

A Challenge of Living? Understanding the Psycho-social Processes of the Child During Primary-secondary Transition Through Resilience and Self-esteem Theories

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Abstract The transition from primary to secondary school can be a period of anxiety for many children. Although most schools have developed systems to ease this process, it has been argued that the emphasis is often on administrative and organisational procedures. In contrast, children and parents are typically more concerned with personal and social issues. It may be that such concerns have received insufficient attention in the past. This paper employs theoretical perspectives from the literature on resilience and self-esteem to examine key aspects of the process of transition from the perspective of the individual child. It is argued that for some children at least, transition can be legitimately considered ‘a challenge of living’ because of the social and personal messages which are received from a range of experiences within a concentrated period of time. The nature and source of these messages are discussed, and some implications for practitioners suggested. It is argued that in order to help vulnerable individuals cope with, and even benefit from, the period of transition, we need to focus more on the way social and personal experiences are interpreted at this time.

Keywords Primary–secondary transition · Resilience · Self-esteem · Self-competence · Self-worth

The research on transition between primary and secondary schools shows that it is a period of anxiety for many children (Galton and Morrison 2000; Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2006), with substantial decline in self-esteem, academic motivation and achievement (Eccles and Midgley 1989; Wigfield *et al.* 1991). That most children navigate this process successfully

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can be attributed in part to raised awareness among professionals of the issues related to transition. Many schools now have formalised procedures related to transition; examples include a range of induction strategies to help with the settling-in period, coupled with improvements in the transfer of information from primary to secondary settings (Hargreaves and Galton 2002; Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2006). But successful adaptation may equally be due to students remaining resilient and coping with change and/or receiving support from external networks that may serve as a protective factor (Akos 2004).

In this paper, we focus on theoretical and empirical work in the area of resilience and self-esteem to help illuminate how processes of transition can impact upon children over this important period in their lives. Resilience has been chosen because it focuses on a range of factors (both within individuals and in their immediate environment) that influence whether these individuals cope with a period of adversity or threat—or fail to do so. As we explain later, for many children transition does constitute such a period of potential threat. Self-esteem theory, specifically that which emphasises the duality of self-esteem, also has insights to offer. This theory is described in some detail later in this paper, but in essence it rests upon the belief that an individual's self-esteem is dependent upon two types of judgement: the extent to which one feels worthy of respect from others, and competent to face the challenges which lie ahead (Mruk 1999). This theoretical perspective alerts us to a range of challenges to an individual's worth and competence which are likely to occur during this transition period. Central to the argument in this paper is that, for some children at least, transition can be legitimately considered 'a challenge of living' (*ibid.*).

It would appear that to date, the relationship between transition, resilience and self-esteem has received little attention. Certainly, the transition literature provides studies that have focussed on self-esteem (e.g., Eccles and Midgley 1989) and some that have focussed on resilience (e.g., Catterall 1998). In the resilience literature, clear links have been drawn with the self-esteem of the individual (Rutter 1987; Gilligan 2000). However, despite similar constructs being mentioned (e.g., Newman and Blackburn 2002), it would appear that the links between resilience and self-esteem in the context of primary-secondary transition have not been explored in any detail. We believe that these relationships are stronger than has previously been recognised.

Resilience has been defined as a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity. As will be discussed later, research suggests that resilience during adverse situations is due to the internal attributes of the child and protective factors in the family and the wider community (Luthar 2006). In the resilience literature, self-esteem has been viewed as a personal characteristic of individuals who survive, or even thrive, in the face of adversity. However, in a recent theoretical analysis, Miller and Daniel (2007) argue that the links between self-esteem and resilience are more numerous and more important than has previously been acknowledged. In short, their argument is that accepting the duality of self-esteem requires us to consider a range of experiences and processes previously reported as discrete factors in relation to childhood resilience. The interested reader is referred to that paper (see, in particular, pages 608–610) for more detail, but the central idea is that a range of factors linked to resilience are known also to influence the two dimensions of self-esteem.

By way of illustration, findings related to efficacy, autonomy and esteem are typically reported as separate personality variables in the resilience literature; but from a two-dimensional self-esteem perspective, they would all be related to feelings of self-competence. Similarly, a range of personal qualities (such as self-respect and positive values) and beliefs (for example, about friendships and security), all identified in the literature as being characteristics of resilient individuals, impact upon the worthiness

dimension of self-esteem. Miller and Daniel (2007) conclude that the relationship between self-esteem and resilience is encapsulated in Branden's (1994) view that self esteem is a feeling that one is competent to cope with the challenges one faces and worthy of happiness. Issues related to worth and competence are central to the argument in this paper and are developed later.

The Concept of Resilience

The term resilience was introduced in scientific literature during the second half of the twentieth century and has been recognised as an important construct from a theoretical and applied perspective (Luthar 2006). In defining resilience as “a phenomenon or process reflecting relatively positive adaptation despite experiences of adversity or trauma” Luthar (2003, p. 6) explains that two conditions are critical; exposure to significant adversity or threat, and achievement of positive adaptation despite that adversity or threat. In fact, resilience research first gained prominence in pioneering work with children of schizophrenic mothers where it was found that among these children who were at high risk for psychopathology, were a number of children who had shown surprisingly healthy adaptive patterns (e.g., Garnezy 1974 and Rutter 1979; cited in Luthar 2006). Further research was conducted with other groups, for example children exposed to naturally occurring stressors such as deaths or injuries in the family (Murphy and Moriarty 1976) and Werner and Smith's work with infants at risk on the Hawaiian island of Kauai (Werner and Smith 1982). These studies led to the identification of factors that seemed to be common amongst children who were successfully dealing with adversity, such as social charisma, affectionate and strong ties with family and the wider community. Among other prominent publications, one that was particularly significant was an analysis of conceptual issues by Rutter (1987). He suggested four main protective processes which mediate risk at key life turning points. These are: to lessen the impact of risk by altering the experience of risk (e.g., preparing the child for the death of a family member) or exposure to the risk (e.g., by close supervision); to decrease the number of risk factors in order to avoid an accumulation of unmanageable risks; to increase self-esteem and self-efficacy (e.g., through positive and secure relationships, successful completion of tasks), in order to create a positive chain reaction in the young person's life; and to provide access to opportunities such as part-time work and out of school activities, to increase confidence and develop necessary life skills.

