



## University of Canberra

This thesis is available in print format from the University of Canberra Library.

**If you are the author** of this thesis and wish to have the whole thesis loaded here, please contact the University of Canberra Library at *e-theses@canberra.edu.au* Your thesis will then be available on the www providing greater access.

PRIMARY-SECONDARY TRANSITION: COPING IN A  
NEW SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

by

VERONICA SEN

A Field Study Report submitted in Partial  
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Education in the  
Canberra College of Advanced Education.

December, 1978.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer is indebted to the Principals and staff of four A.C.T. primary schools and two high schools for their co-operation in the Field Study Project. Special thanks are given to the students and parents who participated in the Study; and to the Project Supervisor, Dr. T. Hardy, who directed the Study with patience, thoroughness and expertise.

Thanks are also extended to Dr. W. Mulford and Dr. L. Kendall for their helpful suggestions. Both Dr. Mulford and Mrs Elaine Atkinson are thanked for agreeing to act as Examiners of the Report.

Mr. Dhrubajyoti Sen's invaluable assistance and the cheerful forbearance of Devika, Mahamaya, Indrani, Vijaya and Kironmoy are very much appreciated. Mesdames Betty Polak, Amita Manna, Helen Cosgrove helped in special ways as did Messrs Errol and David Smith.

Sincere thanks must be given to Mrs Margaret Bacon because of her very obliging manner and her prompt and careful execution of the typescript.

## ABSTRACT

The aim of the Field Study described in this Report was to examine the nature of primary-secondary transition as perceived by students themselves. Twelve students from four A.C.T. primary schools were interviewed prior to their entry to one or other of two high schools, and subsequent interviews were conducted at intervals during the students' first six months in high school. Further information was obtained from interviews with their parents and from formal and informal assessments made by their primary and secondary teachers. To place the trends revealed in the interviews in a wider context, surveys were administered at the beginning and end of the six months' period to all Year 7 students in both high schools.

A major emphasis of the Study was an investigation of how students cope with new tasks, social and academic, at a time when there is a potentially stressful conjunction of early adolescence and major educational transition. Such coping is conceptualised as the individual matching his resources against the demands made by a new situation.

The initial appraisal by students of the new situation was a general perception of high school as either benign or threatening. The more differentiated, or secondary, appraisal was influenced by further information and experiences; and re-appraisal was characterised, after a further lapse of time, by either a reinforcement or reversal of original perceptions.

It was found that upon moving to the more complex institutional setting of high school some students had difficulty in adjusting to a more formal organisation and a more demanding curriculum. The students' response to high school included such coping strategies as hostility, withdrawal or active striving to meet the challenge of a new school. Some students who showed a marked inability to cope with one or more of the tasks, social or academic, of high school were deemed to have experienced adaptive failure.

A key factor in adjustment to high school, and one that was at least as important as academic achievement, was that of interpersonal relationships. Success in relating to both teachers and peers was found to be a crucial factor for students, whether bright or less bright, and it was found that students of limited academic achievement could find compensation if they perceived their "person environment" as benign.

## CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
EXAMINERS' APPROVAL	ii
CERTIFICATE	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
CHAPTER ONE: Transition: A Psycho-Social Perspective	1
CHAPTER TWO: Primary-Secondary Transition: The Literature	27
CHAPTER THREE: Methodology	46
CHAPTER FOUR: Twelve Students in Transit: The Background	59
CHAPTER FIVE: Entry to High School: The Appraisal	85
CHAPTER SIX: Secondary Appraisal: The First Six Weeks	100
CHAPTER SEVEN: Re-Appraisal: High School After Six Months	115
CHAPTER EIGHT: Conclusions and Implications	141
BIBLIOGRAPHY	152
APPENDICES	160
Appendix A: Teacher Rating Scale	160
Appendix B: Schedule for Group Interview of Year 7 Teachers, March 1978.	162
Appendix C: Student Expectations of High School	163
Table 1: Things Heard About High School	163
Table 2: Things Looked Forward to at High School	163
Table 3: Things Not Looked Forward to at High School	164
Table 4: Things Most Different About High School	164
Appendix D: Letter Requesting Students to keep First Days' Diary	165
Appendix E: Student Interview Schedule, October 1977.	166
Appendix F: Student Interview Schedule, February 1978.	168
Appendix G: Student Interview Schedule, March 1978.	171
Appendix H: Student Interview Schedule, June 1978.	172

APPENDICES	<u>Page</u>
Appendix I: Information Sheet for Individual School Subjects	173
Appendix J: Parent Interview Schedule, March 1978.	174
Appendix K: Parent Interview Schedule, June 1978.	176
Appendix L: Questionnaire A, February 1978.	177
Appendix M: Questionnaire B, July 1978.	180
Appendix N: Distribution of Student Responses to Questionnaire A.	183
Table 1: Distribution of Year 7 Students Responses to Questionnaire A at Churchill High School.	183
Table 2: Distribution of Student Responses (Boys and Girls) to Questionnaire A at Churchill High School.	185
Table 3: Distribution of Year 7 Student Responses to Questionnaire A at Wilson High School.	187
Table 4: Distribution of Student Responses (Boys and Girls) to Questionnaire A at Wilson High School.	189
Appendix O: Distribution of Student Responses to Questionnaire B.	192
Table 1: Distribution of Year 7 Student Responses to Questionnaire B at Churchill High School.	192
Table 2: Distribution of Student Responses (Boys and Girls) to Questionnaire B at Churchill High School.	195
Table 3: Distribution of Year 7 Student Responses to Questionnaire B at Wilson High School.	198
Table 4: Distribution of Student Responses (Boys and Girls) to Questionnaire B at Wilson High School.	200
Appendix P: Student Responses to Open-Ended Items in Questionnaire A.	203
Table 1: Student Responses to Open-Ended Items in Questionnaire A at Churchill High School.	203
Table 2: Student Responses to Open-Ended Items in Questionnaire A at Wilson High School.	205

## APPENDICES

Page

Appendix Q:	Student Responses to Open-Ended Items in Questionnaire B.	207
	Table 1: Student Responses to Open-Ended Items in Questionnaire B at Churchill High School.	207
	Table 2: Student Responses to Open-Ended Items in Questionnaire B at Wilson High School.	209
Appendix R:	A Selective Analysis of Student Responses to Questionnaires A and B to Determine any Sex Differences.	211
Appendix S:	A Summary of Four Case Studies.	217