

**This is me in Grade 9:  
Transition from a middle school to a high school.**

**by Steven David Van Zoost**

**B. Comm., Mount Allison University, 1992**

**B. A., Mount Allison University, 1993**

**B. Ed., Mount Allison University, 1994**

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## **Abstract**

**The purpose of this thesis is to attempt to understand the process of transition from middle school to high school. To develop an understanding I conducted a case study of one group of students as they moved from Grade 8 to 9. As a Grade 8 teacher I wanted to more fully understand the initial concerns of my previous students about: a) the high school's climate, b) their social relations, and c) academics as they moved to Grade 9.**

**I used a qualitative methodology for this research. Data sources included notes from participant observation, questionnaire results, and transcripts from interviews. Educators at the middle school and the high school, students in Grade 9, and these students' parents participated in the research. In the analysis of data four themes developed about the transition process: students' voices during the transition, unclear roles and responsibilities within the school community, perceptions about the Grade 9 teachers, and shifts in curriculum frameworks.**

**Recommendations developed from the analysis: a higher level of parental involvement; a student orientation at the beginning of Grade 9; increased assistance from the Regional School Board and the Department of Education and Culture; and more opportunities for educators to discuss transition concerns. To develop a more comprehensive transition program, I discuss designing a transition team, emphasizing collaboration among the members of the school community.**

## **Dedication**

**This thesis is dedicated to my families:  
nuclear, extended, borrowed, and constructed.**

## **Chapter One: Trainspotting**

... once or twice the conductor alighted to visit the driver in his cabin, to exchange information and plans, communication which could not be signaled by stamping of feet, ringing of bells, or knocking and gesturing. (Frame, 1964, p. 128)

### **Tickets: Problem and Research Question**

The appearance of middle schools has been a recent trend in the Nova Scotia public school system. Their emergence has been erratic, controversial and has had inconsistent support from the Department of Education and Culture, individual school boards throughout the province, school advisory councils and within the teaching community. This unstructured implementation has left educators often skeptical and relatively uninformed about the role of middle schools and their philosophical differences from high schools.

Without differentiating between middle schools and junior high schools, the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture recognizes that "creating schools that are welcoming, inclusive, and caring communities for all students is essential particularly for middle years students who are experiencing so much change in all aspects of their lives" (1997, p. 19). According to the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture (1997) these communities are fostered

through individualizing and personalizing students' experiences, recognizing students needs during the transitions between grades and schools, developing a comprehensive guidance program, integrating peer support programs, providing health services and offering extra-curricular activities. "What matters most is the care in the classroom and in the routine relationships among teachers and students" (p. 22). Such a vision of education suggests an alignment of middle schools with curriculum theories that place the student at the center of their constructions. For example, Pratt (1994) suggests that a curriculum perspective which emphasizes "the development of all aspects of the individual" be termed "individual fulfillment" (p. 14). Posner (1995) uses "experiential" to describe a curriculum framework which is derived from students' experiences. John Dewey (1938) uses the label "progressive" to describe curriculum which recognizes the unique experiences of each student. These types of curriculum theories are foundational to the philosophy of middle schools--to be centered around the developing of students.

By contrast, traditional senior high schools often base their curriculum frameworks in the teaching of specific subjects in order to prepare students for life and work after graduation. The Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture (1998) states that high school

. . .experiences must offer students opportunities to acquire critical employability skills and to develop the skills and attitudes they will need to become lifelong learners. To ensure that Canada remains

**internationally competitive, education systems across the country are striving for more consistency, portability, and universality; for high standards and achievement; and for better access to and use of new forms of technology. (p. 1)**

**To accomplish such educational goals, high school structures organize learning around academic subjects. Such a structure encourages educators to prepare students for life and work after high school graduation by means of mastering academic knowledge. Posner (1995) calls this emphasis on preserving cultural heritage a “traditional” curriculum (p. 46).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Pratt (1994) labels subject-centered curriculum as “cultural transmission”(p. 9).<sup>2</sup> These types of curriculum theory value academic history more than the student’s individual experiences.**

**John Dewey (1938), criticizing such curricula, describes what he terms “traditional” education: “The subject matter of education consists of bodies of information and skills that have been worked out in the past; therefore the chief business of the school is to transmit them to the new generation” (p. 17). Nova**

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**1**

**Posner (1995) describes the foundation of traditional curriculum: “. . . education needed to focus on transmitting the cultural heritage of Western civilization. . . . The textbook would make a common body of facts equally accessible to the children, thereby serving as an antidote for the opinion-dominated newspapers of the day. The teacher, using the lecture-recitation method, would be the driving force in the process and would be responsible for getting students to think about what they read” (pp. 46-47).**

**2**

**Pratt’s (1994) term “cultural transmission” refers more to the teaching of academic subjects than to the transmission of culture: “the role of curriculum, and of schools in general, is to transmit the best products of the intellectual culture. . . . Cultural transmission tends to see curriculum in terms of a specific, and fairly limited, number of intellectual disciplines. The areas of learning most valued are those that tend toward abstraction and generalizability” (p. 9).**

**Scotia students experience these philosophical differences and the structural variations they generate as they move between schools.**

**The purpose of this research is to develop an understanding of the process of transition from middle to high school. I have conducted a case study of one group of students as they make the transition from Nova Middle School, where I am assigned to a Grade 8 teaching position, to Nova High School.<sup>1</sup> The middle school is situated in a corridor of Nova High School, housing Grades 7 and 8 with a distinct staff allowing it to operate independently from the high school. I became interested in studying this transition during the four years preceding this research. At the end of each school year, Nova Middle School has a “promotion board meeting” with all of the teachers present. During this meeting we make decisions about the grade level placements of any at-risk students. Typically, these are students who have not succeeded academically in the middle school, and the staff must decide whether promotion or retention is in the best interest of the student. Each year, I hear my colleagues’ fears of sending an ill-prepared student into Nova High School’s semestered system. The concerns raised are often about the individualized responsibilities in Grade 9, the more intense academic expectations, and the removal of the teaming structure which is apparent in our**

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**1**

**Nova Middle School and Nova High School are pseudo names for the schools involved in this research.**

**middle school.**

**It was during one such meeting that I began to wonder what were the students' concerns about moving to high school. Recognizing that educators and parents may have concerns about the transition, I wanted to include their voices in my research while maintaining the focus on the students' concerns. I wanted to more fully understand students' initial concerns about: a) the high school's climate, b) their social relations, and c) academics when they move from a middle school to a semestered high school structure. Such research would be of value to our school if we were to continue improving the transition process from the middle school to the high school. As a teacher-researcher, I hoped this study would enhance my own, as well as my colleagues' (as participants of the research) understanding of our students' needs.**

**While the findings of this research are not to be regarded as generalizable, it is intended that this case study could be of value to other educators who are identifying similar themes in their work. For example, educators interested in understanding the needs of students in transition, the awareness of parents perceptions of a middle school philosophy, or discussions about collaboration among the members of a school community may find value in this research. Although contexts differ, the findings of this research may speak to other schools, providing guidance for similar questions or offering direction for further research in other situations. At the outset of this case study other high schools in Nova**

Scotia contacted me to ask if I would be willing to research the transition problems they had identified in their schools. Certainly the concern of the transition to high school is not unique to Nova Middle School and Nova High School, nor is this concern relevant only to educators. A better understanding of the move to high school is potentially valuable for all members of the school community.

### **Railway Platforms: A Qualitative Methodology**

I developed a qualitative methodology for researching the population of students that was in transition from Nova Middle School to Nova High School in the Fall of 1998, most of whom I had taught in Grade 8 during the 1997-98 school year. I began by identifying the questions that had led me with curiosity and concern to this research: Did students have issues about the change in school climate? Would they feel safe in the high school? Were they enthusiastic about becoming involved in the high school's extra-curricular activities? What social concerns did the students carry? Would they continue previously formed friendships? Would they feel comfortable meeting new people in the high school? What were the students' academic concerns about moving to high school? Would they feel that the work load was reasonable? Would they feel prepared for Grade 9? Would there be too much homework?

My research aim was not to test an hypothesis and generalize the results, but was rather to explore the school's contexts to more fully understand the

transition process in our school. A qualitative methodology offered an open-ended framework which allowed me flexibility to uncover the students' concerns from a number of angles. Neuman's (1997) description of qualitative research explains much of the rationale for my choice of this research methodology:

Qualitative research uses more of a logic in practice. It relies on the informal wisdom that has developed from the experiences of researchers. . . . It is more of a spiral, moving slowly upward but not directly. With each cycle or repetition, a researcher collects new data and gains new insights. . . . [A cyclical path] can be highly effective for creating a feeling for the whole, for grasping subtle shades of meaning, for pulling together divergent information and for switching perspectives (pp. 330-331).

The cyclical nature of the methodology allowed me to respond to data as it was being generated and therefore provided opportunities to re-examine the students' concerns. I noted in my journal in the middle of September that the methodology seemed to have taken on a life of its own; not only did data come from the methodology, but the methodology responded to the findings in the data. As new questions arose, I could adapt my data production tools to accommodate new directions. For example, concerns which arose from informal conversations with students became leading questions during the student, parent, and teacher interviews. Howe and Eisenhart (1990) state that the methodology of such a non-

positivist<sup>1</sup> approach “must be tied to research purposes, it must accordingly respond to the variety of purposes that exist” (p. 4). The research tools that I chose for my methodology responded to the cyclical nature of my inquiry.

The initial phase of the study involved a process of hypotheses-generating, as I attempted to understand both the context of our school’s transition process and the concerns of the students in transition. Brause (1983) terms this style of research as “exploratory rather than experimental” (as cited in Herrmann, 1987, p. 116). Data sources used to build a framework of understanding were interviews with teachers and the administration, field notes kept in a journal as I engaged in participant observation, and questionnaires completed by students and parents. During this first phase, data production and analysis were done concurrently. I spent afternoons and evenings reviewing my journal, compiling questionnaire results and thinking about the next day’s informal questions. (For a time line showing the data production process, see Appendix A).

As I analyzed the data, a framework of understanding developed. I began to make sense of the data as I found common themes and patterns. Hypotheses

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1

Howe and Eisenhart define their use of the term “non-positivist”: “Philosophers typically use *postpositivism* in a literal sense, and this is what we mean by the term. However, because it seems to mean something much closer to neopositivism in the educational literature, we will use the term *nonpositivism* in its place. By this we mean any view that embraces the heart of the new philosophy of science: that all observation is theory-laden.” (Howe & Eisenhart, 1990, p. 8)

emerged from those themes which contained substantial or unanticipated evidence. Herrmann (1987) describes this experience, explaining that the researcher looks “at the details of the teaching / learning situation in relationship to the larger educational context in order to generate hypotheses, new lenses through which future learning situations may be viewed and, hopefully, more clearly understood” (p. 126). Hypotheses are tentative answers to research questions (Neuman, 1997, p. 123) and the non-linear path of my qualitative research recognized the temporary nature of hypotheses as they emerged. These very tentative hypotheses enabled me to reformulate and better focus further research questions about each of the three stands of my initial research question.

Neuman (1997) describes the relationship between research questions and hypotheses: “The process of developing hypotheses helps a researcher state the research question more precisely. The process is interactive and involves creativity” (p. 123). To illustrate this process consider an hypothesis which developed about the high school’s climate: the students seemed to have more responsibilities in Grade 9. I began to ask more focused research questions as a result of this hypothesis: Did the students *feel* more accountable or responsible? What made them feel this way? Did the students feel that I “babied” them in Grade 8? Data about the students’ academic concerns led to hypotheses such as: Math seemed to have “too much” homework and classes were “too long.” I began to ask more precise questions: Was Math the only subject which had “too much”

homework? Had the students' study habits changed? Did the students find *all* of the classes long? In a similar fashion, hypotheses about the students' social concerns emerged: students were excited about the new class groupings in Grade 9. I began to question if the students missed having a close friend with them in all of their classes. I pursued these research questions in the second phase of the research with a student focus group, parent interviews, the continuation of my research journal, and participant observation. Each component of the methodology is outlined in more detail in Chapter Three.

### **The Engineer: Form**

I struggled frequently with the format of writing the thesis. Herrmann (1987) explains that "ethnographies are written in familiar, often metaphorical, sometimes poetic language" (p. 117). While this research is not an ethnography, some of the same struggles about form might apply to my writing. The first time I noticed my interest in writing this thesis with such a tone occurred when my teenage cousin and I rented and watched the movie Sphere during the research time period. The movie is broken into what felt like chapters, with a title for each phase--not uncommon in movies, but atypical for North American mainstream films. With each "chapter" title, my cousin and I looked at each other in amazement of what was foreshadowed to come. Each new title pulled us deeper into the movie, raising our suspicions and curiosity. It occurred to me to use

allusive sectional titles in my thesis to encourage the reader along and to help construct meaning.

### **Railway Line One: Nova Middle School**

Understanding the unique organization of the schools provides the reader with a lens which could help her or him contextualize my interpretations of the data. Nova Middle School is a school within Nova High School. It operates in the same building, but on a separate flexible block timetable from the high school, with a distinct staff. Recess is held at a different time than the high school's, as are the start and end times to lunch. Nova Middle School is located in an independent corridor of the school and has its own gymnasium, music room, technology education labs, staff room and resource program. Many aspects of the middle school are shared with the high school: guidance responsibilities, administrative responsibilities, the small canteen, student council, outdoor athletic facilities, and a computer lab. The middle school has created its own mission statement (see Appendix B), and professional development opportunities have responded to the unique needs of Nova Middle School's staff and students.

Approximately three hundred students from ages eleven to sixteen comprise the five Grade 7 and five Grade 8 classes. The students travel as a class to each subject area: English, Social Studies, Math, Science, French, Related Studies, Technology Education, Music, Family Studies, Sustained Silent Reading, Personal

Development and Relationships, Physical Education, Homeroom and Exploratory Time. They have approximately nine 35 minute periods in a day. A schedule posted in the homeroom classrooms shows how the six-day cycle rotates. The students meet in the morning in their homerooms to listen to the announcements, “check in” with their homeroom teacher, and get themselves organized for the day. This routine is often appreciated as the students arrive to Nova Middle School from six different feeder schools. Predominantly a rural populace, eighty percent of the students commute to school each day by bus from the surrounding area. Since there is no cafeteria in the building, this creates a large student community during non-instructional time congregating in the classrooms, the hallway and the gym. There are students in our middle school working on individual program plans who need the support of full-time Teacher-Assistants. Others have significant medical concerns, hearing impairments, athletic achievements, musical interests, enrichment needs, and learning disabilities. Teachers work together to try to meet the diverse needs of the students.

Thirteen classroom teachers assisted by a vice-principal, a resource teacher, and a shared guidance counsellor work together to enact the vision of Nova Middle School. It is significant to note that of these sixteen positions, eleven staff members have moved to Nova Middle School within the last four years, and that seven staff members have five years of teaching experience or fewer. The staff, regardless of experience, is anxious to work together in finding, trying and

**evaluating innovations that may benefit the students at the middle school.**

**Energetic and ambitious in nature, the staff has created a cooperative and safe atmosphere for creative developments in the teaching of early adolescents.**

**The Grade 8 homerooms are divided into two teams, a concept discussed in Chapter Two. As there are five homerooms, one teacher (myself) crosses over to both teams. Teaching assignments often include several subjects. For example, my course load includes English, French, Personal Development and Relationships, and Related Studies. I taught all four of these courses to my homeroom students, and French and Related Studies to the other four Grade 8 classes during the 1997-98 school year. While most teachers taught 60 to 90 students, my position was unique in that I got to know most of the 150 students in Grade 8, and my homeroom students exceptionally well.**

### **Railway Line Two: Nova High School**

**Nova High School, with a population of 600 students from Grades 9 through 12, is constructed in several corridors: Nova Middle School is positioned in one corridor, Grades 9 and 10 in a middle corridor which connects to the Grades 11 and 12 section of the building--theoretically. In practice, students from all levels must often pass through the Grade 9 and 10 corridor to reach other school facilities such as the music room, science labs, gymnasium, library, canteen, or the office. The Grade 9 and 10 classrooms are located in the center of**

the school, between two gyms. Outside of each gym, is a natural place for students to “hang out.” Grade 7 and 8 students use the benches outside Nova Middle School’s gym, and high school athletes control the bench outside the senior gym. The Grade 9 students have nowhere to “hang out,” except in their classrooms, positioned between the two ends of the school.

The 150 Grade 9 students are grouped into homerooms alphabetically during the first day of school for registration purposes. They do not meet again in these groups. They begin the school day seated in their first class as they listen to the morning announcements. Before school, students move freely around the classrooms and hallway. No longer tied to a specific homeroom, they seem fluid and monitor all of the rooms to be sure to get to wherever something is “goin’ on.” Each student has an individualized Monday to Friday semestered timetable and she or he attends four 80 minute periods in a day, ensuring that the student will have each of their four subjects every day.

The Vice-Principal of Grade 9 is also responsible for Grades 10 and 11. The staff is not entirely discreet to Grade 9 as three of the teachers also teach other grade level courses. Most of the staff has been recently hired: six of the nine Grade 9 teachers have five or fewer years of teaching experience; two of the more experienced teachers have moved to these Grade 9 positions within the last two years. Each teacher is responsible for delivering a specific course: English, Social Studies, Math, Science, French, Family Studies, Physical Education, or Music.

Computer Related Studies is taught by several Grade 9 teachers. For the past two years, the Grade 9 staff has gotten together on its own initiative to hold "Grade 9 Team Meetings." It is an enthusiastic staff, eager to work together for the students' benefit. Like their students, these teachers are also somewhat displaced; the school has two staff rooms, one in the middle school corridor, and the other in the Grades 11 and 12 area of the building.

### **Changing Trains: The Transition Program**

When I first began teaching at Nova Middle School, the transition to Nova High School was not discussed. After my first year of teaching, I started to invite previous students back to my Grade 8 classroom to talk about their experiences in Grade 9 with my current students. They told stories and gave advice about how to prepare for Grade 9. In my third year of teaching the Guidance Counsellor for Grades 7, 8, and 9 became responsible for initiating this process and it occurred in all of the Grade 8 classrooms. At the time, the middle school conducted a similar process for the transition from Grade 6 to 7: several Grade 7 students were asked to visit their respective elementary schools and speak to their peers about Nova Middle School. This, I felt, was a critical beginning for a transition program. It made me, as a Grade 8 teacher, very aware of the concerns about the transition as I listened to my previous students speak candidly about what they liked and did not like about the transition process, and what strategies they were using in adapting to

the high school.

By the Spring of 1998, the transition program for the participants of this research had four identified components. During the third week in May, the Guidance Counsellor visited each of the Grade 8 homerooms to talk about the timetable and the course selection process for Grade 9. Time was also spent generating questions that the students wanted to ask the Grade 9 Vice-Principal and Grade 9 students. The following week, these questions were asked to such a panel in Grade 8 homeroom classes. During the second week in June, the Grade 8 students spent a morning sitting in Grade 9 classrooms as their future teachers moved from class to class introducing themselves and the course that they would be teaching. Since one of the Grade 9 teachers could not attend school that particular morning, I had the opportunity to participate in this process as I assumed her role. Following this activity, a survey entitled "Evaluation of the Grade 8 to Grade 9 Transition Activities" was created by the Guidance Counsellor and distributed to the Grade 8 students. It was hoped that the results from this survey could be used to improve the transition program in the following year. Finally, in late September of 1998, the Grade 8 teachers met for an afternoon with the Grade 9 teachers to discuss student concerns, provide student backgrounds, and share strategies that had been effective (or not) with specific students.

Throughout this transition program, I could hear myself asking, "Is this of any use?" I felt that the Grade 8 and Grade 9 worlds were so far apart that one

would have to visit them, in order to understand them. Were the comments that I heard from students true or were they the perceptions, the myths, which naturally develop from unfamiliar and exciting circumstances? What was my role as a Grade 8 teacher in the transition process? Are there other initiatives which I could be doing within my own classroom to aid in the transition to high school? For the development of my own teaching, I wondered what I could do as a Grade 8 teacher to make this transition smoother for my students; how could I help them change trains?

## **Chapter Two: Quilt Making**

**Has my Calculus teacher ever heard Ravel? Has my Phys. Ed. teacher ever seen a Gauguin? Has my Chemistry teacher ever read James Joyce? Has my piano teacher ever felt a Rodin?**

**History? Who's History? Some miscellaneous rags on the floor  
Waiting to be picked up and sewn together; quilted education.**

**(Personal journal from Grade 11, 1986)**

**This literature review brings together several topics related to my research question. I begin by tracing the historical roots of junior high school and middle school, and their differences from high school. I then examine research about inter-school communication among educators followed by a discussion of the literature involving student transition. Stitching these pieces together, I use the literature review to look for guidance about the transition process from middle school to high school.**

### **Finding Fabrics: The Emergence of Junior High and Middle Schools**

**Elliot Eisner (1996) states that our school system was "built on an organizational theory that has little to do with the developmental characteristics of growing children" (p. 341). He explains that in the mid-nineteenth century, school became organized into grades, and content was distributed to each of these levels.**

As educators began to understand the developmental needs of children, school organization started to change; school became divided into stages. The dominant structure was to break the twelve years into primary and secondary schools. Power and Cotterell (1981) claim that this design created an abrupt change at the point of transfer to high school, and also isolated “primary school teachers from secondary school teachers, thereby militating against efforts to bridge the gap” (p. 32).

Hansen and Hern (1971) describe the evolution of junior high schools during the early 1900's as a response to the perceived failures of the organization of elementary and secondary schools into eight and four grades respectively. It was “conceived not as a movement to introduce something new into American education but as an expedient endeavor to ease several supposed deficiencies” (as cited in Clark & Clark, 1993, p. 448), including keeping people in school longer. Those needs involved a more challenging curriculum, specialist teachers, provision for individual differences, meeting the special needs of early adolescents and reducing the number of dropout and retained students. Lawrence Cremin (1961) traces the development of junior high schools as a response to a turn of the century educational change: “to include direct concern for health, vocation, and the quality of family and community life” (as cited in Fleming & Toutant, 1995, p. 31).

Junior high schools were established quickly, the first in Columbus, Ohio, in the United States during 1909 and then in Canada: Winnipeg, Manitoba (1918)

and Edmonton, Alberta (1919). These schools began to search for a clear vision of purpose. The functions of the junior high school were well stated between 1938 and 1940 by Gruhn and Douglass (as cited in Clark & Clark, 1993, p. 449). They entailed integration, exploration, guidance, differentiation, socialization and the transition from pre-adolescent education to programs responsive to adolescent youth. The school structure and timetables mimicked those of a senior high school format, as did the teacher expectations of the students. By the mid-sixties, more than 8000 junior high schools had been established in the United States (Power & Cotterell, 1981, p. 33).

However, the functions established by Gruhn and Douglass were not clearly evident in junior high schools. Hansen and Hern (1971) researched the failure of some junior highs (as cited in Clark & Clark, 1993, p. 450) and explained that ability grouping, departmentalization, specialization, low pupil-to-guidance ratios, dissatisfied teachers and the mimicking of senior high schools each had a part to play in the demise of the junior high schools studied. Many principals began to seek new formats to address the needs of early adolescents. Power and Cotterell (1981) report that the "alleged failure of the junior high school to achieve its goals led to advocacy of a 4-4-4 structure (instead of the 6-3-3 pattern) and to the establishment of yet another type of institution, the middle school" (p. 33).

According to George and Alexander (1993) a widely cited definition of middle schools originally came from Alexander in 1968:

. . . a school providing a program planned for a range of older children, pre-adolescents, and early adolescents that builds upon the elementary school program for earlier children and in turn is built upon by the high school's program for adolescence. (p. 5)

This early definition of middle schools proved unsatisfactory as it provided educators with little direction. Hargreaves (1986) identifies the first challenge in establishing middle schools: creating a unique identity. Hargreaves cites a pamphlet published by the West Riding Education Committee in 1967 which explained that middle schools would be:

a *new* departure, a *new* kind of educational and social grouping, and not a *half-way house* between primary and secondary as we have come to use these words. . . These schools must find their own *identity* and must develop their own form of organization and way of working in response to the needs of their children. (p. 4, Hargreaves' emphasis)

To complicate the middle schools' search for identity, staffs were called upon from diverse backgrounds, and support for resolving the divisions between elementary and secondary teachers was "disappointingly sketchy or absent" (Hargreaves, 1986, p. 7). The poorly implemented reorganization of school structures spawned and emphasized the growing divide among educators as they felt compelled to become advocates of either junior high schools or middle schools. This debate created resistance towards middle schools from junior high advocates for nearly four decades.