Gilligan (2000) expanded on Rutter's protective processes by stating the importance of five key areas which have to be addressed in order to understand resilience in at-risk young people and children. They are: decreasing the number of problems in the child's life; thinking about his or her life course in terms of a ‘developmental pathway’ which can be altered at any point by small incidents or experiences, whether positive or negative; providing him or her with a secure base (e.g., secure attachments with parents and siblings, enabling examination and exploration of the greater environment); developing self-esteem through positive experiences, relationships and success (e.g., performing well in sports); and finally, developing self-efficacy, by ensuring that he or she is involved in planning and preparation for any changes (e.g., involving in planning for the move to secondary school whilst the child is in primary school). He emphasised the importance of positive school experiences as a protective factor.

Catterall (1998) studied risk and resilience in primary–secondary transitions and presented some models on the basis of empirical research. He emphasised the need to move away from ‘at risk groups’ and instead to look at individuals who might be at risk of

dropping out from school due to lowering of academic achievement and commitment. He used the terms ‘Commitment Resilience’ and ‘Academic Resilience’ and suggested that if we look at individuals and their performances, then we can see workings of risk over time. Importantly he argued that the individual can move in and out of risk situations, indicating the dynamic nature of resilience.

To summarise, if we take an overview of the research in the area of resilience, there appears to be a change in perspective, in that it is increasingly seen as a process that is dynamic, “having the capacity to emerge in later life after earlier periods of coping problems” (Newman and Blackburn 2002, p. 10). As discussed earlier, this positive adaptation is seen to be the result of protective factors that are present within the child or/ and his or her environment. It is believed that the occurrence of such protective factors can negate the impact of risk factors, leading to resilience in children to any significant change in their life. Primary–secondary transition is clearly one such change. Despite differing views on many aspects of resilience, there seems to be a consensus on these two important sets of factors: the internal protective factors (e.g., child’s internal attributes, self-esteem) and external protective factors (e.g., supportive family or community).

On the basis of extensively explored theoretical factors, Newman and Blackburn (2002) have suggested that resilience factors (Table 1) and risk factors (Table 2) operate in three dimensions: the individual (internal factor), the family (external factor) and the external environment (external factor) and have presented them as follows:

As can be seen, the authors have suggested that similar factors in a child’s life can lead to the child being at risk (parent–child hostility) or can work as a protective factor (good parent–child relationships). They have further suggested that some of these factors are partly bio-genetic and their sensitivity to change or manipulation is limited. However, most are variables known to professionals and present a wide range of possibilities for positive change. It is believed that if a child has a series of adverse circumstances/risk factors, compensatory resilience factors are required to promote resilience. For example, in the context of transition, an unpredictable crisis such as bullying can put a child at risk of underachieving or emotional distress. However, a supportive and positive family environment can promote resilience against the risk factors.

Table 1 Resilience Factors (sources: Emery and Forehand 1994:81; Palmer 1997:203; Gilligan 1997:15, cited in Newman and Blackburn 2002, p. 8)

The child	The family	The environment
Temperament (active, good-natured)	Warm supportive parents	Supportive extended family
Female prior to and male during adolescence	Good parent–child relationships	Successful school experiences
Age (being younger)	Parental harmony	Friendship networks
Higher IQ	Valued social role (e.g. care of siblings)	Valued social role (e.g. a job, volunteering, helping neighbours)
Social skills	Close relationship with one parent	Close relationship with unrelated mentor
Personal awareness		Member of religious or faith community
Feelings of empathy		
Internal locus of control		
Humour		
Attractiveness		

Table 2 Risk Factors (from Pearce and Holmes 1994, cited in Newman and Blackburn 2002, p. 8)

The child	The family	The environment
Learning disability	High level of parental conflict	Poverty and low social capital
Genetic factors	Parental separation	Homelessness or fragile housing
Developmental delay	Lack of consistent guidance	Racism
Difficult temperament	Parent–child hostility	Unpredictable and unmanageable crises
Problems with communication	Abuse	
Chronic illness	Parental psychological disorder	
Poor educational performance	Parental alcoholism or drug dependency	
Low self-esteem	Parental criminality	
	Poor friendship networks	

Resilience and transition

At this point the reader might question whether primary–secondary transition can be seen as traumatic enough to justify employing ideas from resilience theory. However, as can be seen from the above example, research has already been conducted to look at risk and resilience in the context of primary–secondary transition (Catterall 1998). Further, research suggests that there is a difference in the perception of an adult and child regarding stressful and traumatic events (e.g., in the context of transition, see Brown and Armstrong 1982; Akos 2004). Although adults identify major life events as stressful, children see daily ‘hassles’ such as conflicts with peers or school transition as major stressors (Newman and Blackburn 2002). Essentially, it is the number and frequency of apparently minor ‘hassles’ that make them traumatic.

If we look at primary–secondary transition research there seem to be several such stressors for a child at this time. For example, the issue of discontinuity has been highlighted in the U.K. government reports (e.g. Galton *et al.* 2003; SEED 1999) as one of the stressors. One element of this has been the lack of continuity in learning, with secondary schools often favouring the ‘fresh start’ approach. In fact, from the perspective of the child, there are a number of discontinuities which have to be coped with simultaneously. For example, in many situations, especially in the U.K., there is a change in physical location coupled with changes in the way in which the learning environment is organized (Graham and Hill 2003). Obvious examples which stem from the complexities of time-tabling are the number of classrooms children work in and the concerns about getting lost or having the wrong books and equipment for classes. Research shows that children entering high school looked forward to having more choices and making new and more friends, but at the same time, they were concerned about being picked on and teased by older children, having harder work, getting lower grades, and getting lost in a larger, unfamiliar school (Mizelle 1999; Lucey and Reay 2000).

