual, family and school factors that may impact on a student's transition into secondary school. The measure of transition 'success' used in this paper is a student's sense of belonging at school.

To examine whether a positive sense of belonging in Year 7 is more or less likely for certain groups of students or students in certain types of schools, a multilevel logistic regression was used.

This technique is used when the outcome variable is dichotomous, i.e. whether a student has a positive sense of belonging or not. It denotes the *probability* or *likelihood* of a student having a positive sense of belonging, and how various characteristics of the student (e.g. students' gender, socioeconomic status and engagement characteristics), or characteristics of the school they attend (e.g. size of school, location of school and type of school), affect that likelihood.

The outcome of interest in this analysis is the odds ratio for the different student groups, with odds ratios above one representing an increase in probability of having a positive sense of belonging, and odds ratios below one representing a decreased probability of having a positive sense of belonging. For example, in Figure 3 the odds ratio for students with positive teacher-student relationships in Year 6 is 1.29. This indicates that the odds of a student with positive teacher-student relationships in Year 6 having a positive sense of belonging in Year 7 is 1.29 times that of a student with negative teacher-student relationships in Year 6, holding all other student, school and engagement characteristics constant.

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