The choice seemed to be between supporting junior high schools which emphasized cultural motives of educating (such as vocational preparation) or middle schools which emphasized the psychological and social needs of their students (Fleming & Toutant, 1995, p. 37). This choice reiterates the frameworks previously discussed by Posner (1995): traditional and experiential perspectives of curriculum. Often, this choice was not easy, nor clear. Hargreaves (1986) notes that "in many respects, in the top two years [of middle school], they appear to be even more 'secondary orientated' than secondary schools themselves" (p. 14). Both forms of school structures, each intending to aid in the transition from primary to secondary schools, exist today.

Research conducted by Lounsbury in 1991 discusses that "the new middle schools and the old junior high schools were surprisingly alike in actual practice" (p. 68). More recently, Fleming and Toutant (1995) note that the "new school structures essentially embraced the same philosophical and psychological tenets espoused by earlier generations of progressive reformers--only this time in support of defining the transition period in adolescent life from Grades 6 through 8, instead of Grades 7 and 8" (p. 35). Some recognition of the common purposes between junior high and middle school educators has occurred, creating a common discussion ground termed "middle level education."

The National [American] Middle School Association (1995b) defined middle level education as the

**. . . segment of schooling that encompasses early adolescence, the stage of life between the ages of 10 and 15. In order to be developmentally responsive, middle level schools must be grounded in the diverse characteristics and needs of these young people. It is this concept that lies at the heart of middle level education. While grade configuration may be a consideration, the nature of the program provided for young adolescents, wherever they are housed, is the crucial factor. (p. 5)**

**A Nova Scotia educator, Baltzer (1995), explains that a middle school is “centered around the developmental needs of early adolescents; emotionally, socially, physically, and intellectually” (p. 13). Placing the young adolescent learner at the center of the definition gave middle schools an identity which was unique from other secondary concepts of education. Several school boards in Nova Scotia responded by drafting policy statements about middle level education. In 1997, the Middle Level Leadership Team of the Annapolis Valley Regional School Board stated that it is committed to the development and implementation of middle level education and supports:**

- ▶ a philosophy that addresses the varied intellectual, physical, social and emotional development of early adolescents**
- ▶ teams of educators who are knowledgeable about, and committed to teaching early adolescents**
- ▶ a developmentally responsive curriculum and program which is balanced between the cognitive and affective needs of early adolescents**
- ▶ an environment conducive to learning that is positive, safe, supporting and challenging. (p.1)**

**Understanding how the vision of middle level education is organized was researched by Alexander and McEwin (1989) and the Carnegie Council on**

Adolescent Development (1989). These studies report that many of the programmatic visions of middle level education remained to be fully implemented. To assist middle school structuring, the National Middle School Association's documents are frequently used. This we believe: Developmentally responsive middle level schools has "been the most widely cited statement about the education of young adolescents" (National Middle School Association, 1995b, p.1). The content of this book has been modified into a school-based staff survey to assess the implementation of a middle school program. Another document from the National Middle School Association (1996) reports twenty characteristics of exemplary middle schools. This text outlines the importance of the school community, the nature of the curriculum, and the significance of the school's structure in middle level education (see Appendix C to read the twenty characteristics). This document is frequently used by educators to describe effective middle schools.

The National Middle School Association's Research Summary #4: Exemplary Middle Schools (1995a) suggests five characteristic of successful middle schools: interdisciplinary teams, advisory programs, varied instruction, exploratory programs and transition programs. These characteristics help to demonstrate the organizational structures and explore the nature of middle schools. In discussing each of these components of middle schools I have cited, wherever possible, from recent documents produced in Nova Scotia to help define each of

these terms. The texts produced in Nova Scotia are representative of locally produced documents in other provinces, states or school districts such as: The Center of Education for the Young Adolescent. (1991). What should a middle school be?; Cheng, Maisy & Ziegler, Suzanne. (1986, October). Moving from elementary to secondary school: Procedures which facilitate the transition process (Report for the Toronto School Board); Department for Education and Children's Services South Australia. Learning for young adolescents—the middle years of schooling: Information for parents (Brochure); George, P. S. (1988). What is a middle school—really (Brochure from the University of Florida); Osborne, K. (1984). Middle years sourcebook: Some suggestions for the education of early adolescents (Manitoba Department of Education); Wisconsin State Department of Public Instruction. (1993). Preparing for life and work: A Student and parent guide to high school planning (Brochure). Most often these texts are grounded in the works produced by the National Middle School Association. As I discuss each of the five components of successful middle schools recommended by the National Middle School Association (interdisciplinary teams, advisory programs, varied instruction, exploratory programs and transition programs) I make links to educational theory and conclude this section by considering what common ground these five characteristics of middle schools might share.

### *Interdisciplinary teams*

Teaming is a common structure which is used to organize middle schools. The Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture (1997) includes teaming in its document, Current and emerging research on successful junior high schools: The middle years. This document, though using the words “junior high school” in its title reflects many commonly accepted middle school practices.

Teaming, in the simplest sense involves two or more teachers working together in a collaborative environment to provide the best instructional program for a common group of students. . . . A cadre of teachers working cooperatively with each other and a common group of students can build a community of learners where teachers create matches between learning experiences and students’ interests and backgrounds. (pp. 53-54)

By allowing teachers to concentrate their energies on fewer students, teaming reflects a belief in an experiential curriculum framework from which educators are more capable of responding to the students’ previous experiences and understandings. The importance of the quality of students’ experiences in educational settings is discussed by Dewey (1938). He recommended that educators provide continuity and interaction in educational experiences. These experiences of growth demand that educators assume “the responsibility for understanding the needs and capacities of the individuals who are learning at a given time” (p. 45-46). Teaming is one manner in which educators have opportunities to better understand their students’ needs and capacities. Furthermore, as a structure, teaming fosters professional contact and offers

coordinated support for students to respond to identified needs and capacities (George & Alexander, 1993). Connecting this characteristic to Nova Middle School, I questioned whether students sensed the collaborative team efforts of the middle school staff and if consequently they felt more secure in the school. Moreover, I questioned if students would sense the removal of teaming and its benefits as they moved to Nova High School.

### *Advisory programs*

Advisory programs are outlined in the Annapolis Valley Regional School Board's Middle Level Handbook (Draft):

In such programs, a small group of students (not more than twenty) is assigned to a teacher or another adult for regularly scheduled meetings to discuss topics and issues of concern to students. These programs are intended to develop close, trusting relationships between students and adults and ensure that the personal and social needs of students are addressed. Advisory programs can also provide academic support and increase students' engagement with learning. (1997, p. 14)

These programs require that sufficient staff is available to the school in order to provide the desired personal contact outlined in such a program. James (1974) states that "the paramount benefit of advisories is that they constitute the student's first line of belonging--a group one belongs *with* rather than *to*--thus meeting the child's need for a strong affiliation with a group of peers within the school" (as cited in George, Stevenson, Thomason & Beane, 1992, p.55). Advisory programs

are compatible with the educational theories of Dewey (1938) and contemporary theories such as a community of learners. For example, Short & Burke (1991) describe a community of learners and make connections to Dewey's theory of educational experience:

As learners become secure and value their own meaning making, they are more capable of supporting the meaning making of others. Learners become active at offering learning opportunities to others. Just as motivation can be seen as the internal forces supporting the natural learner, invitations are the generative force propelling a community of learners forward. Dewey's criteria for measuring the educative process has been fulfilled. The force of the present learning experience has acted to increase the likelihood that the learners will seek related future experiences. The current experience invites the next. Education is generative. (p. 26).

Educational experiences such as those described by Dewey (1938) and Short & Burke (1991) can be fostered by structures such as advisory programs. These programs can develop a community of inquiry as educators and students work collaboratively together to explore the group's concerns, questions, or interests.

### *Varied instruction*

The Public School Programs (1996-97) from the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture reflects how varied instruction, as referred to by the National Middle School Association, structures essential learning experiences.

The program must provide opportunities for students to

- become aware and use opportunities for learning that exist outside the school

- ▶ **engage in diverse interactions with adults and their peers in curriculum-based contexts that foster the development of interpersonal skills and social maturation**
- ▶ **articulate their own learning needs**
- ▶ **learn with and from one another in a variety of groups**
- ▶ **explore multiple pathways to learning as they work toward achievement of the expected learning outcomes. (pp. B-8 and B-9)**

The National Middle School Association (1995b) similarly advises middle school learning activities to be developmentally appropriate and adapted to individual differences.

The use of varied instruction is supported by educational theories such as multiple intelligences (Armstrong, 1994; Epstein, 1998; Gardner, 1993; Goleman, 1995) and learning styles (Dunn, 1996; Dunn & Dunn, 1992; Dunn & Griggs, 1988; Hoover, 1991). Gardner (1993), in speaking of putting his theory of multiple intelligences into practice, states that

**It is of the utmost importance that we recognize and nurture all of the varied human intelligences, and all of the combinations of intelligences. We are all so different largely because we all have different combinations of intelligences. If we recognize this, I think we will have at least a better chance of dealing appropriately with the many problems that we face in the world. (p. 12)**

Rather than recognizing only the individual teacher's (or the educational system's) dominant understanding of achievement, multiple intelligence theory has encouraged educators to explore the many ways in which students think and express themselves. Practices such as varied instruction allow students with more opportunities to use their multiple intelligences.

Dunn & Griggs (1988) criticize the educational system "because it does not respond to the many different ways in which healthy, normal, motivated students absorb, process, and retain difficult information and skills" (p. 2). Instead, Dunn & Griggs support learning style theories which recognize that students have many different learning preferences which demand of teachers to use a variety of teaching strategies. Dunn (1996) defines learning style as the way in which each learner begins to concentrate on, process, and retain new and difficult information. Middle school professional libraries often contain resources which ground teaching and learning practices in learning style and multiple intelligences theories.

### *Exploratory programs*

According to a presentation by staff members at Evangeline Middle School during the Annapolis Valley Regional School Board's Middle Level Education Conference in January 1998, an exploratory program is a "scheduled program of experiential learning modules offered by staff and volunteers which provide a variety of educational opportunities for students to select and 'explore' new learning experiences" (conference handout). These staff members report that exploratory experiences enhance the school's community and create opportunities to groups of staff and students who share common areas of interest. Furthermore, exploratory programs can capitalize on the unique expertise or interest of a

school's staff (personal conversation with teachers at John Martin School, January 1998).

These accounts of exploratory programs are agreeable with educational literature about a community of inquiry. Short & Burke (1991) report that curriculum *is* inquiry:

. . . learning is inquiry and inquiry is learning. In the past, the roles of researcher, teacher, and learner were always seen in a hierarchical relationship to each other. If we take a collaborative perspective on curriculum, then we have multiple roles available to each of us. . . . Both teachers and children should be involved in learning and researching, in searching out the questions that are significant in their lives.

A second belief is that inquiry questions must be framed by all who are intimately involved in that inquiry. (p. 55-56)

These characteristics of inquiry learning support the structure and intentions of exploratory programs in middle level schools. For example, an exploratory program is derived from an inquiry by a group of learners (including the educator) as they explore questions which interest the group. This could include questions about how to design and make a quilt, developing theatrical improvisation skills, or discussions about how school spirit might be improved. In each instance, the group works together as they inquire into learning possibilities.

### *Transition programs*

The National Middle School Association (1995a) reports that 85% of public school students change buildings to enter a middle school, and expresses that the

transition from middle school to high school is important. MacIver (1990) warns that these transitions are often overwhelming and challenge “the coping skills of some students, negatively affecting their psychological adjustment, self-esteem, and motivation to learn” (as cited in Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture, 1997, pp. 19-20). The Annapolis Valley Regional School Board (1997) reports that:

. . . a strong transition program runs from early Spring and continues into the Fall of the next school year. Transition programs are developed at the school level and may include, but are not limited to pre-visitation slide-shows, school visitation days, “Big Brother / Big Sister” programs, peer discussion panels, question and answer periods with the school counsellors / administrators, invitational letters, teacher coordination and preparation for transition, and parent orientation sessions. (p. 15)

Transition programs demonstrate beliefs in school collaboration and educational communities. Transition programs promote partnerships within a school community, something which is apparent in recent educational literature. For example, DeVillier (1990) suggests that the school community should be highly involved in the curriculum development process and Haynes, Comer, & Hamilton-Lee (1989) report that community involvement enhances a school climate. Sergiovanni (1994) reports that schools should have a more central role in community building, developing relationships, creating common purposes, providing care, and fostering attachments among people in the community. Cibulka & Kritek (1996) support educational movements which coordinate

services among schools, families, and communities as a means of educational reform. Transition programs have the rationale and potential to work towards such a conception of our education system.

The five characteristics of exemplary middle schools outlined in this review suggest an alignment with educational theories such as Dewey's (1938) educational experience, a community of learners, multiple intelligences, learning styles, a community of inquiry, school collaboration, and the importance of educational communities. While the individual needs of adolescent students provide the rationale for middle school programming, the vision of middle schools is enacted by creating a caring learning environment. The concept of care in school programs has been supported by contemporary feminist writers such as Noddings (1992):

We will pretend that we have a large heterogeneous family to raise and educate. . . . How shall we educate them? . . . I will suggest education might best be organized around centers of care: care for self, for intimate others, for associates and acquaintances, for distant others, for nonhuman animals, for plants and the physical environment, for the human-world of objects and instruments, and for ideas. (as cited in Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995, p. 694).

Noddings (1992) suggests that education should be organized around themes of care rather than traditional academic disciplines. I consider that the five characteristics of middle schools (interdisciplinary teams, advisory programs, varied instruction, exploratory programs, and transition programs) are themes (and

consequently structures) of care for middle level students.

Within the middle school literature, the vision of care is often reflected in descriptions of a positive school climate. While recognizing that every school climate is unique, the National Middle School Association provides indicators of positive middle school climates. In This we believe: Developmentally responsive middle level schools (1995) the National Middle School Association writes:

The climate of a developmentally responsive middle school is safe, inviting, and caring; it promotes a sense of community and encourages learning. . . . In a healthy school environment, human relationships are paramount, and all individuals are treated with dignity and respect. . . . The climate encourages positive risk-taking, initiative, and the building of substantive relationships. (pp. 18-19)

What seems apparent to me is that this climate is desirable in any organization of school: elementary, middle, junior or senior high. I question the impact that discussions of middle school philosophy has had on educators re-examining the structure of traditional high schools. Are high school programs developmentally responsive? Is fostering school community less important in the senior high school's learning environment? How much influence does school philosophy and structure have on students' learning experiences? Are there connections between staff morale and school organization? While these issues were not initially viewed as within the scope of this study, they became important to me as I observed and analyzed the transition of students from a middle school to a high school climate.

### **Cut from a different cloth: Senior High School**

Bent and Unruh (1969) report that “the curriculum is the heart of the secondary school” (p.1). The tradition of a content-centered senior high school to prepare students for society (as discussed by Hamilton, 1990) is reflected in the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture’s document, Senior high schools: Comprehensive programming and services (1998):

Today’s high school students will enter a competitive global economy where traditional employment opportunities are limited, the labor market is predicted to be turbulent, and each person may change occupations several times in a lifetime. School experiences must offer students opportunities to acquire critical employability skills and to develop the skills and attitudes they will need to become lifelong learners. (p. 1)

This type of curriculum is often described as “traditional” (Posner, 1995). Dewey (1938) criticizes this “traditional education”:

The traditional scheme is, in essence, one of imposition from above and from outside. It imposes adult standards, subject-matter, and methods upon those who are only growing slowly toward maturity. The gap is so great that the required subject-matter, the methods of learning and of behaving are foreign to the existing capacities of the young. They are beyond the reach of the experience the young learners already possess. Consequently, they must be imposed. . . (p. 18-19)

The dangers of limiting the vision of secondary school curriculum in a framework of cultural transmission are well documented. Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) explain that “the predominantly academic orientation of secondary schools puts a premium on a rather narrow definition of what counts as

achievement and success. . . . Embracing a narrow view of achievement as *academic* achievement creates large rates of failure by *definition*" (p. 27). Brown (1984) reports that over seven national (American) commissions in the last decade have outlined "the failure of secondary schools to meet the needs of all of their students" (as cited in Hargreaves, Earl & Ryan, 1996, p. 9). The Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture recognizes this crisis of senior high schools and suggests that "the constraints of year-to-year promotions, subject scheduling, and pre-determined career blocks must be reconceptualized to focus on flexible, adaptive models of learning and future planning" (1998, p. 17). In this same document, the Nova Scotia government also challenges high schools to recognize and value *all* post-secondary destinations. Forty-eight percent of high school graduates do not plan to attend university and more than 20% are undecided about their plans after graduation or will join the workforce (p. 27).

High schools must respond to the vocational needs of some students as well as to the needs of those who will apply to colleges and universities which are tightening their entrance requirements. Jack McCurdy (1982) explains that "the colleges have made every effort to placate school boards, principals, and teachers, but it is evident that they are telling the schools what to teach in very precise terms" (p. 548). These external pressures on high schools to emphasize academic achievement only reinforce the subject-centered climate which is often encouraged from within the school. Boyd and Crowson (1982) report that "a major stumbling

block in the path of secondary school change is teachers' academic orientation" (as cited in Hargreaves, Earl & Ryan, 1996, p. 27).

Beyond the academic nature of high schools, Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) note two other dominant characteristics of secondary school culture: student polarization and fragmented individualism. The former refers to the grouping of students, often based on academic performance. Without entering the debate as to the value and extent of these groupings, the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture (1998) reminds educators of the tenancy of subject-centered school structures to promote ability groupings, and identifies the creation of inclusive high schools as one of the key challenges and issues for high schools in the future.

Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) use the terminology "fragmented individualism" to explain the demands put on teachers to respond to the many individual students' needs in their classrooms, and the learning climate that this creates in the high school. The Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture (1998) alludes to the difficulties in establishing inclusive learning communities:

Principals, for example, recognize their responsibility for ensuring that appropriate programs are provided for all students in supportive learning environments, but perceive making this goal a reality to be a particular challenge. For example, much work needs to be done at the high school level for students with special needs in terms of both establishing a team process for program planning and developing and implementing individual program plans for the students who need them.

Particular issues for senior high teachers include the time

**involved in individual program planning, the high number of students with special needs among their total student load, their need for more training and expertise in using particular strategies to meet students' individual needs, and a perceived lack of services and supports. (p. 29)**

**Newbill and Stubbs (1997) report that students felt that their high school lacked attitudes which foster a learning environment for all students. The students claimed that they lacked individual respect, acceptance, and opportunities for influence in the school. Findings by Koos (1995) support claims of a reduced response from high schools toward students' personal, social and developmental needs: "while exploration and guidance. . . must continue throughout the full period of secondary education, the obligation for their achievement rests somewhat more heavily upon the lower [middle school / junior high school] than upon the upper unit [high school]" (p. 76).**

**According to Wagner and Sconyers (1996) in a Report from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, parents of high school students are concerned about the school's structure, uncaring teachers, enrichment opportunities and directions for non-college-bound students. Students' concerns about high school were identified in the same study as: the teachers' lack of respect for students, boring classes, safety, and the need for engaging school and extra-curricular activities. These findings suggest to me the possible weight and impact that a traditional curriculum framework of education could have on a school's community. A strong focus on academics can dominate the**

developmental directions of a high school's organization and climate. I could not help wondering how teachers who believe in a student-centered philosophy of education adapt, manage, or survive in structures which promote subject-centered learnings. I also considered the unfairness of generalizing these findings about high school to a specific site. As I began my research, no doubt, the questions and concerns about "academic dominance" in high school classrooms were a part of my observational lens. How students manage the complexities of structural and philosophical changes between schools remained my predominant concern.

### **Quilters' Gossip: Myths Between Schools**

Although there is not a wealth of research about the transition from middle school to high school, common themes emerge from other transitional literature, such as the moves from primary to secondary schools, or from elementary to middle schools which may help provide insight into the transition between middle school and high school. Of interest to me were themes about communication between schools and the staff perceptions which were a result of this lack of exchange. These were concerns which were identified by our staffs at Nova Middle School and Nova High School previous to this research.

Power and Cotterell (1981) note communication difficulties which can occur between primary school and secondary school teachers. They identify common concerns about the students' transition through a process of analyzing

field notes which were taken during staff meetings and orientation days and by interviewing teachers at both levels. The teachers involved in the research reported that:

the transition between primary and secondary schools represents an unnecessarily sharp break in the educational experience of children, particularly those (e.g. slow learners, disadvantaged children) who lack the intellectual skills and defenses needed to cope with the demands of high school life. Many primary teachers believe that the curriculum of the high school is too demanding, too academic and too inflexible to cater for individual differences. (p. 6)

In addition, the primary teachers also explained that they were unfamiliar with the high school's curriculum syllabus. Uninformed about the high school's culture, the primary teachers showed concern about the students relating to several different teachers and the influence of the older children at the high school.

Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) state that elementary school culture is built on care, and this is "bound up with two other arguably less desirable conditions-- ownership and control" (p. 25). The concerns expressed by primary teachers are often reflective of their care and desire to protect their previous students' welfare at secondary schools.

Some of the primary teachers interviewed by Power and Cotterell (1981) "resented the pressure from high school to revert to repressive methods of teaching such as rote learning of spelling and grammar" (p. 7). Power and Cotterell conclude that,

for the most part, primary teachers are very sensitive to and defensive about what they see as attacks on their professional competence. They believe . . . that most of the problems of transition experienced by children stem from the failure of the high schools to adjust their programs to meet the spectrum of children which now enter high school (p. 7).

In the same study, secondary teachers, as did their primary counterparts, expressed concern about curricular differences between primary and secondary schools. The high school teachers were not, however, as concerned about the students having several different teachers. Their concerns centered around school structural limitations: the size of the high school population, the lack of resources. Although many secondary teachers were adapting the curriculum to meet student differences, they felt pressured by society which expects them to be “formal, subject-centered and competitive” (Power & Cotterell, 1981, p. 5). The researchers report that “. . . secondary school teachers were somewhat less successful than their primary counterparts in devising environments matched to the students” (p. 35), and stress the importance of high school teachers to re-examine their teaching strategies. Smedley and Willover (1981) put it this way: “student control in elementary schools is more humanistic than in secondary schools, where it is more custodial” (as cited in Hargreaves et al., 1996, p. 23). Although this research illuminates the transition between primary and secondary schools, the accounts about inter-school communication and perceptions speak to the transition from middle schools to high schools: staffs from different school levels need to

more fully understand each other's culture.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) Committee Council on Middle Level Education (1983) reports that the interactions of middle level and high school staffs are not as successful as those between elementary and middle schools. The committee attributes this to the hiring process of early middle school grade teachers--they were predominantly former elementary teachers. This report suggests that principals from middle schools and high schools should work together with district administration to increase communication between staffs. Without this interaction, judgements such as "the middle level is not getting students ready for the high school" quickly develop (NASSP, 1983, p. 4). Maxine Greene (1996), while not referring specifically to contexts of inter-school transitions, suggested that "the more continuous and authentic personal encounters can be, the less likely it will be that categorizing and distancing will take place" (p. 253). Unfortunately, these communication links are often undervalued and/or neglected.

It is no surprise that transitional research examines school cultures to attempt to articulate the differences between middle schools and high schools (Hargreaves, 1986). It is critical to define the perceptions between school levels, the myths, if they are to be de-constructed. Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) warn that student and teacher myths about transition should not be belittled or eliminated as they "serve to transmit important warnings in a context of high

emotion and low information" (p. 38). Removing these preconceived judgements and defensiveness between middle school and high school teachers, parents and students is the predominant purpose for collaborative transitional planning. As I read about the research of school cultures and that of transition programs, common themes emerged from the literature: moving between school cultures, the phases of the transition, and family support. I discuss each of these themes in the next section.