Importantly, the dominant pedagogic style is subject to change. While accepting the fact that approaches to teaching and learning are evolving, for many pupils, transition is still characterised by a shift from child-centred, activity-based or experiential learning classrooms to (in many cases) a more didactic approach, informed by a different educational ideology (Midgley *et al.* 1989). The expectations of teachers may differ, as will the nature of some important relationships between teachers and students (Midgley

et al. 1989; Tonkin and Watt 2003). Shaw (1995) has commented on the loss of the family ethos children experience in primary school when they move to the (relatively) impersonal environment of the secondary school. Not only do secondary teachers seem to have expectations that are different from primary teachers, in the course of a day children have to adjust to the teaching and management style of several different teachers (Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2006). For some children who might be experiencing problems in the family, the stable relationships or attachments formed with the primary school teacher can be vital—but due to the large number of pupils and teachers in secondary schools, these secure attachments can be more difficult to form (Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2008). For some children, one negative experience can lead to a downward spiral in their motivation to attend school and can also have an impact on their self-esteem. Several studies in the rest of Europe (O'Brien 2003; Kvalsund 2000; Lohaus *et al.* 2004; Zanolini and Usai 2002), the USA (Akos 2004; Eccles and Midgley 1989; Pellegrini and Long 2002; Wigfield *et al.* 1991), Australia (Tonkin and Watt 2003) and elsewhere have emphasised similar issues.

Another stressor during transition seems to be that peer relationships are often in a state of flux. Children who have been classmates for 6 or 7 years can become strangers. The nature of peer status changes too, as children go from being 'big fish in a small pool' to minnows in an uncharted ocean. As they adjust to the new environment, the new organisational arrangements, the new relationships and the new sets of rules (both explicit and hidden), there may be conflict between social and educational agendas. Some 20 years ago, Measor and Woods (1984) highlighted that at this time children can experience a sense of loss—loss of the familiar, in terms of places, people and routines. Despite the passage of time, this still seems true today (Tonkin and Watt 2003).

Lucey and Reay (2000) point out that although any sense of loss is difficult; it is an integral part of the process of change. An important idea here is what Hallinan and Hallinan (1992) call the 'transfer paradox'. This refers to the fact that the transition process represents both a step up and a step down in terms of socially reflected maturity. Lucey and Reay (2000) argue that school transition presents children with a dilemma central to the experience of growing up: that in order to gain a level of autonomy appropriate to their level of need, they must be able and willing to give up some protection. So, although anxiety and a certain amount of emotional impact are inevitable consequences of transition, they are central to the development of appropriate coping strategies. However, as educators we must ask, what happens if a child does not have the internal attributes or a supportive environment to help develop these coping strategies?

Newman and Blackburn (2002, p. 17) encapsulate important issues here:

Transitional periods in the lives of children and young people are times of threat but also of opportunity for change. If children possess adequate coping skills, are in environments that protect against excessive demands, but also have opportunities to learn and adapt through being exposed to reasonable levels of risk, then a successful transition is likely. If neither coping skills, nor an environment that is likely to promote them, are present then periods of transition may become points in the child or adolescent life span where serious developmental damage may occur.

Taking into account all of these factors, it is hardly surprising that for many children this is a period of considerable uncertainty and potential stress. It is also important to remember that these changes occur at a time of great physical and emotional change: the onset of puberty. It is almost self-evident that all the changes referred to above can have a significant effect on self-perceptions—specifically on an individual's sense of worth and competence—leading to stress and in some cases, trauma (Rudolph *et al.* 2001).

In terms of previous resilience and transition research, the importance of the internal protective factors (for example, self-esteem) and external protective factors (such as positive relationships at home and school) to help reduce multiple ‘risks’ or ‘stressors’ at the time of primary–secondary transition, is obvious. Therefore, care needs to be taken to structure a supportive environment for children during transition, and we address this in the final section of this paper. However, of equal importance is the need to understand what might be happening to the child’s self-perceptions at this time.

The Concept of Self-esteem

At an everyday level, we have a clear enough idea of what we mean when we talk about self-esteem. However, when we come to define it, things are not so straightforward. Indeed, despite its prominent role in psychological theory, counselling and teaching, there is little consensus in terms of definitions, models or measures (Tafarodi and Milne 2002). Whereas writers in the area of self-concept tend to equate self-esteem with global self-concept (see, for example, Marsh and Craven 2006) frequently writers will differentiate the terms (for example, Lawrence 2006). The differences here are not insignificant, since in the former case self-esteem sits at the top of a hierarchy of self-perceptions, whereas with the latter it is self-concept which is the superordinate construct. The stance adopted in this paper is informed by the literature on self-esteem rather than the work on self-concept, but even within this delineated field there is considerable variation in the way self-referent terms are conceptualised.

Indeed, the proliferation of self-related constructs and the associated lack of clarity are problems that have been commented on by various writers (see, amongst others, Lawrence 2006; Tafarodi and Milne 2002; Emler 2001; Blaskovich and Tomaka 1991). A notable attempt to provide some clarity in this area can be found in the writing of Christopher Mruk (1999), who employed techniques from phenomenological psychology to address the problem. Based on the work of Giorgi (1970), phenomenology involves an attempt to find what is called the general structure of a phenomenon. Mruk defines phenomenological psychology as “a way of describing both the individual experience and the universal nature of a given human phenomenon as it is lived in real life” (p.7). He points to some of the difficulties in arriving at a fundamental structure of self-esteem, including the fact that the topic is studied from both sociological and psychological perspectives, includes a wide variety of acceptable research methods, and involves some special measurement difficulties related to validity.

He explains that the process of phenomenological review begins with empirical information. The data are then subject to a systematic process of analysis, and the end result of this is both the identification of the universal components of an experience, and how they are experienced in an individual case. His analysis demonstrates that the main definitions of self-esteem have traditionally fallen into two categories: those which focus primarily on self-worth, and those which are based upon an individual’s judgement of competence. For example, Mruk points out that although the writing of Coopersmith (1967) does make reference to competence, the main emphasis of his work has been on self-worth, as exemplified in his famous definition of self-esteem as being “a personal judgement of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes [a person] holds towards himself” (1967, pp. 4–5). Certainly, the work of Rogers (1961) is clearly focused on the worth dimension. On the other hand, the seminal work of James (1890/1983) and the psychodynamic writing of White (1963) more clearly reflect a concern with competence.

As a result of his analysis, Mruk has developed a two-dimensional model of self-esteem, and has demonstrated that this is capable of incorporating the findings of the main work published in the field. This model reflects the belief that how people feel about themselves is dependent not only on whether they see themselves as worthwhile people who are accepted by others and lead a good life, but, importantly, also involves judgements about competence in a set of domains considered important to them.¹ Mruk therefore conceptualises self-esteem as the integrated sum of self-worth and self-competence. In practice this means that for individuals to have high self-esteem they must feel confident both about their sense of self-worth ('I am a good person, entitled to care and respect from others') and their sense of self-competence ('I am able to meet the challenges I face in life'). According to this model, if individuals have a deficiency in one or other dimension, they may behave in ways which suggest high self-esteem, but such characteristics may in fact reflect what is called pseudo or defensive self-esteem. To explain this, it is helpful to refer to Fig. 1.

Mruk's model sees the two dimensions of self-esteem intersecting each other at a central point. Accordingly, self-esteem conditions fall into one of four categories, each sub-divided into clinical and non-clinical conditions. Two of these categories are consistent with what is generally known: high and low self-esteem. According to Mruk, individuals who are low both in self-competence and self-worth have classic low self-esteem; they are likely to behave in ways that are familiar to many teachers. They tend to be negativistic in outlook; they are reluctant to contribute to school activities, have negative perceptions of their own abilities and low expectations of favourable outcomes. In clinical conditions this may result in depression and worse. In contrast, those who have a positive sense of worth and competence are described as having high self-esteem. (In fact, Mruk distinguishes between the majority of individuals in this category, who he describes as medium self-esteem, and a much smaller minority who enjoy particularly high perceptions in both categories who are described as having authentic high self-esteem.)

An interesting aspect of Mruk's work is his conceptualisation of the two other categories of self-esteem, and this can be seen to relate to notions of resilience; more specifically it can be seen to relate to the experiences which lead to vulnerability, and the self-perceptions of the individuals concerned. Mruk refers to the idea of defensive self-esteem; that is, where individuals act as though they have high self-esteem when in fact they have a serious deficiency in some important respect. He further divides this category into defensive type 1 and type 2. According to Mruk, the former have a sense of worth but not of competence. In a classroom, such children may feel secure in terms of being accepted and receiving positive messages about themselves as individuals, but have learned that they are often not able to perform age-appropriate tasks effectively. A consequence of this is that when the demonstration of some kind of competence is called for, such individuals may feel threatened and employ various avoidance and/or denial strategies.

In contrast, individuals who would be categorised as defensive type 2 are faced with a different set of self-appraisals and tend to display different behaviour characteristics. Here a

¹ The similarity with Bandura's concept of self-efficacy is immediately apparent. Although it is Bandura's view that self-efficacy is independent of self-esteem (Bandura 1990) a two-dimensional model of self-esteem involves the belief that coping with the challenges one faces in life (or failing to do so) carries with it subjective feelings about the self. Tafarodi and Swann (2001) point out that experiences of success and failure do not simply influence a sense of agency at the cognitive level; they are experienced as a positive or negative *value*: "general self-efficacy, defined as global expectancy, and self-competence [...] are but two consequences of the same cumulative process. Namely, self-competence is the valiative imprint of general self-efficacy on identity." (p.655)

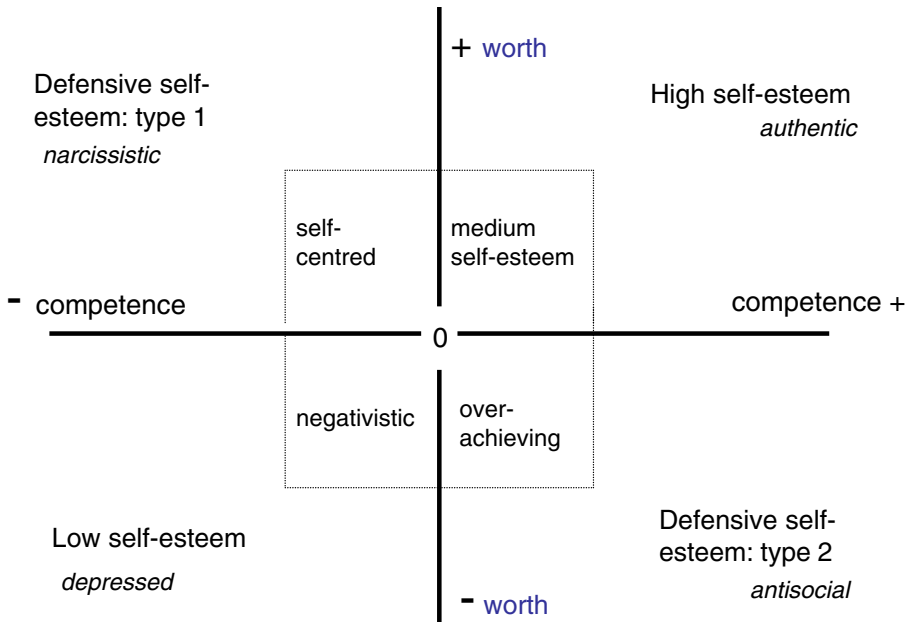


Fig. 1 The self-esteem meaning matrix (from Mruk 1999, p.165)

person may have a positive sense of competence, based on experiences of success, but a low sense of worth, because of distressing or traumatic events or a history of negative messages about their worth. (Of course, such negative messages may come from a variety of sources—as we discuss in this paper.) According to Mruk, their behaviour patterns are likely to include a range of anti-social behaviours, and although it is beyond the immediate scope of this article, extreme forms of this type of defensive self-esteem behaviour have been linked to a range of deviant behaviours. (See Mruk pp. 169–171 for further discussion.) The difference between these self-esteem conditions is central to the discussion in this paper.