### **Looking for Patterns: Common Themes in Transitional Research**

#### *Moving between school cultures*

A common theme found in transitional research is the examination of school cultures, and what it means to move between cultures. Measor and Woods (1984) researched the experiences of students moving between schools. They report that this transition can sometimes be traumatic because transfer to secondary school involves not one status passage, but three. It involves:

- ▶ the physical and cultural passage of adolescence itself that we call puberty;
- ▶ the informal passage within and between peer cultures and friendship groups where different kinds or relationships are experienced and expected;
- ▶ the formal passage between two different kinds of institutions, with different regulations, program demands, and teacher expectations. (as cited in Hargreaves & Earl, 1990, p. 27)

Hargreaves, a leading author about school cultures, argues that switching schools

is not just about moving between institutions, "but to change communities--each having its own assumptions about how students learn, how knowledge is organized, what form instruction should take, and so forth" (Hargreaves & Earl, 1990, p. 28). Ahola-Sidaway (1988) describes the organizational cultures of elementary school and high school as "Gemeinschaft-like" and "Gesellschaft-like." She used these metaphors to explain the differences between the school communities:

Gemeinschaft [elementary school] is characterized by permanence and intimacy, little division of labor, and a high degree of social integration that brings about a strong sense of community identity. Communal interests take precedence over individual interests.

Gesellschaft [high school] is characterized by transiency, impersonality, anonymity, and a great division of labor and specialization of function. People co-exist independent of each other; and relationships are contractual. Individual interests, as opposed to communal interests, predominate. (p. 6)

Other researchers examine the responses from students as they move between communities; is there a culture shock? VanSciver (1985) not only points out the sharp differences students experience as they move from middle schools to high schools but also questions educators' professional responsibilities towards these students in transition:

The difference in philosophies of education frequently practiced in these two different buildings [middle schools and high schools] coupled with a lack of articulation between the staffs who work in them results in what may best be defined as blatant educational malpractice. The resulting disruption in the continuity of the experiences of the students who pass from the middle school to the

high schools manifests itself in a near catastrophic adjustment phase for these students. (as cited in Marshall, 1992, p. 26)

Recognizing this dilemma, Wells (1996) followed students from their Grade 8 year at a progressive middle school to Grade 9 at a traditional high school in a two year study. While her research follows literacy instruction and attitudes between the schools, Wells also observes sharp contrasts between the schools' cultures. Often, these cultural differences influenced the teachers' instructional methodologies and Wells (1996) records what happened as students adapted to the high school:

... most of them began to realize that they weren't at Meadowbrook [the middle school] anymore and started reorienting their energies. They found out what they had to do and, for the most part, did it. Class work was nearly entirely textbook-driven, and there was little opportunity for the kinds of writing Meadowbrook students had come to expect in school. Reading consisted of "looking" for answers to textbook questions or finding vocabulary words. Vocabulary, which was easily tested, dominated instruction. Classes were often boring, and one student's lament--"I have so much to learn and I'm stuck here in this class"--summed up the frustrations of many. With few exceptions, students felt little connection to their teachers or to the work that was required of them. Peer friendships sustained them, and the Meadowbrook students became part of the flow. As Monica explained, "People come. People graduate." (p. 133)

Wells reports her great disappointment in the skills which were lost in the transfer to a high school culture. Her questions about educational concerns during school transitions reflect the complexities of moving between cultures: "Where to begin? Whose goals? Whose values? Whose vision? Where does leadership fit in?" (1996, p. 176) These questions deserve much attention and research interest for

future understandings about moving between school cultures.

In an attempt to help school communities respond to questions such as those raised by Wells and to understand the difference among elementary, middle and high school cultures, the Center of Education for the Young Adolescent (1991) and Paul George (1988) through the University of Florida produced information brochures. These documents summarize some of the issues explored earlier about middle schools and high schools such as curriculum, teacher organization, schedules and student groupings (see Appendix D).

### *Phases of Transition*

Phases of the transition process is another common theme found in the research literature. Measor and Woods (1984, pp. 46-52) identify a "honeymoon period" at the beginning of the high school year where teachers spend a lot of time introducing the routines of the new school and student excitement and readiness is at an all time high. According to these researchers, difficulties student experience during this phase include not feeling comfortable enough yet to ask their teachers questions, discipline issues (often due to a lack of attentiveness), and not fully comprehending the class timings or schedule. Beatrice Ward (1982, p. 19) suggest that her findings were perhaps influenced by a honeymoon period, and concluded that the early period in high school might be the "the most satisfying period" in the transition time frame.

Measor and Woods' (1984) longitudinal study reports that as students become more comfortable in the high school climate their personal concerns become more important to them. Furthermore, students begin to change their appearance to look more like "high school" students (p. 52). Anxieties during the transition are short-lived according to Hargreaves et al. (1996, p. 38). These researchers warn about the possible long-term dangers of the students' high expectations towards high school not being fulfilled during the honeymoon period and consequently turning school experiences sour:

The tragedy is that this anxiety passes so quickly, that students adjust so smoothly to many of the uncomfortable realities of secondary school life. These realities, we have seen, can restrict achievement and depress motivation especially among the less academic, sowing seeds for dropouts in later years. (p. 214)

### *Family Support*

A final thread of research examines the role of students' families during the transition to high school. Students' socioeconomic background is reported to be linked to the parent's involvement with their child's education. Likewise, parents with a higher income level are more likely to have made contact with, and have more accurate knowledge about the school, and its transition activities. Consequently, these socioeconomic differences among students influence a school's delivery of a transition program (Baker and Stevenson, 1986; Rice, 1997; Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Smith, 1997).

### **Loose Stitches: Recommendations for Transitional Programs**

Many researchers focus specifically on the transition process to high school and its impact on students. Kathleen O'Rourke (1990) advises students to be prepared for the rise in stress and social pressure which accompany the move to high school. Likewise Mertin, Haebich and Lokan (1989) report an overwhelming effect on students' anxieties during the transition to high school. Themes of fear, anxiety, self-doubt, excitement, anticipation, confusion and wonder among students moving to high school are reported by Capelluti and Stokes (1991, p.19). Cooke (1995) reports specific student concerns during the move to high school to include: less guidance from teachers, more teachers to deal with, an impersonal school, complicated schedules, more and different students, lack of time to spend with family and friends, the stress from tests and examinations, new expectations, and grading differences at the high school level.

Sierer and Winfield (1988) demonstrate the importance of lowering students' anxieties and for students to feel comfortable in their high school--their research reports that students who were more positive in their attitude towards school achieved greater academic success. Furthermore, Kadel (1994) reports that students who were more involved in a high school's activities were more likely to succeed and remain in school (p. 24). Given what these researchers report about the importance of students' level of comfort and involvement in their high schools, the transition process could be instrumental in fostering an inviting climate.

Marshall (1992) and Mayer (1995), recognizing the anxiety created when students moved from a middle school to a high school, suggest that transition programs are critical to a student's comfort and success. Roderick (1992) reports that "a link exists between high school drop outs and the difficulty that these students had experienced in making the transition from one level of schooling to another" (as cited in Marshall, 1992, p. 28). Responding to claims such as those by Marshall (1992), Mayer (1995), and Roderick (1992) about the significance of transition programs, many researchers examine the effects of transition programs and their relationship with future student success.

The BRIDGE program, a transition program for at-risk middle school students moving to high schools in Hartford, Connecticut, was evaluated in 1991. These researchers report that students felt a heightened sense of control over their lives after one year in the program. This program offered at-risk students special incentives to continue their education including early promotions from Grade 7 to Grade 9 and possible job internships while enrolled in high school. Students reported an increased "connectedness" with the school, and 65% of the at-risk students involved in the study were successfully promoted to the next grade level.

Smith (1997) reports that programs that assist students with the transition from middle school to high school have a measurable impact on students' high school success. Smith's study surveyed 7,924 students from 702 middle schools as they moved to high school, and then again four years later. Data from parent,

teachers and schools, taken from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (1988, 1990, and 1992) were used by Smith. Smith felt that students who were involved in a transition program that involved students, parents and teachers were less likely to drop out of high school and performed better academically. Smith reports that "these effects persist after family, demographic, student, and other middle school characteristics were taken into account" (p. 150).

A transition initiative was made in 1993 by the Wisconsin State Department of Public Instruction. Recognizing difficulties of the transition to high school a guide for parents and students was published to help prepare for the transition to Grade 9. This document focuses on career planning and course selection at the high school level and introduces readers to the subject-centered philosophy of Wisconsin high schools.

Another example of a transition initiative is provided by DaGiau (1997) who describes a comprehensive guidance program for students entering high school. This program, delivered by a senior high school guidance counsellor, fosters students' self-awareness and self-acceptance. Working with large group, small group, and individual guidance sessions are DaGiau's recommendations for implementing a transition program.

Unlike the previous examples of transition initiatives, Capelluti and Stokes (1991) discuss the role of educators. They offer suggestions to high school teachers to respond to the needs of students arriving from a middle school: use

actively engaging learning activities, encourage students to think and work independently and cooperatively, use a wide range of class activities, reinforce students' sense of responsibility, provide praise and recognition, and accept the students for who they are (p. 21).

The initiatives of the BRIDGE program (1991), Wisconsin State Department of Public Instruction (1993), DaGiau (1997), and Capelluti and Stokes (1991) are examples of responses from members of the school community working independently: working with specific at-risk students, creating a brochure, a guidance counsellor's initiative, and providing suggestions for high school teachers. Other visions of school transition activities involve the members of the school community working together to create a transition program. For example, a report written by Hargreaves and Earl (1990) through the Ontario Ministry of Education

outlined six broad areas of reform efforts designed to 'improve the experience and consequences of transition.' The first four deal with easing the process of transition from elementary to secondary schooling. They include providing liaison and continuity between elementary schools and the secondary schools they feed to meet the needs of transferring students: developing systems of planning, communication, and joint work between elementary and secondary schools; developing record keeping methods so that teachers may exchange information between school levels; and, providing orientation programs to help ease the transition. The remaining efforts focused on institutional reorganization and secondary school restructuring. (as cited in Fleming & Toutant, 1995, p. 36)

Hargreaves continued to promote school reform (1996) and is perhaps Canada's

leading educator in the transition process between middle schools and high schools. Hargreaves emphasizes the importance of inter-school collaboration and transition programs.

Given what has been identified by Hargreaves and Earl (1990), the Evaluation of the BRIDGE program (1991), Marshall (1992), Mayer (1995) Smith (1997) and VanSciver (1985) about the complexity of transition programs, important questions need to be asked. For example, who should be responsible for these transition programs: the middle school? the high school? the school district? teachers? administrators? guidance counsellors? This is a complex question due to the existing diversity of school structures and relationships.

Power and Cotterell (1981) assert that the school district should establish curriculum committees to bridge the gap (p. 37). The NASSP (1983) recommends joint planning between the high school and middle level staffs, emphasizing that "the upgrading of practice at the middle level is not the only action which is necessary to improve articulation of programs between [middle level and high school]" (p. 5). Similarly, Kadel (1994) reports that communication between the educators of middle schools and high schools is the key to improving the transition process (p. 24). It has also been argued that collegiality between high schools and the staffs of their feeder schools is what is necessary (Hargreaves & Earl, 1990, p.89). Marshall (1992) outlines a "Smooth Move Committee," its participants, leadership, functions, program, implementation and effect. This committee

consists of teachers, counsellors and administrators and recommends the involvement of parents in the transition activities. Cooke (1995) and the NASSP (1996) suggest that parents should be included in such planning committees. Regretfully, there has been little research conducted to shed light on the complex difficulties of assigning the implementation responsibilities of transition programs. Middle schools, high schools, school districts, administrators, guidance counsellors, teachers, students and parents are all viable leaders or partners in conducting transition programs, yet who should assume the responsibility for initiating such efforts remains unclear.

Recently, Smith (1997) observes that partial transition programs have no independent effect on students' performance. It would appear that if transition programs are to be effective, they must be comprehensive and well implemented. Many common transition program activities have been used and researched. From the schools in Smith's (1997) study, she reports that the most common transitional activity from middle level to high school was for the high school's guidance counsellor to meet with the Grade 8 students. Eighty-three percent of high schools with extensive transition programs and 74% of the schools with partial transition programs reported this practice. The least common practice was a "Big Brothers / Big Sisters" initiative (15%). Smith also reports that high schools with partial transition programs often focus their efforts solely on students, while high schools with more developed programs also involve parents and teachers. These latter

**schools reported more support from parents and more positive teacher relationships within a staff.**

**The extent of a school's transition program is often determined at the site level. Reports from Capelluti & Stokes (1991), Cooke (1995), Cramp (1987), DaGiau (1997), Power & Cotterell (1981), Hertzog & Morgan (1998), Kadel (1994), Kaiser (1995), Lee (1978), Marshall (1992), Mayer (1995) and the NASSP (1985) provide valuable resources for choosing activities in a transition program. I have organized these suggestions into five categories: activities for staff, Grade 8 student activities, collaborative activities for Grade 8 and 9 students, Grade 9 student activities, and parent activities. These suggestions can be found in Appendix E.**

### **Hanging the quilt**

**What pieces of fabric would I take from the research literature into my study? What textures would I see at Nova High School which would remind me of other educators' understandings of the transition process? The professional literature proved to act as both a lens and a mirror to my observations during the research. To date, most of my efforts to help students prepare for high school have been concentrated within my classroom. I found the quantitative research done by Simms and Blyth (1987) both affirming and encouraging. By surveying early adolescents, their findings report that the "most important resources for a**

successful transition are a high initial self-esteem, a high self-perceived peer regard, and a high self-rating of one's looks" (p. 340). I am encouraged to know that as a Grade 8 teacher I can help shape some of these characteristics in my students to help them be better prepared for the transition to high school.

My vision of transition activities moved from my classroom towards a larger school community program as I read other educators' initiatives. The research design for this study evolved with my increased perspective to include not only students but parents, administrators, and colleagues in this study. Because of the literature, I realized the scope of this study needed to involve the school community at large in order to better understand the students' concerns. The methodology that I designed would have to be structured enough to incorporate many voices, but fluid enough to allow time to listen and respond.

The research literature made me curious about what I would question during the research; what would challenge my current understandings? As I sit in Grade 9 classes, would questions about the importance of understanding school culture appear obvious? Would I wonder if my teaching methodologies, rooted in social learning, would be disrespected by some of the Nova High School staff? Would I think that I had somehow participated in what VanSciver (1985) terms "blatant educational malpractice" by not preparing students enough for more subject-centered classes? Questions such as these which arose from the literature review reflected my own concerns about the transition process and I became more

curious about my original research question: what would the students identify as their concerns during the transition process to Nova High School. The questions which arose from the literature review fueled my need to conduct this research--to visit Nova High School, to share threads between the middle school and the high school.

### Chapter Three: Story Telling

She told Lily this story in order to find out if it was true . . .  
Frances needs to say a story out loud to divine how much  
truth runs beneath its surface. (MacDonald, 1997, p. 321)

#### Preface: Overview of the Methodology

To more fully understand students' initial concerns about: a) the high school's climate, b) their social relations, and c) academics when they moved from a middle school to a high school, I chose a case study format for the basis of my research design. As such, Yin (1984) explains that the case study has:

. . . at least four different applications. The most important is to *explain* the casual links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies. A second application is to *describe* the real-life context in which an intervention has occurred. Third, an evaluation can benefit, again in a descriptive mode, from an illustrative case study--even a journalistic account--of the intervention itself. Finally, the case study strategy may be used to *explore* those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear single set of outcomes. (as cited in Lancy, 1993, p. 140)

Though not intending to fulfill all of Yin's applications in their entirety, these are the premises on which I began my research. Burgess (1985) offers another basis to examine the construction of my methodology. He reports four characteristics of qualitative research: the researcher works in a natural setting, studies may be designed and redesigned, the research is concerned with social processes and with meaning, and data collection and data analysis occur simultaneously. These

characteristic are entwined in this chapter in the descriptions of the data production methods and of the data analysis. However, it may prove useful to briefly describe my understandings of these characteristics and provide a framework in which the methodology may be viewed.

*The researcher works in a natural setting*

This case study examines school-based questions, and therefore, the research was conducted exclusively at Nova High School (with the exception of one phone interview). I observed the student participants in the “natural setting” for these questions, the high school. Following phenomenological footsteps, I attempted to understand, not discover. Lancy (1993) describes the phenomenological researcher: “Operating like the natural historian, the researcher observes, records, classifies, and concludes, seeking, wherever possible, to capture the reality of the *subjects* [participants] and not only his or her own reality” (p. 9). When I interviewed teachers and administrators, we remained in their classroom, or moved to an agreed upon office space in the building. Researchers are often limited in their ability to create natural settings. I was fortunate to be welcomed as a researcher into classrooms by Nova High School’s teachers, but as such I was visible to my colleagues and the students as that researcher, perhaps disturbing the “natural setting.”

*Studies may be designed and redesigned*

I enjoyed the flexible nature of this methodology as recommended by Marshall and Rossman (1989) as it responded to arising opportunities in the research. Although the tools were planned in advance of the study their timing, wording, and sometimes sequencing remained fluid. As I reviewed the data I gained a better understanding of when a specific tool could be more effective. Sometimes I used a tool when unexpected opportunities arose, such as a teacher's preparatory period. Often, data collected from one tool helped to guide the directions of subsequent tools. Stake (1995) describes the importance of this flexibility in qualitative research:

... [qualitative researchers] emphasize placing an interpreter in the field to observe the workings of the case, one who records objectively what is happening but simultaneously examines its meaning and redirects observation to refine or substantiate those meanings. Initial research questions may be modified or even replaced in mid-study by the case researcher. The aim is to thoroughly understand [the case]. If early questions are not working, if new issues become apparent, the design is changed. Malcomb Parlett and David Hamilton (1976) called it *progressive focusing*. (pp. 8-9).

*The research is concerned with social processes and with meaning*

Stake (1995) reports that most contemporary qualitative researchers have followed Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln (1982) in their constructivist view of research: knowledge is constructed rather than discovered (p. 99). Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe a constructivist methodology offering guidance into the

nature of constructivist inquiry:

**The variable and personal (intramental) nature of social constructions suggests that individual constructions can be elicited and refined only through interaction *between and among* investigator and respondents. These varying constructions are interpreted using conventional hermeneutical techniques, and are compared and contrasted through a dialectic interchange. The final aim is to distill a consensus construction that is more informed and sophisticated than any of the predecessor constructions (including, of course, the etic construction of the investigator). (p. 111)**

The methodology of this research similarly attempts to understand and articulate my interpretations of the move from middle school to high school. As I interacted with students, parents and educators during the research, I hoped to construct a more informed understanding of the transition process with the participants.

*Data collection and data analysis occur simultaneously*

Burgess (1985) describes the intent of the data analysis I used in this research: "Data are not. . . collected to support or to refute hypotheses but categories and concepts are developed during the course of data collection. The theory is therefore not superimposed upon the data but emerges from the data that are collected. It is this style of work that has been advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967)" (p. 9). Not all of the data were collected at the same time. For example, each tool demanded a unique time-frame which often overlapped with other tools. Each night as I analysed the data accumulated from multiple sources I was able to make observations which led to further data production choices.

These directions provided support for previously noticed patterns, or led to new findings. The process that I used to analyze the data is described in the section entitled "Rhythm: Data Analysis."

### **Literary Techniques: Data Production**

Several data production tools were used in this research: participant observation, a research journal, a student questionnaire, a student focus group, interviews with teachers and administrators, a parent questionnaire, and interviews with parents. The implementation of these tools sometimes overlapped. For example, on the same day as the student questionnaire was administered, I also conducted participant observation, and wrote in my research journal. Each of the data production methods is discussed separately in this section.

#### *Characterization: Participant Observation*

Bogdan (1972), Jacobs (1970), and Jorgensen (1989) define participant observation as an overall research design (as cited in LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 196). This is not how I use the term in this research. For this study, I refer to participant observation as one of several methods of generating data. Marshall and Rossmann (1989) define participant observation in the manner in which I use the term in this thesis:

**Participant observation is a special form of observation and demands first hand involvement in the social world chosen for study. Immersion in the setting allows the researcher to hear, see, and begin to experience reality as the participants do. Ideally, the researcher spends a considerable amount of time in the setting, learning about daily life. (p. 79)**

**I was present at Nova High School during the month of September 1998 to directly observe the Grade 9 students who were entering the high school's semestered system. This persistent observation helped provide a description of the transition process. The data collected during this time were recorded in my research journal. Informal interviews with students during non-instructional time often led to the most insightful revelations. Patton (1980) terms this "informal conversational interviews," a phenomenological approach where the researcher has no presuppositions about what might emerge or what might be of importance from the onset of the conversation (p. 198). Often, I would sit down at a table joining a group of students and listen, and they would include me in their conversations naturally. I also used passive observation during class time, observing students without interaction, as they adjusted to new groupings, new teachers, new understandings.**

**Spradley (1980) describes five degrees of involvement in participant observation: nonparticipation, passive, moderate, active and complete (p. 58). I find it difficult to classify my involvement by his categories, as my role often moved to various levels of involvement, depending on the situation. At best, I feel**

comfortable being labeled with “moderate participation,” according to Spradley (1980): “the ethnographer seeks to maintain a balance between being an insider and an outsider, between participation and observation” (p. 60). At first, I had a difficult time defining my role:

The teacher as researcher is an interesting role. I can see my observations being influenced by me trying to define myself--being unobtrusive: blending; wallpaper. Not allowing my face to be read--that's hard. I am trying to keep an unbiased face for the students. No reactions. My previous students look to me *for* reactions, especially those that know me *really* well--they know my thinking and what I would do / say... think. It will be hard to be invisible. (research journal, the first day of school)

In a class, the teacher explains that *why* a certain principle is true is what's interesting and a student from my homeroom last year turns to look at me and smiles, recognizing that *I* believe that *why* questions are what makes life interesting and fun. I have no idea what this student thinks about the principle, but she's busy making comparisons and connections from past and present rapidly--how much is my presence influencing her thoughts? (research journal, second day of school)

I soon learned that I had multiple roles to play: an observer, a previous teacher, a participant in classes, and a non-teaching staff member.

As an observer, I was constantly trying to record observations in my head to write down later, more discreetly. I empathized with Wells (1996) when she stated, “I didn't want to be viewed solely as a researcher with a yellow pad, either. I wanted students to accept me as a part of their world” (p. 11). Yet, I discovered that the mere idea that I was constantly observing the students seemed to lead some students to meta-cognitive thinking. For example, students often approached

me with data about their transition process without verbal prompting. It was as if they too, became observers of their transition process because I was visibly keeping it in the forefront of their minds.

As a previous teacher I believe, as did Wells (1996), that the students wanted to maintain my status (especially at first) as their teacher: "There was going to be enough 'new' in high school, and they wanted to keep *me* the same" (p. 14). Sometimes in class, I was asked for help. Often it would be for something that they knew I could do, for instance, helping students with a creative writing assignment in Science class. More often though, it was I who had a hard time breaking the role of "previous teacher." I was constantly, and perhaps overly, concerned about several of my previous students as I watched their study habits and attitudes change. On September 10<sup>th</sup>, I wrote in my journal about a former student not having completed her homework. This, as I explained in my journal, was unusual for her and disconcerting for me. I strategically placed my page so that the student would be able to read what I was writing. I was hoping that she would see my concern, and then I would not have to betray my "non-interference" role by confronting her directly. The need for me to reveal my concern to her was overwhelming. Similarly, watching another student's classroom attitude move sharply towards complacency, I recorded:

[specific student] doodles incessantly. How is he going to succeed this year? Is he committed to it? I worry. It's really difficult to let go of my previous students. Is my role over? I don't know. I think

it is, but I can't wash my hands of them yet. I feel strongly responsible for them, yet I know I shouldn't / can't (research journal, September 10).

These insights would not have occurred, however, if I had not known the student as well as I did.

The greatest advantage of having a strong rapport with the Grade 9 students was that they readily involved me into their culture. I was frequently invited to go to classes, "Come with me to Math, Mr. Van Zoost." They seemed to enjoy watching me as I got restless sitting for a long period of time, doodled, borrowed paper because I forgot some, or asked when the recess bell was going to ring.