Mruk's analysis is certainly the most comprehensive articulation of the two-dimensional model of self-esteem, but further theoretical support for this perspective can be found in the writing of the humanistic psychologist Nathaniel Branden (1994). Additionally, factor analytical studies (Tafarodi and Swan 1995; Tafarodi and Milne 2002) have provided empirical support for a two-dimensional structure for self-esteem. Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale, an instrument considered by many to be the 'gold standard' in self-esteem research (see Blaskovich and Tomaka 1991), had been considered unidimensional in nature, but factor analyses by Tafarodi and Milne (2002) identified two correlated factors, labelled self-competence and self-liking.² Although the terminology is not identical to that of Mruk, the similarity in terms of the underlying principle is clear: on one hand, the more objective, performance-based judgements which contribute to feelings of self-competence; on the

² The authors reported a latent factor correlation of 0.80. It is worth noting that in this study, an alternative two-factor instrument based on worth and competence was also analysed: the SLCS. This has been used in several studies which employ a two-dimensional model of self-esteem, cited later in this paper. See Tafarodi and Swann (2001) for discussion of this instrument, including modifications and details of the psychometric properties.

other, more subjective feelings of acceptance—what we might call internalized positive regard from others.

This brief outline of a two-dimensional perspective is worthy of further discussion than is possible here, but evidence of the growing acceptance of the duality of self-esteem is reflected in the adoption by NASE, the National Association for Self-Esteem, of such a definition (see Reasoner 2004).

Self-esteem and transition

Once more, the critical reader might reasonably ask: why should self-esteem be such a concern over the period of transition? Why now, specifically? The significance rests upon the belief that transition constitutes a ‘challenge of living’ (Mruk 1999); that is, a period where an individual’s sense of worth and competence are particularly vulnerable. The notion of challenges of living can be seen also in the work of Branden (1969, 1994) and Harter (1990), who refers to a range of developmental tasks in adolescence. Essentially, challenges of living are situations where individuals experience a series of significant events, find themselves in different and unfamiliar situations, and have to cope with new and sometimes difficult experiences. Many of these experiences and interactions are heavily loaded in terms of personal and emotional messages. Such ideas are reflected also in the work of Epstein (1979), whose studies led him to propose three major experiences which can significantly affect an individual’s self-esteem: exposure to a new environment, being required to make new responses, and the establishment or loss of significant relationships. Clearly all of these are central to the process of transition.

At the risk of over-simplification, the argument is that an individual with a healthy self-esteem is likely to be able to weather the storms which accompany such a difficult period. Self-esteem effectively acts as a buffer to help individuals cope with setbacks—both in terms of perceived self-worth and beliefs about their ability to meet life’s new challenges (Mruk 1999). Expectancies are important here, with several studies indicating that those with low self-esteem respond more negatively to experiences of failure while those with higher self-esteem, are more likely to persist in the face of difficulties (see Tafarodi and Vu 1997, for discussion). In this respect, one can see links with the literature on stress, where appraisals of confidence and efficacy relate to an individual’s ability to cope with stressors (see for example, Lazarus 1999; Rowley *et al.* 2005). Essentially, someone with a low self-esteem believes he or she has less in the way of resources to cope with these threats and challenges, and is consequently more vulnerable (Baumeister 1993). Whereas those with a healthy self-esteem may cope with the rigours of transition, and benefit in terms of academic and personal growth, those without may emerge from the process uncertain about their worth, less confident about their ability to cope with the challenges that lie ahead of them—and possibly with the seeds of disaffection already sown.

To more fully understand how children may be challenged—and how schools may be able to help—we consider a selection of experiences which are an integral part of the transition process, and examine how such events may impact upon a child’s self-esteem.

Challenges in terms of worth and competence

The factors involved in the development and maintenance of self-esteem are many and sometimes complex, but there are some fundamental processes which have particular importance. Looking first at a sense of self-worth: this is strongly influenced by the quality of our relationships with others and the judgements we make about how we are living up to

the standards expected of us. Simply stated, if we feel we are doing the ‘right thing’ in terms of behaviour, and are receiving affirming messages from family, friends and significant others, then our sense of worth is likely to be secure.

During transition, we see many events which have the potential to influence an individual’s self-worth—and indeed, an important feature is that they often occur concurrently. The reassurance of old relationships is often lost. New and possibly different messages are being received from others—peers, older children and teachers—about one’s apparent worth. It is not difficult to appreciate that for some children, the messages from a new peer group may be less than positive, and may do little to compensate for the loss of friends with whom one has been in close daily contact for six years or more. Similarly, the messages (and the behaviours) of older children may not suggest to the newcomers that they are valued members of this new community. In many cases, the previously close relationship with their primary teacher is replaced by multiple, as yet uncertain, relationships with many different teachers. It follows that any or all of these may send ambiguous messages about one’s value in the eyes of these significant others.

In short then, these new messages affect our feelings of acceptance, and serve as an indication of the extent to which others see us as being worthy of their time and attention (Mruk 1999). Support for the influence of such interpersonal messages can be traced back as far as Cooley in 1902, and have since been emphasised by Rogers (1961), Coopersmith (1967) and Rosenberg (1965). Following empirical studies of significant life experiences which impact upon self-perceptions, Epstein (1979) concluded that the establishment or loss of significant relationships was one of three major causes of significant changes in self-esteem.

Inevitably, children face changes in how the social world appears to them, as the environment they have known so far gives way to a new, sometimes harder and less forgiving world. Judgements about right and wrong can become blurred as children are under pressure to follow behaviour norms in their new situation. Tensions between previous codes of behaviour and new ones may create uncertainty about ‘the right thing to do’—and this impacts upon a sense of worth. Citing earlier work (e.g., Damon and Hart 1988; Rosenberg 1986; Shrauger and Schoenman 1979); Tafarodi and Swann (2001) acknowledge that when children develop, their judgements of personal worth and issues of right and wrong become more internalised, and less influenced by the views of others. Nevertheless, the authors continue:

at no point in development do we become numb to the moral judgement of those who we take an interest in. As social animals we cannot refrain from peering into the looking glass that others hold up to us, as much as we may distrust the images we see there. (p. 656)

Of course, the majority of children experience negative messages at times, and have to grapple with competing notions of right and wrong on occasion; most cope with them and learn from them. It is, after all, part of the process of growing up. However, for some children, the weight of such messages impacts upon an already fragile sense of worth, giving cause for concern.

There are many challenges also to self-competence; that is, an individual’s belief that he or she can cope with the challenges which lie ahead in this new environment. Central to this is the nature of the learning situation. Among the many discontinuities are the significant changes in the nature of teaching and learning experiences. A child now finds that lessons happen in several different physical locations, with different lesson structures and teaching styles, and often with differing expectations and levels of challenge. Although schools are introducing measures to ease the change—such as improved liaison procedures, developments

in the transfer of assessment information, ‘bridging projects’ and even changes in secondary pedagogy—difficulties remain here. We highlight below just one factor.

As mentioned above, there is evidence that secondary schools often favour a ‘fresh start’ approach to learning when pupils arrive in year one. Several factors are implicated here but a fundamental issue concerns assessment. In the past, secondary schools have argued that the assessment information which is passed on from the primary school is not reliable (see for example, SEED 1999) and this belief has been used to justify a fresh start approach. Whatever the cause, such discontinuity has often been linked with a recognised dip, not just in attainment but also in affective factors such as motivation, in the first year of secondary school (Boyd 2005).

The links with self-competence are clear. Less-able children, accustomed to work which has been matched to their ability, can be faced with tasks that highlight their lack of understanding or competence. The difference between their performance and that of their peers may become very evident, not just to them, but also to their new peer group. Marsh’s empirical studies into the ‘big-fish-little-pond’ effect (e.g. Marsh *et al.* 2004; Marsh and Hau 2003) highlight the importance of social comparisons on children’s self-judgments. Although work on the BFLP effect is of particular interest to the selective schooling debate, the processes described are likely to apply to many children moving to a different type of classroom experience such as we describe above. Furthermore, it must be borne in mind that these ‘academic’ comparisons are being made at a time when many other new challenges are being faced; competence is demonstrated not just within the classroom, but on the playing fields and in the playground too. It is not difficult to appreciate how some individuals might be overwhelmed by negative messages.

But there are dangers for other children too in a fresh start approach. Perhaps surprisingly, those who are faced with work which is too easy may suffer in terms of self-esteem. Able children, receiving praise for work which they know is not particularly demanding for them, are likely to question the true nature of their ability. Work in the area of non-contingent success (for example Thompson and Hepburn 2003) alerts us to the fact that when individuals receive praise that appears disproportionate to their efforts, the uncertainty created can have negative effects on self-concept.

Before leaving this section, it is important to acknowledge that for many children, these challenging events are happening in parallel with another momentous change in their lives: the onset of puberty. It is generally accepted that for many youngsters, particularly girls, the physical, emotional and social changes can have significant effects on self-esteem (e.g., Williams and Currie 2000). Although the effects of puberty on self-esteem are beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to recognise that these may add another factor into the equation; and of course, they will influence some individuals disproportionately.

Finally here, a two-dimensional perspective on self-esteem alerts us to the fact that one may have a sense of worth, based on secure relationships and a belief in leading a good life, but at the same time, not feel particularly competent—or vice versa. It follows that an individual may be able to cope with challenges to one aspect of self-esteem but be susceptible to challenges or threats in the other area. Such children may appear as though their self-esteem is secure, when in fact they are experiencing pseudo or defensive self-esteem as described earlier in this paper. However, of greatest concern are the individuals who suffer from low self-competence and low self-worth—those with authentic low self-esteem. For such individuals, the range of potential threats—during transition is increased, and importantly, so too are the potential consequences. These individuals pose even more of a challenge to schools, both from the learning and teaching perspective, and also in relation to pastoral care.

Clearly teachers who are keen to help vulnerable children need to be aware of the range of risks, and would welcome guidance on what they can do to help. So what can—and should—be done?

Some Implications for Professionals

While not wishing to appear over-critical of current practice, we believe there is scope for schools and parents to do more to prepare children for transition. Central to this will be a clear focus on social and personal factors, as well as educational attainment and organisational processes.

An obvious place to start concerns the information being passed from primary to secondary school: there is a need to look critically at this process. If the assessment information passed on is seen to be objective, and secondary colleagues have confidence in its validity, there should be no reason for them to continue with a fresh start policy (see SEED 1999). But equally importantly, information passed on at transfer should include more than details of academic attainment. Information needs to be provided about personal and social factors, in order to alert secondary schools to individuals who may, for a variety of reasons, be more vulnerable when they move on.

Of course, this means that primary schools themselves need to be more aware of children who may be at risk, either because of a lack of external support mechanisms on which they can call, or because of their internal characteristics (for example, in terms of self-esteem). Although we have been highlighting the importance of self-esteem at this time, identifying children at risk in this respect may be problematic; a recent study has suggested that teachers are not good at recognising children who are low in self-esteem (Miller and Moran 2005). It may be that primary teachers need a more sophisticated understanding of self-esteem, and Miller and Moran point to two areas here.