Wells (1996) experienced a similar reception in her research:

I noticed, in some respects, that the kids were treating me more as an equal. They'd liked me in the eighth grade and included me in their conversations and activities, but I'd come into *their* community; *they* had been the hosts. It was different at the beginning of their ninth grade; we were entering foreign territory together. We were *all* outsiders, and we *all* needed to establish rapport with each other in the new environment." (p. 13)

A group of students from my last year's homeroom tried to organize a weekend trip to play *Splatshot*<sup>1</sup> together, and insisted that I go along. Flattered as I was, I joked with them, saying that "my mother wouldn't let me." They continued to persist and I was relieved when the potential date was rained out.

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1

This is a game played between two teams in an outdoor maze. Using plastic guns to shoot balls of paint at your opponents is often more important than the actual purpose of the game, to steal objects from the opposite team's fort.

Another example of how students invited me into their culture was provided by one girl as she tested my role as an impartial researcher. I recorded this experience in my research journal on September 29<sup>th</sup>: “Last year you wouldn’t let me draw on my hands. Can I borrow your pen?” (and she begins, with giggles, to draw on her hands).” My role in the school often moved towards being a participant in classes with the students. I “borrowed” and “loaned” lots of gum, chips, and stories. I listened to students’ problems as an adult, but did not have any “direct” responsibility for them. I enjoyed this unique position. I learned about what happened on the weekends, how to skip classes, how to arrive to class late (after the homework was checked by the teacher) and not get in trouble, was asked “Should I say ‘yes’ to a date?”, “Should I start smoking?”, if fighting with parents ever works; basically, I listened and observed. It was a joy for me to be with them.

As a teacher in the school without a classroom I was rather displaced. I had no mailbox in the office, so I missed all of the school’s daily memos and felt out of touch with the day-to-day operations of the building. I had no place to put my coat, no key to any classroom, no regular access to a computer (a colleague generously allowed me to work in his room whenever possible), and did not feel that I “belonged” in the Middle Level Staff room. When I conducted interviews I moved from room to room. I borrowed my previous classroom for the student focus group session, and the Guidance Counsellor’s office for other interviews.

*Free Verse: My Research Journal*

Most of my professional growth has occurred as a direct result of my reflections in my teaching journal. It is not the daily account of insights which bears significance, but the re-examination of data over time. Common themes, joys, concerns, or strategies present themselves in a slow unwinding manner which has re-directed my teaching practices. The insights which I gained from my journal during this research period enhanced the description of the transition to high school. Furthermore, the journal helped to clarify my distinct contribution to the collection and analysis of the data.

I recorded in my journal both during participant observations and in solitude. Sometimes I would leave a congested setting to write about a situation which I felt was important to record immediately. Stake (1995) recounts the importance of keeping a detailed account of participant observation: "During observation, the qualitative case study researcher keeps a good record of events to provide a relatively *incontestable description* for further analysis and ultimate reporting. He or she lets the occasion tell its story, the situation, the problem, resolution or irresolution to the problem" (p. 62). Stake's account of record keeping neglects to stress the importance of the recorder's perspective in constructing the description. I was conscious throughout the research that one of the functions of the journal was to record my unique interpretations of the data.

The journal also had an unexpected function: it attracted students' attention.

Because I kept my journal so highly visible (it, and a pen, was all I carried with me to classes) students would often seek me out to have something recorded: "Mr. Van Zoost! (Student comes running down the hall.) Here's something to put in your journal: [specific subject] has too much homework!" (Research journal, beginning of lunch on September 10, 1998). Other times, students were prompted to tell me stories because they saw the journal. Often, during non-instructional time I was surrounded by students who wanted to describe their experiences, and I would write hurriedly in an attempt to record these stories accurately. It was as if recording their comments was somehow, for the students, an act of validation. I was unprepared for their overwhelming response.

Knowing the student participants as well as I did helped me to determine when students were just "goofing around" about their comments. Regardless, I recorded their remarks faithfully to demonstrate the integrity of my research. Students were curious about what I was recording--I drew pictures and wrote poetry about them. Sometimes, students requested to draw or write in the journal themselves. It became a communication tool among students as they read each other's stories. I valued listening to the students' conversations which developed during the sharing of the research journal.

#### *Allusion: The Student Questionnaire*

In May of 1998, I articulated some of the questions that arose from my

concerns about my Grade 8 homeroom students moving to Grade 9. When I told them that I would be studying their transition to Nova High School, the students offered suggestions as to what questions they thought would be appropriate for me to research. I read several school climate surveys which I had been compiling in my filing cabinet. Some of these surveys were generated by unidentified schools while two surveys were provided from the central office of my Regional School Board. Using these surveys as a springboard, I put together a rough draft of the questionnaire which examined three aspects of the transition: school climate, social concerns and academic concerns. Members of the thesis committee responded to this draft, asking questions which helped me to refocus the language of the questionnaire.

In June of 1998, the Guidance Counsellor of Nova Middle School designed and distributed a survey which helped to identify the concerns of the Grade 8 students preparing to move to Grade 9. The data from this survey identified the most common fears of students moving to Grade 9 at Nova High School. They included a fear of academic failure, a concern about the perceived increase in the amount of homework, a worry about more difficult academic expectations in Grade 9, and an anxiety about being with older students. These findings helped to further shape some of the questions in the student questionnaire used for this research.

The unpublished results of a Grade 8 to Grade 9 transition survey which

was conducted by the Regional School Board's Middle Level Leadership Team in 1997 offered a further means for me to generate possible questions for the student questionnaire. This survey compared students' impressions when they moved to a high school which was either at a different school site, or within the same building. Data from this survey was useful in teasing out the questions which could have been more relevant to my research. For example, "getting lost" was the most common concern for students moving to a new building, but it was not mentioned for those in transition within the same school site. Consequently, I wondered if "getting lost" would not be a concern of students at Nova High School.

Perhaps the most valuable touchstone for designing the questionnaire was the data I collected during the first six days of school. As I observed students in classes and talked with them during non-instructional time, it became more obvious to me which questions needed to be changed or added. I was frequently asked orientation questions about finding rooms, teachers, or classes. This seemed to contradict the results of the School Board's questionnaire which reported that students moving to new schools within the same building did not have orientation concerns. The students tended to stay in small groups, and appeared unsure about where to socialize. Realizing these concerns, I ensured that they could be addressed in the questionnaire.

The final draft was reviewed by the Guidance Counsellor and other staff

members at Nova Middle School and Nova High School. The Grade 9 Vice-Principal was given a copy of the questionnaire to review before it was copied for distribution. Two parents expressed interest in discussing the research or receiving the results of the survey: "I would like to know what questions you will be asking and the nature of your research, plus your findings"; "of course I am [interested in the findings of the research] and how could I say no!?!". I contacted these parents by phone and had conversations about educational research, and their children.

Opinion and attitude questions about a) the high school's climate, b) students' social relationships and c) academics were predominate in the student questionnaire. Multiple choice questions at the end of the questionnaire elicited factual information from the participants: grade, sex, age, and the name of the school the student attended in the previous school year. See Appendix F for an example of the student questionnaire. The process of generating and editing the student questionnaire's content and structure spanned over four months. By the end of the first week of school in September 1998, the questionnaire was ready to be administered.

The sample used for the questionnaire was taken from all students in Grade 9 for the first time at Nova High School, roughly 150 during the 1998-99 school year. Students who were repeating a year or were transferring from a different feeder school completed the questionnaire, but their responses were isolated and removed from the other students' data. Students who had not returned a signed

parental permission slip were not permitted to complete a questionnaire. One hundred and seventeen students completed the questionnaire; 57 males and 60 females; 103 students were 14 years old, 13 students were 15 years old and one student was 16 years of age.

Questionnaires were distributed to the participating students on the seventh day of school (at 9:00 am) when their initial transition experiences were still relevant, making the data more reliable. The participants were well aware that they would be writing the survey, and several students asked me before school if they could see the questionnaire in advance so that they would have more time to think about the questions. The questionnaires were administered by the Grade 9 homeroom teachers (who were extremely cooperative with this process) and the students responded silently. Those who needed assistance in reading or writing the answers to the questionnaire were identified in advance, and teacher assistants were available during the completion of the questionnaire.

Teachers were provided with an instructional sheet for administering the questionnaire. I circulated among the classrooms, responding to questions and monitoring any possible disruptions. Students were given ten minutes to complete the questionnaire. No one was rushed, and I worked to ensure this by checking in each of the five classrooms before dismissing all of the participants to move to their first class. While I was confident that the responses to the questionnaire would provide valuable insights into the transition process, I realized that I needed

to use a strategy which would enable me to look more closely at some of the issues about transition and therefore I conducted a student focus group.

*Dialogues: The Student Focus Group*

Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1956) coined the term “focus group” to describe a situation in which the interviewer asks a group very specific questions about a topic after considerable research has already been completed (as cited in Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 364). For this reason, the focus group session occurred near the end of my research, after I had collected and reviewed data from other sources and had considered some of the possible emerging hypotheses. The responses on the student questionnaire, the prolonged observation of the participants, suggestions from the staff of Grades 8 and 9, and my reflections about the data collected in the research journal all helped to guide the development of the student focus group questions. During the focus group session I used an interview guide: “a list of questions or issues that are to be explored in the course of the interview” (Patton, 1980, p. 200). I had grouped the questions into categories, listing possible follow-up questions under broader, thematically organized questions (see Appendix G to read the interview guide). As I listened to the students throughout the focus group session, I recorded a checkmark next to the questions as they were explored. This helped to ensure that all of the sub-questions were addressed during the focus group session.

Six Grade 9 students were chosen to participate in the focus group. I chose students whom I thought would be good “information agents.” These were students who represented diverse social groups in the school, and diverse geographic and economic backgrounds in the school community. I also respected that the students I chose would want to feel comfortable during the session, so I selected students who were familiar with my teaching expectations and classroom climate. Blumer (1969) suggested that the participants chosen for a focus group should be “acute observers and who are well informed” (as cited in Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 365). I looked for these characteristics in the list of students I had generated. Furthermore, I considered the balances among the following categories when selecting the participants for the focus group: males and females, academic ability, happiness in the transition to Grade 9, extra-curricular interests, students who were in my Grade 8 homeroom last year (and those that were not), and of course, their abilities to cooperate with each other. A brief self-description was written by each student in the focus group. Data collected from the session were audio taped and transcribed. The 80 minute focus group allowed for an in-depth discussion of the students’ transition process. While listening to students’ concerns about the transition process was the predominant focus of my research, other voices, such as those of educators and parents, offered insights into the students’ move to Nova High School.

*Monologues: Interviews with Teachers and Administration*

I examined the transition process through interviews with the Grade 8 and Grade 9 homeroom teachers. I also interviewed the appropriate administrators as they were important informants in the research. These interviews took place on September 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> during educators' preparatory periods and at lunch. Using the data I had collected from the student and parent questionnaires, I created a list of questions to use as an interview guide as suggested by Patton (1980). I used open-ended guiding questions during the interview which provided valuable data about the transition process to high school, and the barriers between the two school staffs. Patton (1980) reports three benefits of using the standardized open-ended interview format, two of which were applicable to my methodology: "the exact instrument used in the evaluation is available for inspection by decision makers and information users; the interview is highly focussed so that interviewee time is carefully used" (p. 203).

The information I collected from these interviews also helped shape some of my other data production tools. For example, a Grade 8 staff member suggested several student interview questions after her interview with me, and brought them to me the following day. I also attended a Grade 9 teacher meeting, a new experience for me, as well as a Grade 8 and Grade 9 teacher meeting which discussed student transition concerns. I recorded notes in my journal during both of these meetings, and consciously listened for differences between the Grade 8

and Grade 9 teachers' perspectives. I wrote down the name of each teacher beside their respective comments which would allow me to consider individual teacher's voices. These experiences with Grade 8 and 9 staff provided a context in which to better understand the data collected from the students.

*Metonymy: Parent Questionnaire*

It became increasingly apparent that data from parents was needed in this research. Some mornings, students would report to me with lines such as "My mom told me to tell you that she thinks that [specific subject] should be for all year because it is a part of life" (my research journal, September 16, 1998). This confirmed to me that parents wanted a voice in this research, and consequently I sent home a parent questionnaire on September 22.

The format of the questionnaire mirrored that of the student questionnaire, and often sought responses to similar types of questions. The open-ended questions demanded that the parents record observations of their children. Once again, the school administration and Grade 9 staff reviewed the questionnaire before I made copies for distribution. Some students told me that their questionnaires were lost in backpacks, ditches or laundry machines, and in the end 54 out of 150 questionnaires were returned to the school (36%). Appendix H provides a sample parent questionnaire.

*Synaesthesia: Parent Interviews*

As a result of the parent questionnaire, two parents expressed particular interest in discussing the research in more depth and so I arranged interviews with them. These were parents of students I had taught in Grade 8 and with whom I had developed regular contacts throughout the 1997-98 school year. One parent had a great deal of contact with the school system, having tutored Grade 9 students. She had a child previously go through the transition from Grade 8 to Grade 9 in the same school and her child currently in Grade 9 was happy about her move to Nova High School. This interview was held at school.

The second parent was a mother of a student who was in my homeroom class in the 1997-98 school year, and was a participant in the student focus group. This parent interview allowed me to inquire into the findings of the parent questionnaire, and to investigate some of her daughter's concerns which had come out of the focus group session. This parent interview was conducted by phone.

The parent interviews allowed me to further probe ideas which seemed prevalent in the responses from the parent questionnaire. I continued to use the standardized open-ended interview format that I used with the teacher and administrator interviews. During both interviews I took notes in my journal, and then read these notes to the parent at the end of our discussion to ensure accuracy.

As data was produced from participant observation, the research journal, the student questionnaire, the student focus group, interviews with teachers and

administrators, the parent questionnaire, and interviews with parents, three phenomena were evident about the data production process. Firstly, data was often generated from different methods simultaneously (as in the occurrence of the parent questionnaires, teacher and administrator interviews, and participant observation on the same days). A second characteristic about the data production methods was their interdependence. For example, the student focus group questions relied on data from the student and parent questionnaires, participant observation, and interviews with educators and parents. Finally, a third process was simultaneously occurring throughout the data production process--data analysis.

### **Rhythm: Data Analysis**

Stake (1995) points out that "there is no particular moment when data analysis begins. Analysis is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as final compilations. Analysis essentially means taking something apart. We take our impressions, our observations, apart" (p. 71). The data analysis in this research was on-going and simultaneously performed with the data production.

For the most part, I followed an outline suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990):

- ▶ *Labeling phenomena: Taking apart an observation, a sentence, a paragraph, and giving each incident, idea, or event, a name, something that stands for or represents a phenomenon (p. 63)*

- ▶ *Discovering categories*: the process of grouping concepts that seem to pertain to the same phenomena (p. 65)
- ▶ *Naming a category*: chosen by the researcher that seems most logically related to the data it represents (p. 67)

Other researchers commonly refer to this process as “coding” (Lancy, 1993; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Stake, 1995). The extent of the nature of coding, or “taking apart” the data and categorizing it, is determined by the researcher. Lancy (1993) explains the range of possibilities in which a researcher could code the data:

Analysis schemes can be as simple as the investigator identifying a major “theme” from the material, and then proceeding to elucidate the theme illustrated by anecdotes, discourse transcripts, and snippets of “memos” (Ball, 1981). On the other hand, one can develop an extremely complex “coding form,” with dozens of categories for use in minutely analyzing the hours of videotape one has made of the phenomenon (e.g., Bergin and Lancy, 1991). And, of course, there are innumerable points between these two extremes. (p. 243)

Labeling phenomena involved considerable hours of reviewing the data. Consider, for example, the voices from the teacher interviews. The interviews were recorded onto 17 hours of audio tape and then later transcribed and typed. During this process I reviewed each interview in its entirety, allowing educators’ voices to speak independently. Individual concerns often reflected unique experiences in the school. Vidich and Lyman (1994) refer to the “fiery cauldron” of the “melting pot” (p. 38) where ethnographers until the 1960's sought to assimilate diverse perspectives into a common understanding. I recorded each interview separately

in an attempt to avoid such a melting pot. Krieger (1983) terms this “polyphonic interviewing” when the voices of the participants are not collapsed together and reported as one dominant perspective, the researcher’s interpretation (as cited in Fontana & Frey, 1994, pp. 368-369).

I did not, however, use polyphonic interviewing in its purest form. Having recorded the interviews independently, I also wondered if the data would reveal insights if it were arranged collaboratively. For example, what if I grouped several responses to the same question into a body of text? While three interviews with the administrators (the Vice-Principal of the Middle School, the Vice-Principal of the High School responsible for Grade 9, and the Guidance Counsellor responsible for Grades 7, 8 and 9) held distinct perspectives, I compiled the responses from the Grade 8 teachers together, as well as those from the Grade 9 teachers.

Rearranging this data was facilitated by the “cut and paste” feature of a word processor. I was curious to re-read the now clustered data from the Grade 8 teachers, and then the data from the Grade 9 teachers, to look for new or previously detected patterns. Using a similar process, I re-organized data from other sources. The transcribing process allowed the labeling of phenomena to occur, Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) first step of data analysis.

The transcribing process can also be likened to Richardson’s (1994) belief about the writing process: “I consider writing as a *method of inquiry*, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic. Although we usually think about

writing as a mode of "telling" about the social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of "knowing"--a method of discovery and analysis" (p. 516). In such a manner, I discovered emerging patterns in the phenomena and generated thematic categories such as "homework," "lack of friends," "lost," or even "teacher warnings."

At first, I kept these emerging patterns to myself, and refused to verbalize them to others. I feared a sense of "conclusion" which could inhibit my ability to continue looking for other patterns. With surprising regularity, students and colleagues would ask me for my findings and I insisted that I "needed more time." In retrospect, this was more a statement of this phase of the data analysis process (Strauss and Corbin's "discovering categories") than I intended it to be; with each new finding, more questions arose. At times, it felt like an unending process, as I contemplated the abundant possibilities of new questions. LeCompte and Preissle (1993) describe this process of finding patterns:

Once a researcher has established the categories within which the data are organized and has sorted all bits of data into relevant categories, the portrayal of a complex whole phenomenon begins to emerge. The process is analogous to assembling a jigsaw puzzle. The edge pieces are located first and assembled to provide a frame of reference. Then attention is devoted to those more striking aspects of the puzzle picture that can be identified readily from the mass of puzzle pieces assembled separately. Next, having stolen some surreptitious glances at the picture on the box, the puzzle worker places the assembled parts in their general position within the frame and, finally, locates and adds the connecting pieces until no holes remain. Thus, analysis can be viewed as a staged process by which a whole phenomenon is divided into its components and then

reassembled under various new rubrics. The creativity of ethnographic analysis, however, lies in the uniqueness of the data, or parts, and in the singularity of reconstructed cultures, or pictures. (p. 237)

Like looking at the puzzle frame, I found myself frequently returning to the statement of the research question to ensure that what I pursued was within the parameters of the research: how does this data relate to understanding the students' initial concerns about academics, school climate and their social needs during the transition to high school?

As patterns emerged and were given names (Strauss and Corbin's third phase of data analysis) they prompted temporary hypotheses ("tentative answers to research questions" according to Neuman, 1997). These very tentative hypotheses allowed me to better focus further research questions which were probed in other data production tools. This was a critical stage in the data analysis, compared by Lancy (1993) to the flow chart of a computer program, where the researcher must decide the direction of her or his research (p. 233). To help in this stage, I used many forms of expression to try to retell the story of the data to myself. I wrote vocal music, drew, and wrote poetry about the transition process and my understandings of the emerging hypotheses. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) explain that:

Analysis is not simply a matter of classifying, categorizing, coding, or collating data. . . . analysis is about the representation or reconstruction of social phenomena. . . . we do not merely report what we find; we create accounts of social life, and in doing so we

**construct versions of the social worlds and the social actors we observe. It is, therefore, inescapable that analysis implies representation. (p. 108)**

**Similarly, Denzin (1994) reports that “field-workers can neither make sense of nor understand what has been learned until they sit down and write the interpretive text, telling the story first to themselves and then to their significant others, and then to the public” (p. 502). I shared some of my art work about the transition process with a colleague and arranged to visit her school which was structurally similar to Nova Middle School and Nova High School. I spent time there talking with Grade 9 students in classes, “hanging out” in the halls before classes, and on the smoking grounds. Although not part of this research, this visit provided me with an opportunity to reexamine data that I had collected at Nova High School. As a guest in this other school, I listened to students’ similar concerns, their voices amplifying the patterns which I had observed at Nova High School.**

**The analysis of the data began at the time of data production and continued into the writing process of this thesis. During the time of data production, data analysis provided me with temporary hypotheses which generated more focused research questions. These more focused questions were consequently pursued in further data production methods. After the research time period, data analysis provided me with means to examine and arrange the data much like that of a puzzle (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). The pieces of the puzzle are presented in Chapter Four, and rearranged into pictures in Chapter Five.**

**Publisher's Note: Ethical Concerns**

The data production methods discussed above deserved several ethical considerations as the methodology of this research required working with many participants in the public school system. At the conception of my research interest, the principal of the school was informed about, and agreed to the nature of this study. Upon approval from the university to support my research proposal, the superintendent of the school board was contacted, and granted permission to conduct this research. The educators who participated in the interviews were consulted for their permission in advance. Parental and student permission to participate in the study was also obtained in advance (see Appendix I) and the participants were made aware that the purpose of the study was to more fully understand students' concerns as they moved from a middle school to a high school.

During the focus group session, if there were any troublesome issues which arose, students were offered direction for support in the school system. When issues arose which required more privacy, the student was interviewed later, independently from the focus group. In all aspects of the research, anonymity was respected by using pseudo-names for the participants and the school.

Educators, parents and students were informed as to how the results from the research could be used. The research could provide a framework for making improvements in the transition process from Grade 8 to Grade 9 at Nova High

School. The participants were kept informed about the findings of the research on a timely basis. For example, the Grade 9 educators received copies of the results from the students' questionnaire immediately, and were encouraged to share them with their students. In a school newsletter, an offer was published for the participants to borrow a copy of the findings of this research from the school's library. All participants had the potential to benefit from being part of the research as they became more aware about the students' initial concerns in Grade 9.

### **Epilogue**

I hoped the methodology I developed would explain, describe, and explore my initial research questions and more importantly, the questions that arose during the research process. In the retelling of the students' concerns from multiple perspectives, I developed my own voice, my own interpretations of the data. This, like other forms of art, is a learning experience. I questioned the sequence in which to report data; while I prefer non-linear stories, I enjoy a sense of beginning, middle and after. How could I arrange data from the many sources in the methodology into such a format?

I struggled with recording separately the experiences of the methodology from the reporting of the findings. For example, the smile of a colleague as he pondered an interview question conveys insight into the tone of the interview, and also suggests the nature of his response. I considered whether such data should be

reported in the methodology section or in the next chapter which discusses the findings of the research. The influence of the methodology, like the research literature, extends beyond this chapter and runs beneath the surface into the reporting of the findings. This is the “unwritten” experience of the methodology that flows between the lines of the next chapter, “Finding Water.”

## **Chapter Four: Finding Water**

I'm going out to clear the pasture spring;  
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away  
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):  
I shan't be gone long.--You come too.

(Frost, Robert, as cited in Lathem, 1969, p. 1)

Finding a suitable title for this chapter was difficult as I wanted to emphasize how these findings were contextualized by my perspectives and by the setting of Nova High School. My father inspired me to use the metaphor of water to explore this contextualization: hot-springs, thin ice, puddles, icebergs, oceans, clouds. In my analysis of data, an additional reference to water seemed obvious: divination. This "divination" section responds to the students' impressions of high school during the first few days of school, the orientation period. Following this discussion, the remainder of the chapter is divided into the three types of concerns as structured by the initial research question: students' concerns about the high school climate, social concerns, and academic concerns.

### **Divination: Students' First Impressions of High School**

Amidst the excitement of the first few days of high school ran confusion. I too, had the "first day jitters" with plenty of energy. The students were excited to see each other and overwhelmed as they tried to sort out where they were supposed to be and where their friends were "hanging out." Many students seemed to act reserved among their peers, even their best friends. High school was supposed to be a "clean break," a place to reinvent oneself. Before the re-constitution of identity could occur, one basic need had to be sorted out: the orientation of the high school. There were three main responses from the students during these first few days of school: difficulty finding the right classrooms, figuring out the individualized schedule, and complaints about missing Grade 8.

Initially, I was repeatedly asked for directions between classes. Students seemed disenchanted when they realized that I had as little knowledge as they about the locations of teachers' rooms. Having taught in the building for four years my ignorance surprised me, and I followed students to classes. According to the student questionnaire, getting mixed up with the schedule or being lost was the biggest concern for 16% of the students. Some students got lost, and arrived late. About twenty minutes into the second class on the first day a boy raised his hand, blushing, and with an embarrassed smile said that he was in the wrong room. On the second day of school I had a conversation with another student which revealed her blend of excitement and insecurity:

- Van Zoost    How's Grade 9?  
 Jan            Great. I love it. It's confusing though. Yesterday I  
                   went to the wrong homeroom and the wrong first class.
- Van Zoost    And did you get up and move?  
 Jan            Yah. (Pause.) Today's a new day. Thank goodness.

I noticed many students talking to themselves, or at least not expecting a response from those around them as they said things like, "I've got to find out where Social Studies is," or "Don't I have English now?" On the third day of school and five minutes before the end of a class I noticed the girl behind me, while frantically turning to the correct page in her textbook, searching for her schedule to reassure herself where she would be going next.<sup>1</sup>

Some students appeared rather disheartened and I wondered in my research journal if it was because the summer holiday was over. On September 10<sup>th</sup> I

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During informal conversations I asked students, "What strategies did you use to become familiar with your individualized timetable?"

- ▶ I threw my schedule out the first day. But then I found someone with the exact same schedule and I still ask them every morning before school what I have
- ▶ On my schedule (now a torn and worn out piece of paper) I just memorized what I have first thing from Monday to Friday and then I know what I have for the rest of the day
- ▶ Every morning, recess and noon I looked at it for the first two weeks and then it just got memorized--pretty much. Every now and then I get it out to look at it.
- ▶ I just looked at it the first day and memorized it.
- ▶ I know what I have in comparison to another student when she goes to a different class, so I just ask her what she has
- ▶ See--I just look at it in the morning and recess. I don't have to memorize it, I just look at it--it's just there in the back of my agenda.

wrote:

Some students are floating; suspended from disbelief? I can almost see their minds form clouds above their heads and they stretch up to the rafters forming thin lines which start to entangle with each other, but, being only air, dissolve through each other when they touch. Alien telepathy? Or maybe alienated topography . . . . The student doodling next to me is changing happy faces into sad faces.

As I was walking in the corridors I noticed one girl's back pack. She had written a quote using Liquid Paper (I have witnessed how long such artwork can take): "If only it were really possible to be 'ready' for school." She told me that she found this sentence in a teenage magazine after the first day of school. These accounts of student stress during the transition were consistent with the reports discussed in Chapter Two by Capelluti & Stokes (1991), Mertin, Haebich & Lokan (1989), and O'Rourke (1990). For example, Capelluti and Stokes (1991) report themes of fear, anxiety, self-doubt, excitement, confusion and wonder as students moved to high school.

During this initial period, some students reported that they missed Grade 8.

On September 3<sup>rd</sup> as I sat down in one class, the girl behind me said,

Aleta	Mr. Van Zoost, yesterday was such a depressing day. I'm going to need anti-depressant drugs by the end of this week [it was Thursday].
Van Zoost	What's wrong, Aleta?
Aleta	I don't know. I'd give anything to be back in Grade 8. I hate it here. [The bell rings. Class starts.]

During other informal conversations and from the responses of the student questionnaire this romancing of the past reflected, for the most part, students

missing their Grade 8 teachers.

Despite any difficult starts, students quickly learned the patterns of high school. As one parent explained on the parent questionnaire, "My daughter had a very difficult first week of school. She felt lonely and hated school. But now she's fine. We went through that last year as well so it's not just the transition to Grade 9" (Parent Questionnaire). Indeed, for most, this initial shock of adjusting to new structures passed quickly, but in the interim, many looked "foggy," conceivably "in their own worlds." Two poems, written by students after a month of high school reflect back to these first days of school:

*The school of doom*

I get off the bus  
and go down a long grey walk way  
and open up the doors to the doom school  
then I go in with my heart pumping  
and my breaths are short and quick  
I take a sharp turn  
and go down a long hallway  
with doors on both sides  
then I get to my room  
after a long search  
I sit down in one of the last chairs  
with everyone looking at me  
the teacher asks me what my name is  
and I say with my voice trembling  
"My name is Josh."  
In my mind the hardest thing  
about the first day of school  
was the first  
five minutes

*Poem*

It's the first day of school  
and I am walking down the hall,  
I'm scared that all the older kids  
will trip me and I will fall.

I'm scared I won't be able to find my class  
I'm petrified I will lose my way,  
You wouldn't believe the trouble I've been through  
Oh, I can't wait until the end of the day.

Everything around me is so weird and new  
I feel like everyone is staring which I really hate,  
I wish things were back to the way they used to be  
Why can't I just turn around and go back to Grade 8.

Finally the day is over  
and there is nothing to fear,  
I think I was only scared  
due to the rumours I hear.

The year is over now  
I am kind of sad,  
But came to find out  
Grade 9 really isn't so bad.

These texts, the first written by a male, the second by a female, reveal the extent of the first day "jitters" and their seemingly short duration. By the following Monday, the third day of school, I noted before school how "settled" the student looked. By the following Friday, when the students completed the questionnaire, they reported with a strong majority that "My worries about moving to high school were exaggerated and they are no longer a concern" (Student Questionnaire). Two weeks later, during the student focus group, Aleta told me that "Grade 9 looked scary, but it's not." Once the students were familiar with the high school's

geography and routines, they became actively involved in perpetuating the impressions of high school that they had feared. Jeremy, when asked during the student focus group what advice he would give to Grade 8 students, demonstrated the importance of telling these stories:

- |           |   |
|-----------|---|
| Jeremy    | I would want to tell the Grade 8's that Grade 9 is probably the worst year ever.  |
| Van Zoost | Why?  |
| Jeremy    | Cause that'll make them think that it's right bad, and when they get there it'll be better. (Student Focus Group Session) |

Ian warned about what can happen when expectations grow too big: "Don't expect too much. It's just another grade." This data echoes what was discussed earlier by Measor & Woods (1984) and Hargreaves & Earl (1990). They warn that unfulfilled expectations towards high school could potentially turn school experiences sour. The orientation period did not last long, and students entered what Meason and Woods (1984) term the "honeymoon" phase, where comfort levels increased and teachers' expectations were explored.

Although I have divided my initial research question into three parts (concerns about the high school climate, social concerns, and academic concerns), these parts did not operate independently. The following text, written by a student who received a significant amount of resource support in Grade 8 and after a month of Grade 9 experiences, illustrates this point:

I feel happy to go to Grade 9 but I wanted to come back to the middle level for two classes. I go to the senior high for two classes.

**I like the two classes very much, but some of the kids in the senior level are mean and make fun of me and I find the school work hard but the middle level I like best because [the middle level resource teacher] helps me a lot and makes me feel happy being down there [in the middle level area of the building].**

**Often social concerns were linked to academic concerns, academic concerns to school climate concerns, and school climate concerns to social concerns. To organize the findings, I placed the data into the three strands of concerns.**

**Sometimes this process felt artificial as I dissected the data and examined it away from other thematic veins. At these points in the operation, I would stop and reconsider the value of the data existing on its own. I have structured the remainder of this chapter to discuss each of the three strands of the research question.**

**My research examined the initial concerns of students, but I also sought out the concerns of the Grade 8 and Grade 9 teachers, administrators, a guidance counsellor, as well as those of parents. These data sources provided a context for thinking about the students' concerns, and proved pivotal for making recommendations about the transition process. I have included their comments throughout this chapter as they pertain to the students' concerns.**

### **Between Tides: Students' Concerns about the High School Climate**

This section discussing students' concerns about the high school climate is comprised of many currents: a feeling of displacement, students redefining their middle school experiences, issues of safety and fear in the high school, an increased sense of responsibility, an awareness of students repeating a grade, the level of student involvement in the school's extra-curricular activities, the perceived lack of care from the Grade 9 teachers, and the eventual assimilation into becoming high school students.

One of the predominant comments I heard about Grade 9 was a feeling of displacement in the school. I heard this in many different ways, and from administrators, teachers, parents and students:

. . . no one wants them and they don't know where they should be and I think all the support to help direct them to where they should be and can be is needed--and there's not a lot of direction.  
(Interview with the Grade 8 Vice-Principal)

Everyone in the school is concerned about the Grade 9's being a lost entity. They're not really part of the high school or the middle school. The senior high generally includes Grades 10 to 12.  
(Interview with a Grade 8 teacher)

I've heard that Grade 9 is difficult because they don't seem to fit. They're not allowed in the middle school wing [hall] and they don't belong to the senior wing--so it is a bit overwhelming. (Parent Questionnaire)

I would like to know where exactly she [my daughter] spends her breaks. I'm really unsure--I know they're supposed to have an area on school grounds, but I'm unsure where. (Interview with a parent)

**Last year we had a place to hang out at lunch--the bench outside the middle school gym. Now we aren't even allowed to stand up against the walls [students were not permitted to hang in the halls]. (Student Questionnaire)**

**Although the senior high area was accessible to all students, the Grade 9's limited themselves to the Grade 9 classrooms. Not all Grade 9 classrooms were used during non-instructional time, making those that were often congested and noisy. Without using a gym to displace built up energy, these 150 students managed themselves well in these five rooms. They worked, ate and spent their breaks in the classrooms.**

**I had a stark realization on September 9<sup>th</sup> after I informally asked a group of students at lunch what they remembered about Nova Middle School. Five pages of notes later, over a dozen students had recounted only one curriculum incident, a "hands-on" building experience. My pages were primarily filled with discipline acts, most of which I knew nothing about. Already, the concept of Grade 8 was being canonized. Leaving Nova Middle School behind was a critical step in the transition process for the students. One male student depicted this position as choosing between two paths, the future and the past (see Appendix L, Figure 1). For him, the transition to Nova High School was a crossroad that demanded choices.**

**Although students enjoyed reminiscing about Grades 7 and 8, it was important to no longer define themselves as "little kids." In Math class a bell for**

Nova Middle School rings and Jacob amuses himself:

Josh "What was that bell for?"

Jacob "It's time for the *little kids*' classes to change" (he whispers with a big grin, proud of his humour). He enjoys referring to Grades 7 and 8 now as "little kids." Mind you, his four inch growth spurt does make them recently little to him. (research journal, September 9<sup>th</sup>)

A soccer player reported that "Rug-rats and anklebiters were trying out for the team! They were so short!" Seeing their own size, and defining themselves as *not* middle school students became a recurring theme.

A common perception among students was that the Grade 8 teachers had "babied" them. This was particularly intriguing and potentially useful to me as a Grade 8 teacher so I followed this line of questioning, asking students informally "How did I baby you last year?" The responses were revealing:

Diane I don't know because you gave us a lot of responsibility. I can't really think of anything that you did.

Blaine You bought us pop and bottles of milk.  
Lynn Babying is sometimes good! Pop's not babying. Pop is like a treat. Babying is like when you feel low, dumb.

Meredith We did fun things *all* the time. It wasn't just some of the time, it was *all* of the time. That was good, not babying.

Dara You made us breakfast.  
Elizabeth Hey! Don't complain!  
Dara Yah, I know--just sayin'.

It seemed that the idea of *not* being babied was important to the Grade 9 students in trying to recreate their identities as high school students. I wondered if the shift from an individual fulfillment curriculum framework in some of Nova Middle School's classrooms to a more traditional curriculum in some of Nova High School's classrooms (as outlined in Chapter Two) required students to prioritize academics over their social, psychological, or learning needs. Moving towards a high school climate might involve denouncing more student-centered activities experienced at Nova Middle School; the Grade 8 teachers "babied" the students, or so the students thought once in Grade 9. A more in-depth discussion about this shift towards a more traditional curriculum is presented later in this chapter in the section examining students' academic concerns.

Non-instructional time provided opportunities for students to return to the newly forbidden middle level corridor, or into the middle level gymnasium. Several Grade 8 staff members told me that they had "caught" Grade 9 students in the middle level hallway. Three different Grade 8 staff members referred to this phenomenon during their interviews, surmising that the students felt more comfortable in the middle level area. The Grade 8 Vice-Principal explained that "this is old home to them and then we kick them out--we have to--unfortunately, or, that could be a good thing because they have to move on in life" (Interview with the Grade 8 Vice-Principal). One Grade 9 teacher, during an informal conversation, wondered if the new Grade 9 students felt abandoned by their Grade

8 teachers. She observed that her students from the previous year frequently returned to visit her while these opportunities were denied to the new Grade 9 students. After several "illegal" visits to the middle level area Johnathan, one of the student voyagers, reported to me on September 10<sup>th</sup>:

Johnathan Me and Pierre went down [to] the middle level wing [hall] and as we walked back we encountered [specific Grade 8 teacher] and she asked us what we were doing there. I said, "Makin' trouble," and kept on walking down the hall and then I went into the gym and the Grade 8's were playing soccer. [A Grade 8 teacher] told me to leave, but before I left I gestured for the goaltender to pass me the ball, and then I drilled it back at him, and then I left.

Van Zoost How do you feel about being kicked out of the middle level gym, now as a Grade 9 student?

Johnathan I don't know. No comment. You're not allowed in there anymore.

Safety in the high school was a predominant concern for Grade 8 teachers:

"It's worse than going to Grade 7 because it's not protected from the high school and all the big scary things that go on" (Interview with a Grade 8 teacher).

Another Grade 8 teacher reported: "It surprises me that the Grade 9's were feeling good being there [in the senior high area of the school] because I feel, as a teacher, much safer here [in the middle area], than I do there" (Interview with a Grade 8 teacher). In fact, 97% of the students felt safe in the senior high area of the school, and 94% reported that they felt comfortable (Appendix K). Similarly, 96% of the parents who responded to the questionnaire felt that their child felt safe at school.

Some students expressed concerns of fear as opposed to safety in creative representations of the transition process. One female student included the words “fear,” “scary,” and “freak-out” in a collage about the move to high school (see Appendix L, Figure 2). The following two texts were written by males and depict a sense of fear:

*Text #1*

I am a little person  
in a big part of school.  
Everyday,  
I see new faces.  
Every class  
I look for familiar ones.  
We wish that  
there was not  
so much homework,  
or a test every week.  
I find this difficult to deal with.  
Especially since  
we are lords  
no longer.

*Text #2*

Billy was just starting Grade 9. Billy had lots of worries, and since he was an only child he had no other siblings to help him with them. The night before school started he was really worrying. One of Billy’s worries were the eighty minute classes. He remembered the double science and maths that he had last year and hated how long they were, now all his classes were this long! Another worry was the new wing [corridor] and teachers. He had never been down that wing, and he didn’t know one of his teachers. One of his biggest fears was the new timetable. Now he was using letters and sections, and new times for their breaks. Billy was afraid he would be in the wrong class at the wrong time.

When the first day arrived he found his homeroom [for registration purposes] fairly easily, and he saw all his friends from last year. His homeroom teacher was very helpful and Billy had his

timetable figured out. He liked how he had a few of his friends in each class, last year he only had one friend in his homeroom. The classes did seem a little long but he got used to it. Billy was very happy in Grade 9.

This last text suggests that the fear was principally caused by what was unknown.

Making things familiar or at least consistent consumed much of the students' conversations during the first week. Perhaps this was an effort to contend with the newness of Grade 9. I overheard one girl explaining to the girl behind her that "this teacher used to teach my older sister." At first, this statement did not strike me as unusual, until I thought about the internalization that was occurring with this statement. She was making connections with her new experiences. Similarly, learning "who is in whose class" was extremely important to discuss, not only for social purposes, but to solidify the students' organization, to articulate the "new order" of Grade 9.

Juxtaposed against the constant demands among students to accompany each other to class was the strong feeling of increased independence; students and teachers chose words such as "responsibility," "freedom" or "Grade 9 is easier" to describe these impressions. Regardless of the terminology, students gloated about this new sense of freedom, and some parents mentioned that they preferred the perceived higher level of responsibility at Nova High School. Teachers frequently warned and reminded students of the expectations of responsibility in Grade 9. At times, I felt that I had heard these warnings so often that I wondered if some of the

Grade 9 teachers considered responsibility to be a *new* skill, attitude and disposition for these students. Because of the emphasis on the “newness” of responsibility, I started hearing what was not being said but inadvertently implied, “You were *not* responsible last year in Grade 8.” I watched as students, parents, and educators began to believe this, increasing the perceived distance between Nova Middle School and Nova High School. One Grade 9 teacher was conscious of this change, as she explained in an interview:

They have such a higher level of independence here [Grade 9]. The problem is that they’re not protected in one nice little hallway that’s sheltered [like Nova Middle School]. They have access to the senior high--the temptation is to follow what they’re doing, which is to go over to the mall and hook off. What happens is that they just constantly hook off and this has been a big problem for me.

During the teacher interviews, some Grade 9 teachers were interested in me finding out if the students *felt* more responsible. During the student focus group session, most students agreed that they felt more *independent*, and added words of advice about this freedom:

You should choose how you use your freedom wisely. Like the other day, a couple of guys decided they didn’t want to work and the teacher said, “Fine, you don’t have to work.” But then we had a quiz the next day and both of them got zero. (Student Focus Group Session)

A Grade 8 teacher saw the increased responsibility as a necessary and potential danger:

Truthfully, when I speak with previous students they say it’s [Grade 9] a lot easier. I think it’s because those controls aren’t there--Mom

and Dad are not sitting in the staff room down the hall, we are not checking that agenda every night. They're saying they're free-- they're a lot freer than they ever were in Grades 7 and 8 and they love it. That's what they mean by, "Oh, it's easier. It's much easier in Grade 9." I don't know how well they do. I guess everybody when they come to the end of the diving board, they have to jump off – you cannot turn around and go back. Those kids are going to grow up, and we're going to have to let them go, and they're going to sink or swim. We just don't want them to sink when we know very well they can swim. But we have to let them – and Grade 9 seems to be the year where they do that – boys in record number. There's no need of it but I don't know how you can prevent it. They have to get their act together in Grade 9 and then it seems to flow after that, they stay. They can go as far as they want after that. (Interview with a Grade 8 teacher)

Students were visually reminded of the responsibility that comes with freedom when they saw the number of students repeating Grade 9.<sup>1</sup> On the first day of school, several repeaters identified themselves in the first class by gloating about their failures. Most students reacted to these statements by staring into space. I waited for the teacher to respond, and she identified how it was possible to fail: by "hooking off" or by not doing the work. Another Grade 9 teacher told me in an interview that "I really try to encourage [students to ask questions] because they are totally intimidated by these people who have been in Grade 9 two

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Dewey (1938) warns educators about the important differences between the freedom of movement and the freedom of intelligence. Dewey reports that freedom of outer movement is a *means* (and not an end) which could help lead to intellectual freedom and requires teachers' guidance. In such a light, the increased physical freedom which students experienced in the move to Grade 9 (e.g. individualized timetables, no homeroom classes) does not necessarily signal an increase in the students' intellectual freedom.

or three times already." Two weeks into the school year, a group of female students remained intrigued with the concept of "repeaters":

There are so many people who have failed--especially gym. I can't understand that. They said gym was supposed to be easy. There are six repeaters in my gym class.

How could you take Science *four* times and still not get it?

How could you take Social Studies *four* times?

How could you take any class four times? It's so boring the first time.

These questions from the students recalled the warnings from Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) about the student failures which are created by defining achievement solely through academics. The visible number of students repeating Grade 9 made me also consider the works of Roderick (1992), the Bridge Program (1991), and Smith (1997) and their reports of student success in high school being influenced by transition programs. The fact that these female students had identified "repeaters" as an issue during the initial transition period suggests to me that they too were wondering what had gone wrong for these students in the move between Nova Middle School and Nova High School.

It appeared that the new Grade 9 students were not academically intimidated by the students who were repeating the grade. Instead, some of the new Grade 9 students observed the repeating students to try and make sense of what had caused their failure. One of my previous students (who became well

versed in action research methodologies in my Grade 8 homeroom class) conducted research, recording the number of classes each repeating student was missing during the first month of school. He speculated that most would not be successful this year either, and warned his peers gently about the dangers of “hooking off” *too* much. During the student focus group, his friends reported how to “hook off” just one class, and leave the other teachers unaware of his or her absence: “. . .in Grade 9, you just have to take a note to the one class you missed, not a homeroom teacher, so you’re free” (Student Focus Group Session).

Initially, students told me that they were very positive about being involved in the high school. Seventy-two percent of the students claimed that they intended to participate in the high school’s extra-curricular activities. Several times, various boys told me that it was much easier to join extra-curricular events now that they were part of the high school, or how much easier it was to be placed on sports teams in Grade 9. I was prompted to recall what Kadel (1994) reports about the link between students’ school involvement and their success. The impression I was left with at the end of September changed when I informally asked students how they had become involved in the high school. Most of them had not sought out any extra-curricular activities other than what they had been doing in Grade 8. The best window of opportunity for encouraging students to become involved in Nova High School appeared very small; one month.

A polarity in the data arose about the perceptions of the Grade 9 teachers’

portrayal of care. The Grade 9 Vice-Principal claimed that "I'm concerned about where it's all going because right now all it is, is that we've assembled a group of teachers who care. That's all" (Interview with the Grade 9 Vice-Principal). I was reminded of what Noddings (1992) reports--that to care and be cared for are fundamental human needs that are needed in today's educational system. While the Grade 9 staff reported that they care about their students, they were simultaneously aware that Nova High School teachers had developed a reputation of being uncaring. Data about this issue from Grade 8 teachers, parents, and students varied greatly. While the Grade 8 teachers acknowledged the generalized perception of uncaring high school teachers, they favourably depicted Nova High School's Grade 9 teachers as concerned and caring educators. Yet one Grade 9 teacher alluded to the preconception of their staff as being uncaring:

I'm sure the Grade 8 teachers think that we don't care a lot and that's not true on my part. For some cases that's true perhaps, but at the Grade 9 level, with the staff we have, I don't think that's true.  
(Interview with a Grade 9 teacher)

When shown the responses of the student questionnaire, several Grade 9 teachers reported that they wished that the students felt more comfortable talking to them. I thought it was commendable that more than half of the students said they *would* feel comfortable approaching the Grade 9 teachers given that they had only attended Nova High School for a very short period of time. The parent questionnaire demonstrated that 96% of the respondents felt comfortable

approaching a Grade 9 teacher about a school concern. One response from the parents touched on what many students reported: "I feel the students in Grade 8 were aware of the teachers' concern and caring (re: marks, behaviour et cetera) and in Grade 9 [the students] feel the teachers' uncaring" (Parent Questionnaire).

It seemed that students perceived "independence" and "caring" as mutually exclusive concepts:

- Mark . . . it's better than Grade 8--there's no worries--you don't have to worry about your binders. It seems more free.
- Ian Yah, more open--it seems like you're more responsible.
- Kathy I think you're more *independent* because if you don't want to pay attention in class you don't have to. They're not going to say anything to you other than, "Ha! Ha! You're going to fail the year because you don't know the stuff." Especially [specific] class. If you don't pay attention to him and then he says, "Do this work," you won't know how to do it unless you were paying attention. And last night's homework is used for the next day's class and so if you don't have it you're going down and could fail.
- Van Zoost What happens if your homework's not done?
- Lynn Nothing.
- Kathy Nothing.
- Aleta Nothing.
- Mark They don't care.
- Ian Yah. They're not going to chase after you saying, "You need help." They want you to come to them.
- Aleta Yah, it's like they don't care. It's all up to you.
- Kathy There's a big difference. Grade 8 teachers are more settled and they're more "baby, baby." They help you along your little way. Once you get to Grade 9 if you want help, you go in and ask, you go in on your own extra time. In Grade 9 if you say, "Can I have help with this question?" you have to wait 20 minutes while

they [the teacher] circle the room and get everybody else and then they'll come to you. In Grade 8, it's like, "Here, I'll do this for you" and in Grade 9 it's just like, "Do it." (selected parts, Student Focus Group Session)

Certainly many teachers reflected this perspective as well, insisting that the students take responsibility for themselves. During an interview, one Grade 9 teacher stated:

Failure rates decrease dramatically in second semester as compared to first semester, behavior problems decrease dramatically in second semester. Some kids need a whole semester to get it and have to fail to become accountable. Students are more capable of asking for help in second semester. For example, "I need an oral test" or "I need some things to be adjusted." (Interview with a Grade 9 teacher)

Despite all good hearted intentions to increase the students' sense of responsibility, Grade 9 teachers seemed doomed to the title of "uncaring" by the students. Perhaps the students were noticing, as did Koos (1995), a reduced interest in their personal, social, and developmental needs from their Grade 9 teachers. Put another way, perhaps the increased focus on academic interests and the removal of homeroom and teaming structures led students to believe that the Grade 9 teachers cared less about their personal, social, and developmental needs. This suggests that students were aware of the changes in school climate from what Pratt (1994) terms a curriculum perspective of individual fulfillment towards one of cultural transmission; what Dewey (1938) would term moving from a progressive curriculum towards a more traditional curriculum.