The first is recognition of the two-dimensional nature of self-esteem. This is particularly helpful because, as we have illustrated above, it alerts us to the differing types of threat to self-esteem, and some possible sources of such threats. The second area where teachers need to develop a better knowledge of their children is in relation to the contingencies of their self-esteem. A contingency is defined as a 'domain or category of outcomes on which a person has staked his or her self-esteem' (Crocker and Wolfe 2001, p. 594). An important idea here is that individuals differ in terms of these contingencies, and the more strongly a person's self-esteem is contingent upon a particular outcome, the stronger the affective or emotional response to it. Clearly the more primary teachers learn about these, the better informed they are about children's views of themselves—and the better able to convey meaningful information to secondary colleagues.

Miller and Daniel (2007) maintain that one of the important insights provided by the two-dimensional model relates to the phenomenon of defensive self-esteem, as outlined earlier in this paper. The authors explain the need for teachers to recognise the symptoms of two different defensive self-esteem conditions. This is important because each condition indicates distinctive types of negative self-evaluations, calling for different types of support.

Accordingly, Miller and Daniel discuss a range of teaching and learning approaches which can be employed to help build self-esteem. The key idea is that some of these strategies are known to impact on self-worth, and others to influence a sense of self-competence. Empirical support for their analysis can be found in Miller and Moran (2007), where the authors describe a controlled study which demonstrated differential effects for two different types of self-esteem enhancement strategies. Interestingly, although Miller and

Daniel discuss strategies which specifically target each dimension, they also suggest that there are some classroom strategies which may impact upon both dimensions of self-esteem, notably peer tutoring. One point that must be emphasised here is the need to be selective in the messages given to pupils, basing strategies on a clear understanding of the needs of the individuals concerned, rather than simplistic notions of increasing a ‘feel-good factor’ (see also Miller and Moran 2006 for discussion here).

Still focusing on curricular experiences, children’s resilience can also be developed through involvement in simulated role plays, or creative drama. In this way, children are provided with secure exposure to transition related issues and given opportunities to tackle them. Jindal-Snape and Foggie (2006) describe how the child can be given opportunities to experience and engage with risk through creative drama in a supportive and safe environment. Gilligan (2000) also focused on school and spare time activities as important contexts for increasing resilience, one example being during a period of transition and change. Positive school experiences are not only valuable academically, but also socially and developmentally.

Both resilience and self-esteem theories would point to the importance of secure attachments in secondary school—with both adults and peers. It may be worth reviewing the pastoral care arrangements in schools, taking into account the perspectives outlined above. Secondary schools may wish to consider whether there are implications for their systems of guidance. Similarly, attachments with peers might be examined. For example, there could be a system of providing non-stigmatising secure attachments in secondary school, especially for children who come from unstable families. One method, employed in some schools, is via buddy systems, but as we indicate above, there may also be social and personal gains from peer-tutoring arrangements.

The discussion above is necessarily limited in terms of the strategies identified. It is also limited in that it focuses specifically on the role of schools and teachers in enhancing self-esteem and encouraging resilience. However, several of the issues above are of interest and relevance to families too. Moreover, given that the family is one of the most important support networks of a child, it almost goes without saying that primary and secondary teachers need to work with families to support the child in understanding what transition involves. In so doing, all parties can enhance the social and emotional wellbeing of the children.

Implications for Further Research

Many empirical studies employing a two-dimensional model of self-esteem have focused on university students (for example, Tafarodi and Milne 2002; Tafarodi and Swann 2001) and other groups of adults, such as patients suffering from eating disorders (Surgenor *et al.* 2006; Sassaroli and Ruggiero 2005; Bardone *et al.* 2003). It is only recently that such measures have been employed in studies in primary classrooms (see Miller and Lavin 2007; Miller and Moran 2007), helping to illuminate aspects of classroom practice and children’s perceptions. It is important to acknowledge that, unlike work in the area of self-concept, (e.g. Marsh 1989, 1993; Marsh and Ayotte 2003; Skaalvik and Hagtvet 1990) there is as yet little evidence of a two-dimensional model of self-esteem being employed in developmental studies. There is much to be learned here. There is a need also to investigate ways in which teachers can employ such measures to inform future provision, particularly for children identified as being at risk. This involves questions related to the predictive validity of the data collected, and practical issues related to the collection and sharing of information and the monitoring of subsequent provision.

Until such time as a more substantial body of evidence accumulates, the case for a two-dimensional model of self-esteem in school-based research rests largely on beliefs about the fundamental structure of self-esteem, and the explanatory power of the theory.

A separate but related issue concerns a lack of clarity in some aspects of resilience theory—what Robinson (2000) has called ‘conceptual blurriness’. Indeed, the ongoing quest for greater clarity has been noted by several prominent writers. In a critical analysis of resilience, Luthar *et al.* (2000) comment on a lack of consensus about definitions and measurement of key constructs. One of the issues identified is that protective or vulnerability factors have been described—and operationalised—in varied and inconsistent ways.

As we have already pointed out, self-esteem has been identified both as a protective factor and an outcome of resilience. Consequently, individuals with high self-esteem are reported to be more resilient when faced with challenges—but equally, children who survive such challenges are likely to emerge with higher self-esteem. Some readers may feel a sense of unease about what appears to be a circular issue of causality here. At one level, this reflects the dynamic nature of self-esteem; few writers in the area of self-perceptions would dissent from the view that an individual’s self-esteem both influences—and is influenced by—interaction with others in social contexts. In fact, this is mirrored in changing perspectives on resilience, as where Margalit (2004) contrasts older conceptions of resilience as a trait with more recent views where it is seen as a dynamic process of adaptation. Nevertheless, at another level, it seems to us that there is a need for further investigation here also. Luthar *et al.* (2000) highlighted the need to further differentiate ameliorative processes in different conditions of individual and context. We would agree, and there will be value in examining more critically the processes involved in stabilising or enhancing self-esteem under different sets of personal and contextual conditions.

In Conclusion

Clearly primary–secondary transition is a complex issue. It involves ideological issues as well as administrative processes and questions of attainment. It is not just a matter for secondary schools and their feeder primaries; it is a process in which many have an important stake. We have focused primarily on the role played by the formal school system, but an important message is that schools should not neglect the beneficial impact on children of informal support from families, peers and the community. It is important to recognise and take advantage of the natural protective influences which stem from these three ecosystems—even if they can be the source of risk factors as well as protective factors (see Newman and Blackburn 2002 and Tables 1 and 2 above).