The ritual first month of testing the rules went beyond "hooking off" and

incomplete homework. For example, the constant struggle to find a place to “hang out” created discipline problems during non-instructional time. Students were not permitted to “hang in the halls,” and they often complained: “We should be able to stand outside the doors as long as we’re not in anyone’s way” (Student Questionnaire). “The person who kicks you out of the halls and pushes you into the rooms is *not* cool” (research journal, September 9<sup>th</sup>). Sometimes the limits were pushed, and consequences seemed unfair:

- Van Zoost     What are you doing?  
 Christine     I’m writing because I was bad. I was caught sitting on the counter by the sink in the girls’ bathroom. I was the only one she ever caught--it’s where *everyone* sits.
- Van Zoost     Not all at once, I hope.  
 Christine     No.
- Van Zoost     So what do you have to write?  
 Christine     I don’t have to write anything. I’m just writing a story because I’m bored.
- Angela         Nobody will come with me [to the bathroom] so I can’t get in trouble. They’re all chicken.
- Denise         I’ll go!  
 Two girls set out to the wild discipline frontier of the girls’ bathroom. They skip away as if on horses. (research journal, September 10<sup>th</sup>)

By the end of September, students had become used to the Grade 9 teachers’ expectations. Each student had developed a unique set of habits for her or his homework, “hooking off,” or “hanging out.” These habits responded to the high school’s climate, reflecting a focus on the self (e.g. individualized timetables) rather than on a group of students (e.g. a homeroom class, a team structure). Having re-defined and put behind them the middle school experience, students

explored the issues of responsibility and observed repeating students who were unsuccessful with Nova High School's expectations. Students claimed that Grade 9 teachers did not care as much about them and negotiated new places to "hang out" in the school. They began to look like members of Ahola-Sidaway's (1988) description of *Gesellschaft*, people co-existing independently of each other. In the halls, they looked like high school students, not middle schoolers. As students familiarized themselves with Nova High School, they simultaneously explored social relationships within the high school's climate.

### **Ditches and Dykes: Students' Social Concerns**

Although influenced by the high school climate, I chose to report the highs and lows of students' social concerns separately. Several social concerns emerged: the new student groupings, a potential separation from friends, and the importance of social status among peers.

During an educators' meeting about the transition from Grade 8 to Grade 9 (September 25,<sup>th</sup> 1998), several Grade 9 teachers expressed concerns about the computer-generated class groupings: "Maybe it's the class dynamics [explaining the change in a girl's academic performance]" "Unfortunately, he's been dragged into a horrible group of kids" "At least they're together [a difficult mix of students] and I can get that class over with and get on with my day" "I just can't give him a lot of attention--he's in a class with a lot of other needy kids." These

accounts also reflect what was discussed earlier about the challenge of high school teachers to respond to a wide diversity of learners as reported by the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture (1998). Furthermore, I was reminded of what Short & Burke (1991) report about the importance of building a community of inquiry and recognized the social difficulties some teachers faced with the computer-generated class groupings if they were to strive towards such a collaborative perspective of curriculum.

By contrast, 91% of the participants of the student questionnaire reported that they liked having different people in every class (Appendix K). The new class groupings was also the most common response to the student questionnaire's open-ended question, "What are you happy about in the move from Grade 8 to Grade 9?" This is contradictory to what Cooke (1995) reports. She states that being around more and different students in high school was a student concern, not a joy during the transition period. Work by Meason and Woods (1984) suggests that this informal passage within and between peer groups is to be expected. Although parents observed their children making new friends, 94% of the parents reported that their son or daughter continued to "hang out" with the same group of friends that they did in the previous school year.

Groups that were formed during class time were interesting to watch. Students tried to sort out who they knew (and how) and who they did not. I heard many new nicknames and wondered how and when did these names stick? During

a class on September 9<sup>th</sup> I watched a trio form and then one student, Gerald, defected to join another group part way through the activity. The remaining two boys were left staring at their desks and listening to other groups' conversations. These two students did not know one another comfortably, and had relied on Gerald to carry the dialogue. For me, it demonstrated the communication skills some Grade 9 students lacked when working with unfamiliar peers. Dewey (1938) reports the importance of the social relationships in the classroom. He suggests that educators have the responsibility

for a knowledge of individuals and for a knowledge of subject-matter that will enable activities to be selected which lend themselves to social organization, and organization in which all individuals have opportunity to contribute something, and in which the activities in which all participate are the chief carrier of control. (p. 56)

In the case of Gerald's group, the activity did not respond to his or the remaining two boys' social needs.

Although having different people in their classes was preferable, not having friends in a class was sometimes devastating. Through the parent questionnaire, parents explained the need for their children to be with close friends:

I feel consideration of classroom placement should be given more priority so that the student has contacts with people they know and are comfortable with.

[The school should be] letting the students know that they are often separated due to semestering from their [Grade 8] homeroom students and it seems important at this age that they have close friends near for support and social contact in class and out of class as well.

The lack of contact with close friends was a recurring theme which emerged from the student questionnaire, the student focus group, and during informal conversations with students.

On the first day of school, the girl behind me in Math class opened to a page at the back of her binder to quickly scribble something between completing math problems. I asked her what she had written: the names of two people that she knew in that class. "I don't know *anyone* in my other classes," she complained. I decided to follow her, checking on the validity or melodrama of this statement. In one other class, she had one close friend, and that made it her favourite class. This was not always the case, as another girl proclaimed on September 17<sup>th</sup>, "I can't believe it. I got stuck with John, Adrian, you [pointing to her male friend]--it's almost the same class as last year. I mean--what's the point--I was so looking forward to new people in my classes" (research journal). The responses to the new class groupings were so individualized that it became a lead question in the student focus group:

- |           |  |
|-----------|--|
| Van Zoost | How much do you miss having someone you can depend on being with you in all of your classes?   |
| Lynn      | Yah. You got me on that one. I MISS MY FRIENDS. I don't have <i>one</i> of my friends in <i>one</i> of my classes-- <i>all</i> year. It's annoying. I'm sort of out of all those little groups [e.g. group projects]--I'm sort of out on my own. |
| Jeremy    | I really miss being in classes with my friends but it's helping. I'm hardly in any classes with any of my friends but I'm doing better than I did last year--like paying attention wise.   |

- Van Zoost** Lynn, have you made any new friends because of the new class groupings?
- Lynn** No. Not yet.
- Van Zoost** So on your free time, you're still holding on to the friends from last year.
- Lynn** Yah, yah. Every noon hour, same friends.
- Kathy** The people I used to hang out with in classes last year I don't hang out with now. I don't hang out with the same people anymore--because of my friend and I started being best friends and we all hang out downtown and do the same stuff together so... and we all work and stuff too.
- Aleta** I miss certain people. I still hang out with the same people. I wouldn't mind having certain people in my classes. They split us all up! I think that was on purpose. I still wish that I had some of my closer friends in my classes. I'm getting used to it now.
- Jeremy** It's like the computer automatically sticks you in a classroom without any friends because a lot of people are in a classroom without their friends.
- Van Zoost** What about you, Mark? Do you miss having someone you can depend on being with you in every class?
- Mark** No. But I have at least three friends in every class. And if I didn't have any, I'd just find a new friend. . . I'm with more friends this year than most.
- Ian** I'm like Mark because I have at least two to three people in every class that I hang out with. I got a couple of new friends but it's not really different. I got a lot of friends in every class.
- Van Zoost** I noticed. I call you guys "the boys at the back" in my journal.
- Ian** Yah. We got split up.

When I mentioned to the Guidance Counsellor that one of my previous students, Lynn, was very unhappy about not having a single friend in any of her classes, the Guidance Counsellor wondered why Lynn had not approached him because he had told the students to see him if they had any problems. Although extremely self-

confident, she "didn't want to be a bother to anyone, and besides," she told me, "I don't know where the Guidance Counsellor's office is, and he doesn't know me anyhow." By the end of September, it seemed that those who were without friends in their classes were not as happy about their transition as those who were. The National Middle School Association (1995b) reports that young adolescents "have a strong need to belong to a group" (p. 39). Similarly, the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture (1997) reports that "This is a time when friendship, social acceptance by peers, and a sense of belonging increase in importance. The peer group provides identity, security, and caring to adolescents, expanding their feelings of self-worth and protecting them from loneliness" (p. 10). In Lynn's case, removal from her friends proved to affect her attitude towards school in general.

During non-instructional time, small groups of friends slowly began to define their spaces, consistently. By the third week of school, when I was looking for particular students I would play mental games with myself as I entered the school, predicting where I would discover the students I had set out to find. For the most part, these cliques were the same groupings of friends established in or before Grade 8. At the end of recess on September 16<sup>th</sup> I overheard, "Are we going to meet back here again? (Nod.) What class do you have? (Response.) Have fun!" The social groupings, and their respective "hang outs" had been established.

A final theme in the data about students' social concerns involved accounts

of social status among peers. The National Middle School Association (1995b) states that young adolescents “may exhibit immature behaviour because their social skills frequently lag behind their mental and physical maturity” (p. 39). Often, immature behaviour was used as a means of exploring one’s social status. Mark gave evidence to this during the student focus group:

If no one likes me I just bring toys to school. I do. I actually do. I bring little wrestlers and play with them and look around, make new friends . . . Big people. Big kids don’t play with toys. I never thought about that until now, that big kids don’t play with toys.  
(Student Focus Group Session)

It seemed that many boys joked and teased to create their social status (or to let it be known) among peers. During a Science class on September 17<sup>th</sup> I noticed the “boys at the back” who enjoyed sitting together and did their work in fits of effort-- and then antagonized each other over borrowing Liquid Paper. Eventually one student complained to the teacher, “I need white-out and Ian won’t give me his.” Ten minutes later (again), “Give me your white-out, Ian!” He did, for a while.

Jokes based on puns were common to hear from the boys, and the teachers often responded in a light-hearted manner. For example, during the first day’s Science class a boy from the back of the class spoke out, thinking he was funny. When the teacher, talking about the principles of buoyancy, asked for the differences between an oil rig and a pin he said, “One’s an oil rig and one’s a pin.” His peers saw this as being a “smart-aleck” and the joke promoted silence. The teacher laughed gently and redirected the question. Sarcasm was the second most

widely used form of humour, often used as a vehicle to complain: "Oh, I'll have *lots* of time tonight because you know I'll have absolutely *no* homework!" I did not hear many sexist, racist, or homophobic jokes due largely I suspect, to the teacher-student relationship that had developed in Grade 8. These students knew what forms of jokes I would have found unacceptable as their teacher.

On September 14<sup>th</sup> in Math class I overheard the importance of image among peers:

Konrad	What question are you on?
Donnie	Three. You?
Konrad	Three. [He's really on question two.]

The Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture (1997) reports that "peer pressure is at an all-time high" during adolescence (p. 10). The National Middle School Association (1995b) explains that students will often "experiment with new slang and behaviours as they search for a social position within their group, often discarding these 'new identities' at a later date" (p. 40). I noticed incidents of students establishing or maintaining power status among peers as they continued to manifest themselves and on September 14<sup>th</sup>, an epidemic of arm wrestling erupted and spread like a virus. By September 18<sup>th</sup>, it became an automatic response between students:

An offer for arm wrestling occurred when a boy felt threatened in losing an argument about the admission price to the Agricultural Exhibition on the weekend. He doesn't challenge the guy he's been arguing, but the guy behind him. O.K. Two minutes later--we're into it. The guy turns back around and challenges the

guy he's been arguing with. Other boys circle to watch; "I gotta see *this*." The two boys are both small. Another guy comes along and see's me writing, see's them, points to them with raised eyebrows and then laughs.

"Give it up--you aren't going to win." Now I can't see the wrestlers--they are completely surrounded by nine other boys, now eleven boys, now thirteen... "What's goin' on?" "Mike, you're a dead man--give it up."

The fight is over. That one, anyway. "Alright, let's go." Now seventeen. Some bigger boys are watching--will the stakes be raised? Intermittent talk about who's going (and when) to the Exhibition. Some discussion about if it's for *kids* or not. They all went last year.

Two girls watch from a distance, uninterested and seeing the wrestlers and seeing me, shake their heads and roll their eyes.

"Come on, Joey--come on... beat him." Twenty-three now. He does. A teacher enters and tries to disperse the crowds, but not to stop the arm wrestling. "Grade 9 students *only* in here," and leaves. But Grade 9's are the only students in the room anyway. (research journal)

Many of the girls, often in a room across the hall from the majority of the boys, were unimpressed with some of the boys' immature behaviours. One girl told me that "There should be all boy classes and all girl classes in Grade 9." Just the same, a few days later, the virus made a quantum leap across the hall, and the girls too started to arm wrestle, and then finally, co-ed matches were held.

While boys often attempted to define themselves in a crowd through jokes or loud voices, peer pressure encouraged girls to try new trends like body piercing or wearing "belly shirts."<sup>1</sup> New nicknames for both boys and girls were

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<sup>1</sup>

These are shirts which expose the bellybutton.

encouraged among peers. I wondered if establishing or maintaining social status among peers was perhaps heightened during the initial transition period as students explored new social dynamics in Grade 9.

Students sorted out their social concerns largely without structured aid from Nova High School. They established new groupings, managed the separation from close friends, and defined or sustained their social status among their peers. While addressing these social concerns and adjusting to Nova High School's climate, the students were most apprehensive about the high school's academic orientation.

### **Leaky Dams: Students' Academic Concerns**

The dam of the high school's traditional curriculum loomed over the students and many had stuck their fingers in a hole of the dam hoping to delay the feared flood; academics. The concerns about academics included increased homework, the difficulty of certain subjects, semestering, the length of the classes, and the change in teaching methodologies. Students spoke openly and frequently about their academic concerns. I speculated that this was perhaps partly because academic concerns were less personal than climate or social concerns. A second explanation could be that these concerns addressed the heart of the high school curriculum directly, what I earlier termed "academic dominance," what Dewey (1938) and Posner (1995) term a "traditional curriculum."

The most prevalent academic concern for students in Grade 9 was the

amount of homework. This was the most common verbal complaint about the transition that I heard. On the second day of school, one student came running towards me at lunch, "Mr. Van Zoost, something to put in your thesis: Math has too much homework!" In fact, I heard this so often that I felt compelled to pursue it further through participant observation in Math class:

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| Teacher | Everyone copied one through five? Excellent, we can keep moving.<br>(Homework assigned and students bow to work. Some general moaning about the amount of work being assigned. The boys in front of me laugh at how much there is to do. Then dead silence as pencils get pushed.) |
| Jordon  | Is this the end of class?  |
| Cameron | And homework.  |
| Jordon  | Yah--about six more pages probably.  |
| Cameron | Probably. (research journal, September 9 <sup>th</sup> )   |

I heard students complaining about homework in other subjects. It was difficult to make conclusions about the amount of homework students received as each student was registered in a different combination of courses. Some students who felt overwhelmed with the work were often taking what they considered, several more difficult courses during the same semester. I pursued the issue of homework in the student focus group and found similar responses; each student spoke of his or her experience uniquely since she or he each had a different course load. Math was not the only subject that had too much work according to the students: "I got all the hard courses now. Like I got English, Social Studies, and Math this semester and Social Studies and Math give you the most homework" (Student

Focus Group Session). Even though one parent said “He has too much homework. Although he doesn’t seem to have a problem with it. He thinks he deserves a little more time for himself,” another parent complained that she was “concerned about how *little* homework there is!!!!” (Parent Questionnaire). One Grade 9 teacher reported: “It’s so individual. Some kids never miss a beat. With others it takes some time.” By combining difficult course loads with varied levels of academic abilities and study skill habits, homework was “overwhelming” to 55% of the students, according to data from the student questionnaire (Appendix K).

The concerns about the amount of homework in Grade 9 seemed to be transmitted frequently by what I called the “myths of Math.” These were the stories that I heard repeatedly that “Math is hard.” I named them myths not only because of their wide spread and commonly accepted recounts, but also for the figurative explanations of math classes. The stories were often third person accounts and contained what sounded like exaggerated language such as “five hours of homework.” Students complained to each other before school about the hours they had spent at night doing math homework, or the number of problems that had been assigned. Stories about Math were told frequently enough that the Math teacher began to wonder what the students considered a “reasonable work load.” The Math teacher noted in a staff meeting (September 25<sup>th</sup>) that students with lower abilities were feeling frustrated with his subject, and attributed this to their repeated absences. The warnings about the amount of homework in Math

were passed on to the students before they arrived in Grade 9 and in the first week of September, these same students began telling the myths themselves:

Sandra      Math sucks.  
 Van Zoost    Why's that?  
 Sandra      I haven't even had Math yet! *He* told me.  
 (pointing)

and by the end of September,

Marty        There's no way it [Math] can get any  
 harder.  
  
 Ron          Oh Yah? Wait till it gets into trigonometry,  
 geometry and all that.  
 Marty        What's that?  
 Ron          I dunno. My Mom told me all about them.

Completing and copying the homework before school started increased as the days went by. On September 30<sup>th</sup> when I asked a student "Why bother copying the Math homework?" he responded that he could not afford to lose any more points for incomplete homework. Other students who had earned high marks in Grade 8 told me that Math was too easy. One student said that he had 107% on his first test. One parent told me about a "three page, single spaced, small font" letter that was written and circulated by another parent about the unreasonable amount of work assigned in Math. The increased expectations of Grade 9 became symbolically wrapped into the word "Math." At the beginning of October when I discussed these observations with the Math teacher, he investigated the concerns with his students. I was not in the school during this time and he reported that the

students agreed that the stories they told about Math were indeed myths.

I reconsidered the value that Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) place on the transmission of myths as important warning signals of change to students entering a transition process. I wondered about the difficulties which were created when the facts about Math class were disguised in myths. The Math teacher became unsure about his instruction. The myths also had the potential to mislead students about the actual workload in Math class. Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) do not discuss the potential dangers of students not taking the warning signals of change seriously because they are cloaked in myths. In this case study, the myths seemed to act more as a challenge or obstacle to overcome, than as a warning signal of change.

Semestering was the second largest academic issue identified by Grade 9 students. Most loved it and a few hated it. Research conducted by Fry (1996) at Nova High School noted similar satisfaction (88%) about semestering among the students. Repeatedly I heard how semestering was much easier because "you only had to worry about four courses." Organizationally, this meant that students did not feel the need to use their agendas to record homework, a skill which Nova Middle School teachers spent much effort developing. During the student focus group, students discussed the fewer demands of Nova High School's semestered system on their organizational skills:

There's just not as many classes and it's better that way--just easier to keep organized and keep track of what you're doing.

Getting back to the organizational thing--it's harder to organize *Splat Shot* than it is to organize yourself for Grade 9. (Laughter)

Like--about organization--last year I always used my agenda but this year I think I used it three times. When I only have homework in two subjects (Math and Social Studies) then I know I can just flip open my binder and I'll have it written down or something. It's easy to remember. (Student Focus Group Session)

Students required fewer binders to keep track of four subjects, as opposed to the eight courses in Grade 8. I was surprised at the number of students who expressed their excitement of having fewer binders to carry.

Some students reported other benefits of limiting the course load to four subjects. These students explained that they had less homework because of their course combinations, or expressed that they liked concentrating their effort on four, rather than eight, subjects:

I like semestering better because of less homework and stuff and I'm a lot more organized because last year you could have eight different things for homework and this year there's only four and usually you don't have homework in some of them.

I like semestering way better. Cause I got all my hard subjects first semester and I always start out really good, working hard and then slowly diminishing into my nothing [he slows down the speed and lowers his voice gradually during this sentence]. Anyway, so I get it all done and it gives you the motivation--right? I only have to do this half the year. Like if you really hate something, I only have to do this homework half the year. I only have this person [teacher] half the year. (Student Focus Group Session)

The Grade 9 Vice-Principal saw the second semester as a fresh start:

One of the great things that I've liked about semestering at the Grade 9 level is that it has given the opportunity for people who have perhaps failed three subjects first semester to do something about it second semester. . . (Interview with the Grade 9 Vice-Principal)

The concentration of the course load was the most common teacher warning at the beginning of the year. Four out of five Grade 9 teachers mentioned this as their biggest concern for Grade 9 students urging the students not to "fall behind." They also offered these warnings in class:

On the first day of classes: Everything in semestering comes really *fast*. It's not like Grade 8 where you could improve after Christmas to help you pass the year. Get off to a good start--like a sprinter's start to a 100 meter dash, it's hard to catch up with a poor start.

During the third week of classes: You can see what I mean when I told you at the beginning of the year that you have to stay on top [of the concepts] because once you start to slide, it's hard to get caught up. (research journal)

The semestering system was also a predominant concern of parents. They reported a lack of knowledge about semestering and how class expectations were different in the condensed amount of time. Some parents wrote about the potential hazard of having a specific course during the first semester and then not again until the second semester of the following year. It was felt that valuable skills could be lost during this time period. Another parent wrote about her daughter's unease with the semestering system stating "She's lacking this year, separated from friends and with the lack of stimulation in class--not the variety of things she had

last year and her concentration has gone down" (Parent Questionnaire). The concern about the dramatic change between Nova Middle School and Nova High School's organizational structures was mentioned by several teachers during the interviews and this frustration was best articulated by this Grade 8 teacher's summary:

. . . it's just a whole new ball game up there in Grade 9 and I don't think they're ready for it. The middle school philosophy and semestering philosophy are at such odds with each other that – I don't know. . . I don't really have a solution for what we can do. I guess what I would like is that I would like the Grade 9's to come to us. I would like the semestering to stop. I just feel that it's slaughtering lots of kids, mostly boys, and either we have to modify our middle school philosophy to where we're not going to do the team thing, and I don't want to give that up or they have to stop semestering in order for it to be a better transition. (Interview with a Grade 8 teacher)

Some Grade 9 teachers expressed concerns about the students adjusting to the changes presented by semestering, specifically the heavier work load and the length of 80 minute classes.

According to the student questionnaire, most students did not feel overwhelmed by the amount of work being assigned, and saw the course load as being reasonable. This data seemed to contradict the common complaints about homework that the students were verbalizing during informal conversations. I investigated this discrepancy further in the student focus group and the students informed me that the amount of homework depended upon the courses in which the student was enrolled. Students stressed the importance of balancing the more

difficult courses between the two semesters: "Try to even out your major courses. English and Math separate, and sort the other ones out too or you'll have a *really* really boring semester" (Student Focus Group Session). Similarly, parents (in general) supported the Grade 9 work load according to the responses of the parent questionnaire. The exceptions were those parents whose children were enrolled in too many or too few courses which were, according to the students, more demanding.

Compatible with reports from Wells (1996), longer classes were a major concern for many students. A few students offered that the day seemed to move faster because recess was scheduled much earlier in the morning at Nova High School than at Nova Middle School, or because there were only four classes a day in the semestered Grade 9 schedule:

... it seems like the 80 minute classes [in Grade 9] go faster than even the 35 minute classes [in Grade 8] because you go and just sit and work hard, like they keep things moving faster and once you're out of that class it's like a quarter of your day gone already. Lunch hour seems to go longer than the class. (Student Focus Group Session)

The more common response was "the classes are *so long*"; "the days are longer... man are they longer!" Consider for example, this poem written by a male student:

Dingggggg!  
 Finally 80 minutes  
 is up.  
 No more [specific teacher].  
 The halls fill.  
 The kids and their noise

invades the halls like  
 rushing water through a culvert.  
 Everyone walks.  
 Slow, slowing, slower.  
 We all go to our classes  
 and sit down only  
 to sit through what  
 seems like an eternity  
 of boredom and then  
 start all over again.

I heard this perspective of long classes with less frequency as September unfolded.

For Lynn, the combination of being removed from her friends and the 80 minute classes seemed to bury her enthusiasm and interest in school which I observed as her Grade 8 teacher:

I can't stand semestering. It's *so* long. It's the variety that I liked [last year] to keep me going--something different. It makes the day so long, especially when you're not with your friends. Whoa... it's *bad*. (Student Focus Group Session)

Lynn's mother reports:

[my daughter] finds the classroom time for each period / subject too long. She appears to be having difficulty with the lack of variety in her days. She does not feel connected to anyone (e.g. friends) during the day--this may be of benefit for her concentration and studies but makes the day long and un-enjoyable for her! (Parent Questionnaire)

By the end of September, attitudes towards semestering wavered. The novelty and newness of semestering had worn off and several students told me that they no longer liked their semestered timetable because they had too many tests, and the material was covered too rapidly. Although these were not the initial impressions

of the Grade 9 students, further research to follow students' attitudes and suggestions about semestering in Grade 9 at Nova High School could be useful in providing a larger context to position these students' initial concerns.

The move away from a progressive philosophy of education to that of a more traditional curriculum in some classrooms at Nova High School was evident to me as I observed teachers' methodologies. This was a tacit student concern. I was aware of the students' concerns not from their direct statements, but from review of many comments I wrote down in my research journal which were then explored in the student focus group. As previously introduced in Chapter Two, Wells (1996) notes sharp contrasts between the teaching methodologies of a progressive middle school and a traditional high school. My discussion about the move away from a more progressive curriculum towards one which is more traditional attempts to recognize the wide spectrum between these two extremes as explained by Dewey (1938):

Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of *Either-Or's*, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities. When forced to recognize that the extremes cannot be acted upon, it is still inclined to hold that they are all right in theory but that when it comes to practical matters circumstances compel us to compromise. Educational philosophy is no exception. (p. 17)

As such, educators often position themselves individually within this spectrum. These personal positions may, or may not, embrace the historical, organizational, or philosophical frameworks of the structures in which these educators work.

The students at Nova Middle School were used to a variety of teaching strategies as suggested by the National Middle School Association (1995b) and described by the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture (1996). Using diverse teaching strategies within a class was something the students and I were used to in my Grade 8 classroom. For example, students in my classes experienced socially-based learning activities, guest presenters, student-generated assessment tools, performances, demonstrations and exhibitions, and local, regional, and inter-provincial school trips. I am not suggesting that these type of experiences do not occur in high school classrooms or that they occur in all middle level classrooms; they are representative of a more progressive educational framework which may occur at any level of school. I mention them because I want to portray some of the experiences which the students of this research had experienced in Grade 8. My teaching bias towards more progressive oriented curricula must be recognized because it filters my perceptions and influences my descriptions of other educators' practices. I find sitting and listening difficult, and the combination of the two often impossible for longer lengths of time; I have never been very "good" at being a student in a classroom where curriculum is rooted in cultural transmission. During one such class at Nova High School I wrote:

This class should be called "training in extending your attention span." Mine feels rolled over and over like a bread roller on fresh dough. It is turning my head into something thinner, it feels more

**fragile or frail. It does cover more surface area, spread out--it's stretched to go farther--does it? I should be adding question marks all through this paragraph. (research journal, September 14<sup>th</sup>)**

**This text reflects my experience as I observed the movement away from a progressive curriculum and towards a more traditional curriculum in one classroom. I empathized when students said they were bored, doodled incessantly or complained that the classes were too long. As students completed textbook problems I recorded that it seemed as if the students were "on a treadmill, everyone in here doing the same thing until mastery of the skill has been achieved" (research journal, September 9<sup>th</sup>).**

**These observations reflect some of the possible consequences of a sharp contrast in curriculum frameworks. I was able to participate for myself how it felt to move from a student-centered experiential curriculum to one which was subject-centered and based on a transmission style of teaching. For example, I noticed the decline of socially-based instructional activities, and often felt the silence. After 50 minutes in one class I noticed that the students had not spoken, except to answer comprehension questions with sentence fragments. These experiences became less and less noticeable to me as I became acclimatized to a more traditional curriculum perspective than my own. I was extremely grateful for this experience as I learned a lot about my own teaching prejudices and philosophy.**

**The students were quick to point out any inconsistencies between the Grade 8 and Grade 9 teachers' approach. They noticed specific variations in how to**

write an essay or even remarked about different teachers' likes and dislikes such as "[Grade 8 teacher] doesn't like Danielle Steele." Broader observations about the move away from a progressive curriculum towards a more traditional curriculum were made by students. For example, I overheard this conversation between a newly dating couple on September 17<sup>th</sup>:

Dave Grade 9 is better [than Grade 8] because the Grade 8 teachers were stupid.

Lisa What do you mean--stupid?

Dave Last year we'd have to draw and stuff--this year it's all work, so I don't get as bored.

Later that day, Dave was excitedly passing around and smelling the scented markers in Science class. Other students said that they worked harder in Grade 9 and some told me that they wished they had better abilities to memorize information.

I was reminded again of the concerns articulated by Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) about students' expectations of high school not being met and causing a bitterness towards future school experiences. Wells (1996) reported a reduced interest in creative writing from the students after they moved to high school due to changes in teaching methodologies. My observations about the dramatic changes between curricula frameworks made me shudder when I considered the claims of what VanSciver (1985) terms "educational malpractice." The curriculum gap was larger than I had anticipated and pressed me further to try to more fully understand the data.

By the end of September, students' concerns about homework had diminished, struggles continued with individual subjects and perspectives began to change about semestering. Although students had largely become acclimatized to the longer classes, they, as did I, continued to notice the shift towards a more traditional, transmissive curriculum in some classrooms at Nova High School. I began to wonder how a transition program might aid in this curriculum shift, and questioned the level of support the students had received with their initial climate, social, and academic concerns in the high school.

### **Filtered Water**

The students moving to Nova High School addressed the climate and social concerns with little structured help from the high school staff. Individual teachers responded to the students' largest concern, academics, with different expectations and methodologies. As students arrived with high expectations of high school they were introduced to a more traditional curriculum in some classrooms and they were met with few supports in a transition program. What does the data mean? What implications arise because of this data? What possible consequences could occur because of me reporting this data publically to the staffs of Nova Middle School and Nova High School? These questions led me revisit the data in a more in-depth analysis.

## **Chapter Five: Building the Puzzle**

**. . . you don't need a large vocabulary, a knowledge of trivia, or an understanding of complex mathematics. All you need is the ability to take a jumble of disconnected statements and organize them. . . . It is important to read clues carefully, so you get all information available without drawing false conclusions. . . . The clues provided may seem arbitrary at first glance. . . . In some harder puzzles, it may be necessary to develop a tentative hypothesis in order to solve the puzzle. (How to solve a logic problem, 1997, pp. 6-7)**

**Borrowing the metaphor from LeComte and Preissle (1993), I compare analysing the data presented in the previous chapter to building a puzzle. The research literature of Chapter Two and the school contexts of Nova Middle School and Nova High School provide the defining outside pieces of the puzzle and provide a frame for the data. Clustering the data into students' concerns about the high school climate, their social concerns, and academic concerns can be likened to sorting the pieces by their colour and shape. In such a manner, I examined the pieces of the puzzle both individually, and as a cluster of data in Chapter Four. In this chapter, I begin to move the data into larger patterns creating images with the shapes and colours. As pieces connect, four small pictures in the large transition puzzle emerge: the role of students' voices, a need for the articulation of the roles and responsibilities within the school community during the transition process, the**

contradictory perceptions of Grade 9 teachers, and the possible consequences of the dramatic shifts in curriculum frameworks between Nova Middle School and Nova High School. The analysis of the data does not dismiss the framework of the original research question, but explores the contexts in which the students' concerns have risen and provides direction towards possible means of addressing the students' concerns reported in this study.

### **Missing Pieces: The Role of Students' Voices**

Students' voices could suggest possible directions for responding to the concerns identified in Chapter Four. Comments about the length of classes, feeling bored, or missing the variety of instructional practices which were experienced in some Nova Middle School classrooms offer guidance to Nova High School educators for creating a developmentally responsive curriculum. The questions from students about the location of their classes and the guidance office should not be overlooked. Although students were in the same building for Grades 7 and 8, some remained unfamiliar with the high school setting. The fact that these voices were largely unheard in the past alludes to a deeper concern: that the students' voices may have generally been neglected.

The issue of neglecting students' voices was evident from the Grade 9 staff. It was often assumed that the students were mature and capable of expressing their needs to educators. Often, the staff relied on the students to relay

their needs without prompting. For example, a comment from a Grade 9 teacher reflected that it was not until the second semester that students started to ask for help on their own. Her expectation of the students was that they would be capable of telling her “I need an oral test” or “I need some things to be adjusted.” This assumes that students are articulate enough to identify their academic weaknesses for an educator.

Secondly, this position assumes that students would be confident and comfortable enough to express one of their “weaknesses” to a Grade 9 teacher. Meason and Woods (1984) suggest that this is often not the case. They report that during the transition period students are often uncomfortable approaching their new teachers. In a context of transition, a period of insecurity, change, and high emotion, this is perhaps asking too much of the student. Data from Lynn, a student who participated in the student focus group, demonstrates this point. Lynn’s self-description demonstrates the meta-cognition of this young woman. For example, she writes “Before I get into an argument with anyone, I always try to think of their side before I utter a word. If their argument looks like it’s going to win, I won’t argue, I’ll agree. I find it can make life easier sometimes.” As her former teacher I could attest to her confidence and leadership. Yet, when she was having a difficult time during the transition without friends in her classes she did not feel comfortable approaching the Guidance Counsellor. When I mentioned Lynn’s concern to the Guidance Counsellor he was confused about why Lynn had

not approached him. This data signals the importance of providing spaces where students' voices can be heard, and alerts educators to the oversights which can occur when it is assumed that students are comfortable in voicing their concerns.

The lack of social skills which I witnessed in a class setting discussed in Chapter Four depicts another example of students' unheard voices. Gerald's group became dysfunctional without him, dependent upon his ability to foster the group's dialogue. Social-based learning, though developed in the middle school, had not eliminated the need for students to learn about communication, cooperative learning, personality conflicts, and other social skills in the high school. The teacher in this Grade 9 classroom did not seem to view social skills as a developmental process needing further refinement. In this incident, it was assumed that students would be capable of knowing when and how their voices could be expressed among peers. If students were unable to discuss a textbook problem among peers, it seemed unreasonable to me to expect students to be able to voluntarily approach an adult about a personal learning difficulty.

The students' concerns about Nova High School's climate, their social concerns and academic concerns as examined in Chapter Four were not given a formalized opportunity to be discussed by the staff of Nova High School, or with the Grade 9 students. Instead, individual teachers responded to the students' concerns in an unstructured manner. Without discussing the students' identified concerns, generalized beliefs about the abilities of Grade 9 students could be

developed by the staff. These ungrounded beliefs could limit educators' abilities to understand their students' needs, or to listen to their students' individual voices.

### **Connecting Pieces: A Need for Articulation of Roles and Responsibilities**

The students reported a feeling of displacement at Nova High School, as discussed in Chapter Four, but these concerns about the high school's climate were not easily voiced to educators. In the middle school, the homeroom teacher assumed the role of an advisor for her or his class. A problem arose during the transition to Grade 9 when a student who had the capability of articulating and the confidence to express her concern did not know whom to approach. In Grade 9, and without a homeroom teacher (except for registration on the first day) the students were instructed to contact the Guidance Counsellor if they experienced any difficulties. The fact that the Guidance Counsellor did not know Lynn (or vice versa) made communication as difficult, if not *more* difficult, than approaching an unfamiliar Grade 9 teacher. These difficulties were further exposed by staff concerns about the transition program: who was responsible for developing and implementing the transition activities?

The lack of clarity as to who was responsible for orchestrating the transition program was one of the fundamental problems of the transition process: "I think... [I am] the person who's supposed to be organizing it [the Grade 8 to Grade 9 transition program] - if I *am* supposed to be organizing it - that's one of the

problems” (Interview with the Guidance Counselor). Instead, students sought opportunities to express their concerns and teachers responded to these students’ needs in an unorganized manner. With neither Nova Middle School nor Nova High School staffs assuming the responsibility of organizing a transition program, little occurred.

The need for a more comprehensive transition program was strongly and consistently voiced during the staff interviews, with only two exceptions. The Grade 9 Vice-Principal was content with the current status of the transition program:

I like what’s being done now--basically being spear-headed by the teachers and through a lot of incentive from (the Guidance Counsellor). It’s really going well. There’s always that notion that one can always do more. . . . For now, I’m pleased with what’s being done. (Interview with the Grade 9 Vice-Principal)

and a Grade 9 teacher explained during an interview:

They’re [students] isolated, and once you come out of there [Nova Middle School] it’s like breaking out of a cocoon and it’s time to let the wings dry and fly away. I think it’s a natural process. Very honestly, I think if we did nothing at all and we let them go through there [Nova Middle School] and when they come out--if they have the foundation from people who care about them and care about their education--they don’t even need what you call a transition program. They’ll break out of their own cocoons and they’ll fly on their own.

These issues would need to be explored further so that staff members could understand the multiple levels of commitment expected from educators in implementing a transition program.

I questioned if much of the students' stress discussed in Chapter Four's section, "Divination," could have been caused by the lack of role definition in the transition program. As previously stated, one male student wrote in his fictional text about the transition: "Billy had lots of worries [about the move to Nova High School], and since he was an only child he had no other siblings to help him with them." Consistent with the reports from the student questionnaire, this data suggests to me that students often relied on siblings or older friends to explain about the move to high school.

Stress was evident when students reported issues of fear as discussed in Chapter Four. Often, it was the lack of information (e.g. location of classrooms, not knowing the teachers, or not knowing who was going to be with them in their classes) that caused stress during the first few days of school. Not knowing who to approach (and perhaps feeling uncomfortable to approach them) about their concerns could have increased the amount of stress some students experienced. The fact that I was constantly asked for directions or for help with individualized timetables indicates that students may prefer to ask for help from people they know.

The Grade 9 students were excluded from the middle level corridor and as one Grade 9 teacher suggested, perhaps the students felt "abandoned" by their previous teachers. The Grade 9 students were perhaps structurally fated to have little contact with their previous teachers, the adults they knew best in the school.

The middle level staff spent their energies “kicking out” students from the middle level hall, off the bench, or away from the gym. How unfortunate, I thought, that the middle level staff was not used more as a student resource during the transition program. The insights that previous teachers could offer about specific students were given in the transition meeting (September 25<sup>th</sup>), but no formalized structure provided occasions for the middle level staff to speak with the Grade 9 students themselves. This missed opportunity was not only potentially beneficial for the Grade 9 students, but also for their previous Nova Middle School teachers.

Firstly, witnessing how students are adapting to Nova High School could help Grade 8 teachers improve their ability to inform their current students about what to expect during the transition. Secondly, it could provide assurance to Grade 8 teachers as they learned about the current status of their previous students who were now at Nova High School. I felt this assurance during the first Grade 8 and Grade 9 teachers’ meeting about the transition to Nova High School (September 1997). It felt good to meet with the teachers of my previous students and get a sense of the students’ progress in Grade 9. Furthermore, the experience of this research provided me with an even better sense of the Grade 9 students’ progress. The opportunities to meet with previous students were not available to other Grade 8 staff members. Instead, with little or no contact with the middle level staff, the Grade 9 students redefined their experiences in the middle level as “babying” and Nova Middle School teachers remained concerned about their previous students as

they “sank or swim” in the high school, as discussed in Chapter Four.

Another role was left ill-defined, that of the parents of Grade 9 students.

The need for parents to be involved with their child’s education during the transition process was articulated by the Grade 8 Vice-Principal:

I think a parent involvement in this Grade 8 to Grade 9 transition is really important and it’s not done. Mainly because they’re coming from this very sheltered, controlled environment in the Middle Level to survival of the fittest and they are not the fittest in the 9 to 12 spectrum; they are the weakest of the siblings. Parents don’t understand the psychological and physical difficulties these kids are going to go through making that step – and that’s not even talking about educational requirements that now are totally different from what they are at the Middle Level – completely different. Parents need to be well versed in those changes and I think they would be requesting a lot more support from the Board to assist their kids in this transition if they knew what it was about. (Interview with the Grade 8 Vice-Principal)

The Grade 9 Vice-Principal was unsure of the parents’ role during the transition process. After reviewing the results from the parent questionnaire, he explained:

In reading the comments that were written by the parents in your survey, one of the big things that I drew out of that was that they needed more information about semestering and they needed more than just knowing that it was going to be an 80 minute class and that they would have 4 subjects per semester. I got the feeling that they needed information about how is being in an 80 minute class different from what they have been doing. And I think we need to go that route this year--how do you prepare for 80 minutes.

[at the end of the interview:] We didn’t talk about parents any. I don’t know the answer to that. I don’t know how to ensure that they feel comfortable about what’s happening . . . I don’t know how to handle that one yet, that’s a puzzle for me. Maybe it’s enough that we’re aware that it’s a struggle . . . (Interview with the Grade 9 Vice-Principal)

When I asked the parents on a questionnaire, "Who, or what was most helpful for you in preparing for this year of school?" the majority of responses said that having children previously enrolled in the school helped. Others favourably mentioned some of the transition activities of which their son or daughter had spoken. One parent noted that "my son is the only one who gave me information about Grade 9." The need for parents to receive more information was clear not only from the responses of the questionnaire, but also from data collected during the parent interviews.

The lack of role definitions in Nova High School's transition program could have undermined initiatives intended to ameliorate the high school's climate. Without a strong transition framework to begin the Grade 9 students' induction into the high school, generating enthusiasm about school spirit and extra-curricular involvement was unnecessarily challenged. During September, a time of uncertainty and change, the ill-defined transition platform could have deterred rather than encouraged students to become involved in the high school's community. Given that students were initially enthusiastic about joining school activities as they entered Grade 9, the effects of the transition process could have influenced the students' attitudes about becoming involved in the school. Defining the roles of the different members of the school community during the transition process could create a stronger sense of security, comfort and community. This could provide a better base for students to respond to the invitations of becoming

involved in the school.

Finally, the lack of defining roles and responsibilities during the transition process leaves the school community to merely speculate about the students' concerns. Without a collegial and communicative approach to the transition process, the school community is left with uncertainties which could generate stories about the students' experiences. These stories could serve as warning signals or potential obstacles as in the "myths of Math." Furthermore, the stories generated in the school community from a lack of communication about the transition process to Nova High School could endorse impressions such as "the Grade 8 teachers at Nova Middle School 'babied' the students" or they could promote the depiction of Grade 9 teachers as uncaring educators.

### **Pieces That Don't Fit: Perceptions About the Grade 9 Teachers**

Perhaps influenced by my Bachelor of Commerce background, I considered that the Grade 9 teachers were in need of a marketing manager; they needed to improve their public image. The polarity in the data about the perceptions of Grade 9 teachers warrants investigation. There are strong needs for the Grade 9 staff to clarify the concept of care at Nova High School, to share this view with Nova Middle School's staff, and to help students understand how the ethics of care and justice can coexist. During an interview, one teacher expressed her concern about the image of Grade 9 educators:

**It really does seem like there are perceptions which haven't been overcome yet [between Nova Middle School and Nova High School staffs]. . . . the Grade 8 Teachers think that we don't care a lot. . . . I wonder if the kids pick up on this myth [from the Grade 8 teachers]. (Interview with a Grade 9 teacher)**

**It would be beneficial for both schools to learn more about how care is portrayed to students. Is it checking agendas to ensure that homework was written down? Is it calling home about incomplete assignments? Issues of care and responsibility are not necessarily incompatible, but will remain perceived as such until both staffs explore these issues together.**

**Noddings (1992) offers insights into the concept of care in school. She criticizes liberal education as it draws on too narrow a set of human capacities, and thus should be rejected as a model of universal education. Furthermore, Noddings reports that dictatorial methods which assume all learners have the same needs disregard individual interests and purposes. Instead, Noddings suggests a more balanced curriculum would help all students to discover their unique talents and develop respect for the talents of others. She encourages educators to imagine themselves as parents of a large heterogeneous family advocating the unique interests and capabilities of each individual. Noddings' (1992) reports may provide the staffs of Nova Middle School and Nova High School with a model for exploring the notion of care. If the concept of care could be better articulated the staffs could help students discuss different ways in which educators convey care, which could facilitate the transition to Nova High School.**

Once the concept of care in the high school has been clarified, the Grade 9 teachers could benefit from sharing this vision with their students and parents. By articulating how the Grade 9 staff responds to their students' needs, clearer expectations could be offered to students and parents. Without this clarification, students may remain confused about some of the Grade 9 teachers' seemingly contradictory expectations of responsibility and care.

### **Glances at the Picture on the Box: Philosophical Shifts**

A fourth picture in the puzzle begins to take shape in the examination of the pieces concerning the move from a progressive curriculum towards a more traditional curriculum. Some findings in the research which demonstrate this philosophical shift include: observations about teachers' methodologies, teachers' recommendations for restructuring the schools, poor student combinations within Grade 9 classes, and the concerns reported about at-risk students. The social, academic, and climatic concerns expressed by students were often a reflection of sharp changes in the educational structure of Nova High School in contrast to Nova Middle School. The issues discussed in this section explore the contexts of the students' concerns and consequently rely on data from educators and parents.

*Teaching methodologies*

Complaints from students about long classes and a lack of variety within a class suggests that students were aware of a shift in curriculum frameworks and consequently some of the teaching methodologies. The methodologies I observed at Nova High School often led students towards pre-determined truths, the teacher's understanding of knowledge, suggesting beliefs in what Dewey (1938) terms a traditional curriculum. This generalization about the instruction I observed at Nova High School is incomplete and perhaps unfair as it does not describe many of the day-to-day activities that I observed in Grade 9 classrooms. Each teacher had developed his or her own teaching style and methodology, and it would be erroneous to assume that all teachers in Grade 9 supported a strict academic focus of determining success. Similarly, I do not want to suggest that all educators at Nova Middle School exclusively support what Posner (1995) terms an experiential curriculum. I use the curriculum frameworks to help discuss middle school and high school practices, but I want to avoid the frequent generalization of progressive middle school and traditional high school. As outlined in Chapter Three, "Leaky Dams: Students' Academic Concerns," individual teachers determine their own curriculum beliefs which may, or may not, reflect the generalized curriculum beliefs often found in school organization in which the teachers operate.

More deliberate investigations of effective teaching methodologies used in a

semestered high school could be of great value to the Grade 9 at Nova High School. These discussions could be of significant value to teachers who were attempting to deliver a curriculum which responded to individual student's needs in an institution designed to promote cultural transmission. The Vice-Principal of Grade 9 reported that requests for staff inservicing about how to adjust teaching methodologies in a semestered structure had been denied by the Regional School Board in the past. Creating occasions for the staff to share insights about their methodologies and to discuss areas of difficulty may be the ideal professional development for this Grade 9 staff. Support from colleagues at other grade levels, schools, the Regional School Board or the Department of Education and Culture could offer additional guidance. Further research to determine not only the needs of the staff, but also the desires and commitment of the staff towards collaborative professional development could provide future directions.

### *Restructuring the school*

Several staff members advocated reorganizing the structures of both Nova Middle School and Nova High School. Some educators suggested that Grades 7, 8 and 9 should be together on one timetable, with a common Vice-Principal. Conversely, I was told that the problems associated with the transition to Grade 9 would subsequently be deferred until Grade 10. Others indicated that the two staffs may be resistant to restructuring suggestions. Further research would need

to be conducted to determine the benefits and feasibility of grouping these three grades together into Nova Middle School's structure.

Some modifications of the schools' structures could be more easily accomplished. Two teachers urged a re-working of the timetables to create a common recess and lunch time among Grades 7, 8 and 9. I preferred the proposal which recommended that the Grade 9 teachers should have a homeroom, and an opportunity to spend time with this group of students. On the first morning, I noticed how quickly the students identified themselves with their homeroom teacher, but they did not return to this formation again after the first day's registration. In a school that I visited elsewhere in the province (facing a comparable transition) the Grade 9 students told me that they enjoyed the homeroom time in the morning to socialize, and the teachers took the daily responsibility of monitoring these students. If a student was having difficulties during the transition period, it was addressed by the homeroom teacher.