In essence, our argument has been that we need to be more aware of the social and personal messages which are conveyed in a range of experiences—experiences which occur with some rapidity in a concentrated period of time. It may be this very concentration that becomes overwhelming for vulnerable children. Several of the issues discussed in this paper may apply to all children, but they undoubtedly have particular importance for those who find the process of transition daunting, or even traumatic. The literature on resilience points to a variety of protective factors which are important in helping children to cope with transition. The internal attributes of the child, a cohesive and supportive family and an external support network in the form of school, peers and community all have a part to play in successful transition. We have highlighted internal attributes, in particular beliefs about worth and competence, as being of central importance.

In their overview of recent changes to middle-schools in USA, Midgley and Edelin (1998) have pointed out there can be dangers if schools focus only on interpersonal relationships when trying to improve experiences for pupils after transition. In essence, this work suggests that self-esteem enhancement is an important concern during the transition process, but not sufficient in itself to ensure successful adaptation. Other factors are important also, not least improvements in attainment which can be brought about by more effective learning and teaching experiences. Our own position is completely consistent with this, and the perspective developed in this article requires that we attend both to the affective (e.g. feelings of worth) and the cognitive (e.g. judgements of competence which come from success in achieving goals).

Indeed, one of the principal benefits of adopting a two-dimensional model of self-esteem is that it avoids the over-simplified perspectives on self-esteem which have characterised many enhancement programmes in the past, and which have been targeted by the ‘anti-self-esteem lobby’ (see, for discussion, Mruk 1999; Miller and Moran 2006). A two-dimensional perspective serves to bring together the learning and the personal elements of school life. It emphasises how achieving one’s goals is fundamental to the development of genuine self-esteem. Accordingly, achievement and self-esteem can be mutually reinforcing, and should not be framed in opposition to each other. (Further support for this view is evident in studies in academic self-concept—see Marsh and Craven 2006, for an overview of the empirical work on the REM, the Reciprocal Effects Model.)

So, what, in brief, are the key implications for practice? We would suggest the following as being priorities for staff in both primary and secondary schools.

1. There is evidence that schools are frequently less concerned with social and personal concerns of children at transition than they are with easing organisational or administrative procedures (see Boyd 2005; Galton and Morrison 2000; Zeedyk *et al.* 2003). Following the main theme of this paper, it is important to see transition as being much more than the rationalisation of organisational procedures and easing of administrative burdens. It is important to identify, and then disseminate more widely examples of good practice, where schools are making genuine attempts to take into account the child’s perspective on the process.
2. The range of discontinuities and challenges which children face has to be recognised, and the potential impact upon feelings of worth and competence must be acknowledged. We believe the issues identified in this paper should help to inform that process.
3. Both primary and secondary schools are in a position to help children who might be vulnerable or at risk (Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2006).
4. Primary schools should ensure that the transfer information which they pass on highlights personal and social factors in addition to details of academic achievement (Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2006). This information should include what is known about the individual’s beliefs about their worth and competence, and the contingencies on which they stake their self-esteem. Given concerns about the reliability of teachers’ judgements in this area (Miller and Moran 2005), there will be value in using standardised instruments which are both economical to administer and easy to interpret. Appropriate self-report forms are freely available (for example, Rosenberg’s SES 1965) or available at minimal cost (Harter’s SPPC 1982). Both of these can supply information about judgements of worth and competence. It will be important for teachers to note also what is known about any external support systems, particularly for those who may be at risk.

5. This more detailed information from primary schools can then be used in secondary school to help support individuals who might be vulnerable or at risk, both when considering the nature of learning experiences and when developing pastoral care provision. There is a growing body of evidence in relation to techniques that can have a positive effect on the self-esteem of pupils. Peer-learning activities have been shown to contribute to enhanced self-esteem; see for example, the meta-analysis by Ginsburg-Block *et al.* (2006), and for evidence specifically related to peer tutoring, Topping *et al.* (2003). Other classroom processes are also known to contribute to gains in self-esteem. For example, studies by Craven *et al.* (1991), Thomas *et al.* (1993), and Miller and Lavin (2007) point to the ways in which formative assessment techniques can be employed by teachers to enhance self-esteem. It is noteworthy that most of these approaches are linked to the development of self-competence in children. The study by Miller and Lavin is of particular interest since the authors specifically employed a two-dimensional measure of self-esteem in their study.

For individuals who might be vulnerable or at risk during primary-secondary transition in particular, it will be important that support is targeted at the appropriate dimension of self-esteem; the information received from primary school should facilitate this. A study by Miller and Moran (2007) has demonstrated differential effects of classroom techniques on feelings of worth and competence. Consistent with what would be predicted by a two-dimensional model of self-esteem, ‘Circle-Time’ techniques led to significant gains in self-worth, whereas a range of efficacy-based strategies employed by teachers resulted in significant gains in self-competence.

The important message here, as in the paper as a whole, is that understanding the two-dimensional model of self-esteem is the key to a more complete understanding—and to the provision of more effective support.

As a final point, we would wish to emphasise that our aim is not the avoidance of risk for children. Discussing resilience factors, Rutter (1987, p. 318) points out,

Protection...resides, not in the evasion of risk, but in successful engagement with it ... [it] stems from the adaptive changes that follow successful coping.

Successful coping is intimately related to self-esteem enhancement: the gain in feelings of competence which follow from meeting new challenges. Avoidance is not the issue; what is important, both educationally and ethically, is that we can help manage risk for those who might otherwise feel overwhelmed during primary–secondary transition—overwhelmed by exposure to a new environment, by being required to make new responses, and by establishing or losing significant relationships—in short, by this challenge of living. Knowledge of the issues highlighted in this paper should enable us to do that more effectively.

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