Co-curricular and extra-curricular activities were mentioned during the staff interviews. Although involving Grade 9 students in components of Nova Middle School's programs (e.g. an exploratory program, or possibly a peer tutoring program) would not necessitate structural changes, it would require structural flexibility. Further research to determine students' interest and staffs' commitment to these ideas would be necessary.

*Poor student combinations within a class*

The Grade 9 teachers reported difficulties in their ability to respond to the diverse, challenging, and multiple behavioural and educational needs of the students in their classes. They often accredited this to poor combinations of students within a class. The nature of computer-generated class lists further promotes the philosophical shift between Nova Middle School and Nova High School. Arranging students randomly and without individual consideration, neglects the very principles of Nova Middle School's philosophical framework: to respond to the students' emotional, social, physical and intellectual needs. The computer-generated individualized timetables disregard the individual placement needs of a student. Furthermore, these timetables dismiss the often difficult student combinations which are arbitrarily created for teachers to manage. By contrast, Nova Middle School's classes are constructed collaboratively by the students' previous teachers, attending to the possible implications of specific student combinations. Where in the past class groupings had regarded students' friends, abilities, personalities, or behavioural needs, Nova High School removes these considerations, making the transition to high school a more abrupt change.

*At-risk students*

Students who were repeating Grade 9 were identified by their peers as "repeaters." These students were not academically successful in Grade 9. A

Grade 9 teacher pointed out in an interview that “sometimes failing is what it takes to make a student ‘get it’ and become more accountable.” The Grade 9 Vice-Principal liked semestering because it allowed students who had failed several subjects to have a “fresh start” in the second semester. A Grade 8 teacher reported that it seemed to her that if students made it past Grade 9 they could continue on through to graduation with little difficulty. This data sheds light on the issue of “failing” in Grade 9 when pieced together. Further research and support for at-risk students during the transition to high school is needed at Nova Middle School and at Nova High School. Transition programs that identify at-risk students and provide them with support influence the students’ likelihood of success in high school (De Mesquita, 1992; Evaluation of the Bridge Program, 1991; Grannis, 1989; Lane, 1988; Linney & Brondino, 1993; Pantleo, 1992; Smith, 1997). The “bottleneck” of failing students in Grade 9 at Nova High School could reflect, in part, the shifting definition of success towards high school terms, academics.

### **Final Pieces**

The analysis of the data has identified further research topics which could expand the understanding of the transition from Nova Middle School to Nova High School: a possible longitudinal study of students’ attitudes towards semestering; investigating the feasibility and the school community’s interest in restructuring the schools to incorporate Grade 9 into Nova Middle School; and inquiring about

the Grade 9 staff's professional development interests. The analysis has also shed light on some of the possible problems which lay beneath the students' concerns: the possibility that the students' voices were not recognized during the transition process; a need for the articulation of the roles and responsibilities of members in the school community during the transition to high school; the varying perceptions of the Grade 9 teachers; and the dissimilar philosophical frameworks of Nova Middle School and Nova High School.

If this research is to be of value to Nova Middle School and Nova High School, the findings ought to be discussed by members representing the entire school community. Rather than relying on the fragmented efforts of individual staff members, the larger school community could respond to the needs of students during the transition to high school. The analysis led me to consider alternatives which might be used by the school community at large, and towards recommendations which responded to the voices of the research: students, parents and educators. As I began to form recommendations, I frequently returned to examine the pieces connected during this analysis.

## **Chapter Six: Making Music**

**. . . the world is broken into fragments and pieces that once were joined together in a unified whole But now too many stand alone There's too much separation We can resolve to come together in the new beginning. . . We can learn We can teach We can share the myths the dream the prayer the notion that we can do better (Chapman, 1995)**

Following the lines of thought developed in the analysis of the data, I have outlined the recommendations in this chapter around the members of the school community. The recommendations could be used as a preliminary discussion in examining possible roles each of these members could assume in a transition program. To facilitate the collaboration of the school community, I have suggested a transition team. Further ideas for student orientation, parent involvement, staff inservices and the support of the Regional School Board and provincial Department of Education and Culture are presented as separate sections. These discussions could illuminate possible directions when considering the underlying problems of the students' concerns as outlined in Chapter Five. The final sections in this chapter reflect on the research process, the implications of my new understandings as a Grade 8 teacher, and the importance of the larger school community to respond to students' concerns.

### **Composers: A Transition Team**

In response to the undefined roles in the school community to implement a transition program between Nova Middle School and Nova High School as discussed in Chapter Five, I propose a transition team consisting of interested educators, parents and students from both Grade 8 and Grade 9. The transition team could only be as useful as the staffs' interest in supporting the team's initiatives. Furthermore, the team's effectiveness would be dependent upon the members' abilities to listen and respond to the students' concerns. The transition team could be legitimized further with endorsement, support, and guidance from the Regional School Board. The school's Advisory Council, Parent Association and Student Council might want to work with the transition team and even take on some of the responsibilities in the transition program.

The components of the transition program could be constructed by this team. I would also urge this committee to consider further studies on issues raised in this research. For example, data taken from other times in the Grade 9 academic year could be useful to the committee. One of Wells' participants said, "At the beginning of the year, I didn't really miss it [middle school] because I wanted to move on. Then I found out high school wasn't as exciting as I thought it would be" (1996, p. 103). Research conducted on a smaller scale could provide valuable data, such as asking the students at a later time in Grade 9, "What combination of courses works best in a semester?" Passing this data on to Grade 8

students could improve their future experiences in Grade 9. Other research such as the role of parents during school transitions, staff collegiality, or the effects of transition programs would be useful to the transition team. This team might also be able to examine the poor student combinations in Grade 9 classes as presented in Chapter Five, or offer additional support programs for identified at-risk students.

### **Auditions: Grade 9 Orientation**

A component lacking in the transition program is a Grade 9 students' orientation in the Fall. Many students experienced initial concerns which, for most, faded quickly. As discussed in Chapter Four, getting used to semestering and knowing the location of classrooms were the two most significant problems that students faced and could be easily alleviated. Furthermore, as presented in Chapter Five, students' voices of concern were generally neglected during this initial school period and could have aided in a more successful student transition. The school community could address these concerns in structured orientation sessions at the beginning of September. I have listed suggestions for activities which could help students during the first month of school in Appendix M.

**Chorus: Parental Involvement**

The transition team could prepare specific activities for parents which respond to the concerns expressed by parents about their lack of information and low participation in their son's or daughter's move to Nova High School as discussed in Chapter Five. Parents offered many suggestions on how to improve the transition process. Most frequent was the request for a parent orientation session:

I think towards the end of Grade 8 there should have been a parent session on semestering and course selection--the reasoning about it and the expectations of the teachers. That would have made one more comfortable. I am still having a hard time grasping the idea that they're going to do a whole year's work in four months.  
(Interview with a parent)

Parent orientation session--definitely. When we came into Nova Middle School in Grade 6, we met in the band room and all the teachers came in and the Guidance Counsellor said his door was always open. We felt good that the middle school was protected from the rest of the high school. (Interview with a parent)

Beyond a parent information session on the topic of semestering in the Spring of Grade 8, I would encourage parents to be informed about their son's or daughter's choice of courses in each semester. As discussed in Chapter Three, students identified that the balance of courses in a semester often determined the amount of homework they experienced. For some, more difficult course loads led students to complain about the quantity of homework. Parents were requested to sign a "course selection sheet" for the first time in the Spring of 1998. This served as the

major communication vehicle from Nova High School about their son's or daughter's Grade 9 year. In future years, the course selection process could be expanded, allowing parents to become better informed about the combination of courses in a semestered system and their possible consequences.

A "Meet the Teacher Night," as executed at Nova Middle School was requested by parents and some of the Grade 9 staff. During this function at Nova Middle School, parents were invited to visit the school one night and were welcomed by the administration and guidance counsellor. Parents toured through the classrooms meeting the teachers casually and returned to the gymnasium for snacks. Parents found that "putting a face on the teacher" was comforting, and gave a context to the stories they heard from their son or daughter. Initiatives of this sort could help the Grade 9 teachers' image of being uncaring. The school's Advisory Council, parent organization, and Student Council could be present for this event, further promoting a sense of school community.

A brochure could be formatted for a parental audience. In fact, some Ontario School Boards produced such documents in the 1980's to aid course selection and career planning in high school ("After 8, then what?"). A similar brochure was produced by the Department for Education and Children's Services of South Australia, Learning for young adolescents -- the middle years of schooling: Information for parents. Brochures produced at Nova High School could help parents understand the philosophical, structural, and/or instructional

differences between Nova Middle School and Nova High School. While listening to parents' concerns about their son or daughter in high school, I could not help wondering about the influence on students by their parents' attitudes towards school. Efforts to help parents develop or maintain a positive perspective towards the high school could further improve students' attitudes during the transition process.

### **Rehearsals: Grades 8 and 9 Staff Inservices**

A lack of communication has created what one teacher during an interview called "a wall" between the staffs of Nova Middle School and Nova High School. This teacher wondered if the Grade 8 students, because their teachers did, felt "the wall" between Nova Middle School and Nova High School. Impressions, such as this one, could become self-perpetuating and self-fulfilled legends and heighten the difficulties students experience during the transition period. Deconstructing the lore could help improve the transition process. When I asked, "What impressions or myths do you carry about the teachers in Grade 8 or Grade 9?" the responses were overwhelmingly consistent among the educators who were interviewed. The vocabulary was often humourously descriptive, as if in the telling of the myth the reporter was laughing at its flaws, exaggerations, pitfalls, and untruths. A summary of these impressions came from the Grade 8 Vice-Principal, who was once a Grade 9 teacher:

(laughter) Alright. Senior High to Middle Level: Touchy-feely. You know all that warm fuzzy stuff and treat them just like elementary kids and what are they teaching them? They're not teaching them any real curriculum – there's no core materials coming through, it's all artsy-crafty, cooperative learning, they're not preparing the kids for the real world, they're still coddling them and babying them.

Middle Level to Senior High: They're uninterested in students. They're interested in curriculum, academics; very little is student-centered. If a student's having difficulties, well that means that you just give them more work on the same stuff that they're having difficulty with rather than trying to identify the individual difficulties of the student or develop a program to fit their needs. It's not a student-needs situation, it's a curriculum-needs situation. I think the Middle Level sees the Senior High as not really being interested in the students themselves but more emphasis on just getting their job done, going home and coming back the next day. (Interview with the Grade 8 Vice-Principal)

Almost all of the educators prefaced their accounts with “the myths *used to be.*” The staffs gave three reasons to explain why the legends were starting to sound “out-dated.” The high turnover of staff members in both the Grade 8 and Grade 9 teaching, administrative, and guidance positions in the last five years changed the characters in the myths. This also implied an unfamiliarity of the new staff members with the school's history and mythology. One new teacher expressed that she knew very little about the middle school: “Being new, I don't have a whole lot [of myths and impressions]. I understand that they have a lot of work because they prepare a lot of courses” (Interview with a Grade 9 teacher). In contrast, a few staff members had “jumped the wall” and had held positions in both schools further deteriorating some of the myths; their experiences and staff

contacts quickly put holes in the legendary foundations.

According to the teachers, the sole staff meeting of Grade 8 and Grade 9 teachers (September 1997) was responsible for the majority of the myths' erosion. I was surprised at how much educators felt that communication had greatly improved between the two staffs because of this *one* meeting, and the promise of another this year (September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1998). One Grade 9 teacher explained her learning from this transition meeting:

[There are] not as many [myths] as last year because we had that meeting. The myth was "everything is 'cushy-feely' and that they're not very academic" but then I had a chance to talk with [specific teachers in Grade 8 who teach the same subject]. They asked what were my expectations, what did I want kids to be able to do. The biggest myth was squashed as I realized this wasn't a cushy-feely-hi-how-are-you-doing-today Science class. This meeting allowed the myth to be squashed. For me, it couldn't be squashed without the meeting because I don't hang out in the middle school staff room. (Interview with a Grade 9 teacher)

Attending a similar meeting in September 1998, I took my research journal with me and listened carefully for any difference and similarities between the Grade 8 and Grade 9 teachers' concerns, vocabulary, and tones.

The transition meeting's agenda was to discuss specific student concerns. The Grade 8 teachers read the students' names from their previous homeroom class, commenting on each student's academic, behavioural, or social performance in Grade 8. The Grade 8 teachers showed concern about how students were adapting to Grade 9. Similarly, their concern was evident during the interviews

when then Grade 8 teachers responded with twice as many questions that they would want to ask the Grade 9 students than the Grade 9 teachers. This was understandable since the Grade 9 teachers were familiar with the students' performances, but the Grade 8 teachers' concerns were often unvoiced, neglected, or undervalued. One of my colleagues, Fry, explained that her study "was promoted by a desire to ensure that Grade 8 students leaving the middle school could cope with all of the changes in the Grade 9 system, as well as, adapt to the implementation of semestering . . ." (1996, p.1). My research interests developed out of similar concerns.

I envision a future inservice which involves both staffs and has a specific agenda. The inservice time would not be spent discussing specific students' concerns (unless they are used as illustrations), nor does this utopian meeting have "curriculum content" on its agenda. These issues were discussed briefly during a Grade 8 and Grade 9 staff meeting in 1997, and though still pressing, there are others which could be surfaced to dispel harmful myths between the staffs. During an interview one teacher, after I asked her what myths she carried about the Grade 8 staff, said that it would be interesting for the two staffs to read the collected myths together: "[ask students what] would they say is the biggest single difference between the Grade 8 staff and the Grade 9 staff? And then I'd be interested in sharing that with both staffs" (Interview with a Grade 9 teacher). I believe the foundation for this work was built during the teacher interviews of this

research as educators verbalized the myths for themselves.

Repeatedly I was told that communication between the two staffs was critical to improving the students' transition. The topics for discussion however, determine the depth of this communication. Throughout the research I discovered several perceptual inconsistencies which deserve closer examinations: teaching methodologies, "care" and the need for transition programs. The two staffs could conduct this inquiry together to help deconstruct, as opposed to re-write the teacher myths.

I considered that by sharing the practices that are used in each subject between the two staffs, teachers could more fully understand their students' experiences and futures of different instructional methodologies. Perhaps of even greater value is the teachers' professional development when they share their understandings of how learning occurs, managing individual student needs, assessment, and evaluation. It might be interesting and revealing to examine the current practices of social learning in the high school curriculum, and the concept of skill mastery in the middle level. While social learning is often stereotypically associated with middle school classrooms and skill mastery with high school, these are not exclusive practices. Furthermore, the frameworks of progressive and traditional curriculum practices could be discussed by individual teachers so that educators would not feel usurped by the larger philosophical structure of the school in which they work, a middle school or a high school.

## **Patrons: Recommendations for the Department of Education and Culture and the Regional School Board**

The intentions generated at Nova Middle School and Nova High School to promote a transition program are restricted by the level of support they receive by their Regional School Board, and by the provincial Department of Education and Culture. Including these parties in the transition planning process could help the school further define the roles within the school community. Skepticism and sometimes pessimism was heard from some staff members about the amount of support they felt was offered by the Regional School Board or the Department of Education and Culture. In an interview with the Grade 9 Vice-Principal, he expressed his concern about the lack of their interest in high school initiatives:

Here's what you should know: that all the years that I've been teaching, there's basically been no change at what's being delivered at the 9 through 12 level--in terms of curriculum, in terms of addressing the needs of the students, in the time that I've been teaching, there has been I don't know how many dollars invested in the 7 - 8 middle level ideology and I think that's grand. I want someone to find out what's going on here. Things haven't changed here. I don't know the last time things did. This is exactly how things were when I went to high school. I want to know when someone is going to put some money in here. . .

You need to know that someone needs to value what's happening at the 9 - 12 level quicker before the people who are working as hard as they are decide to give up.<sup>1</sup> No one is saying, except for us inside the

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Hargreaves, Earl & Ryan have commented that "Secondary schools and junior high schools are full of fine teachers working in terrible structures that diminish or

school, that they're doing a great job. . . . We have no resource base. We have meetings on our own time . . . . There has been no training, no inservicing. People have asked, but there's been nothing . . . . When will the great things that are happening at the middle level, when will they say alright, they're okay [the middle level] now, what's our next project? And I'm waiting for someone to say the next project is this [high school]. (Interview with the Grade 9 Vice-Principal)

This frustration was echoed by many people who had invested energy in the transition process as they made requests for support. The Guidance Counsellor responsible for Grades 7, 8 and 9 said that,

. . . communication is the biggest thing and most of the time is still spent convincing our bosses and their bosses that this is a worthwhile thing. There are so many roadblocks about getting sub [substitute] time, or being able to have inservice time to leave the kids home to do things for the teachers. (Interview with the Guidance Counselor)

In May 1998, the Department of Education and Culture published a draft version of *Senior High Schools: Comprehensive Programming and Services*. While this document does identify the challenges for high schools as they incorporate more diverse student needs, it does not suggest the direction nor provide the resources needed to implement its vision. This document does not mention or respond to the concerns identified in this research: the transition process to high school, semestering, parental involvement in education, or the examination and development of teaching methodologies in senior high classrooms. Perhaps an in-

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defeat them over time" (1996, p. 160).

depth study could be conducted to discern the provincial need for school transition programs. A policy from the Department of Education and Culture about school transition, supported with funding for the regional school boards, could have been beneficial to both Nova Middle School and Nova High School as they spent much time contending for funding and direction. One educator explained that

It's frustrating when the Board says it supports middle level stuff which is supposed to include student transition but they don't want us to have time, they don't want to leave kids at home, it gets so frustrating. I would love the next middle level inservice [from the School Board] to be on transition. (Interview with the Guidance Counselor)

Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) suggest another model of support: organizational learning. They propose that "collaborative cultures turn individual learning into shared learning" (p. 173). In this manner, individual professional developments could be integrated into the vision and action of the school. I had been trying to achieve this in my own professional development and resigned myself to the conclusion that I would prefer a more formalized process. I had taken courses about issues of concern to my staff, but the opportunities to share such learnings were limited. Beginning with a small group of colleagues and growing, recent developments at Nova Middle School have allowed a forum for these types of discussions. We are exploring together the importance of our unique experiences and insights, contributing to each others' professional development, and as well as to the school's organizational development

(Hargreaves et. al. warn about being too euphoric and blind about organizational learning, 1996, p. 174). Working collaboratively with a school board or university liaison could be the most effective way of structuring organizational learning. Using this vehicle, the staffs of Nova Middle School and Nova High School could greatly improve the transition between schools. Beyond the school site, support must be given from the Department of Education and Culture and the Regional School Board for initiatives of this type to succeed.

### **Refrain: Retrospection on the Methodology**

During the research process optimism predominated, and I did not regret that some things could have been done better, but sought to see how I could subsequently improve the methodology. Lofland & Lofland (1984) describe the benefits and dangers of including such a retrospective section in a methodology:

What person with an eye on the future, who wishes others to think positively of her or him, is going to relate anything that is morally or professionally discrediting in any important way? This is especially the case since qualitative work tends to be performed by younger persons, who have longer futures to think about and less security about the shape of those futures. We delude ourselves if we expect naturalistic researchers actually to 'tell all' in print. Nonetheless, a wide range of very useful and neutral things can and should be committed to public print, the better to advance the art. (p. 149)

If I were to re-do this research, there are a few things I would do differently.

For one, I would ask for a locker in one of the Grade 9 classrooms. This could have reduced my feelings of displacement, and have given me another

opportunity or reason to be “hanging out” with students. (The non-instructional time was often more informative for my research intentions.) I would also have asked for more student-generated texts about the transition process early in September. A writing assignment done in conjunction with a Grade 9 teacher was initiated, but completed by students on a volunteer basis. I would want to further explore this avenue of data production in future research designs.

In the middle of my research, I wished that I had defined my role more clearly: what level of participation did I want to achieve? Later I decided that by leaving that role less defined I learned a great deal about the nature of research; the possibilities of fluidity, and the advantages of flexibility. I also considered, and would re-consider in similar research designs, committing to complete participation in some aspect of the design. I wondered what more I could have gained if I had attended Science classes on a student’s regular schedule, was assigned my own seat, completed the homework, and wrote the tests. Perhaps my dialogues with students would have achieved an even greater depth of understanding.

I tremendously enjoyed working with students whom I had previously taught. The research atmosphere felt comfortable and the students readily accepted me in their classes. I am encouraged to continue other forms of school-based or classroom-based research. My relationships which evolved with the participants have enduring qualities, something which I may not have been able to

experience in less familiar research settings. The reputation of research studies in our school was enhanced by the students' enthusiasm to work with me. For example, immediately after the student questionnaire, one student on his way to the bathroom said, "That was a good survey, Mr. Van Zoost" and signaled for a high five as he passed me in the hall.

### **Dynamics: My Grade 8 Teaching Position**

The benefits of this research do not hinge solely on the support of the Department of Education and Culture, the Regional School Board, the schools' administration or my colleagues. I have gained valuable experiences which will transform and improve my teaching. Additionally, I have a better context to envision my previous students, and a better understanding of how to help prepare students for the transition to Nova High School.

I further understand that when I help students to be compassionate with themselves, comfortable with their difficulties, and confident in their successes, these learnings are not lost, abandoned, or a liability to their future. I held these strong convictions before the research, but felt unsure of how these beliefs might unfold as students moved into other educational frameworks. Because of this research my worries about previous students have diminished. I startled myself as I wrote this because I did not realize (again) how much I continued to think about my previous students.

One of the concerns that arises from the research is related to my teaching methodology in Grade 8. I felt that I may have given students *too* much independence, *too* much responsibility. (This seemed rather ironic to me as I listened to the Grade 9 teachers warning their students about the increased responsibility which occurs in Grade 9.) I feared that because the students in my homeroom had so much control over their learning, they might resent future teachers' expectations. During a private interview with Lynn, I addressed this issue:

Van Zoost     Do you feel that part of the reason that you're so unhappy is because you had *so much* freedom in my classroom last year? You chose the multiple forms of texts, set your own deadlines, generated your own assessment tools. . .

Lynn             That's hard to say because I like that freedom in English and Related Studies but right now the only class I have that I like is Science. It's kind of hard to have a lot of freedom in some subjects, like French. I don't like a lot of control. (Student Focus Group Session)

I worked hard at preparing my students at the end of the year for the possibility of a classroom with fewer self-imposed expectations and I discovered that this was not always the case at Nova High School. Wells (1996) raised similar questions at the end of her research:

In the eighth grade, students felt that they had voice and choice. They routinely offered suggestions for projects or configurations for working together. They were able to choose some areas of study and could negotiate assignments. In the high school, they did what they

were told to do, and their voices were quieted. What if these students, who appeared to be so confident in the eighth grade, had felt empowered to make demands on the high school? (p. 178)

The learnings experienced with my homeroom students in Grade 8 were aimed at being transformational. In Grade 9, many of these students may have continued to set their own goals, choose their own texts, self-assess--but in contexts beyond the classroom.

I witnessed during this research how uniquely crafted is the art of teaching as I observed the individual styles of teachers co-existing across the hall. This research allowed opportunities for me to examine many other aspects of my job as a teacher which can be difficult to observe from within the walls of one's own classroom. Closer examination of the school's politics during this research revealed some of the complexities of teaching. Educators often negotiated many political spheres: philosophical differences among educators, structural parameters of the building, restricted access to resources due to financing or availability, differing administrative styles, collegiality, students' diverse needs, and community demographics. As educators navigated this terrain, each of these political aspects of teaching played a part in directing, or sometimes limiting, an individual teacher's craft of education; finding spaces within these politics is perhaps what makes teaching an art.

New professional development interests arose from my research. I became not only interested in my Grade 8 teaching perspective, but questioned (again) if I

wanted to work with students in other grade levels. As I observed other high school classrooms, I grew anxious to have future opportunities to work with older students, and will consider such teaching positions in the future. Secondly, the dimensions of conducting research which reflected my own teaching questions provided valuable professional development. The reflective structuring of research encourages me to continue exploring issues which are directly concerned with my teaching contexts and interests. I am interested in action research methodologies which will allow me to continue designing research around classroom-based questions.

My most rewarding experience was the peer collaboration which occurred during this research. I am encouraged to continue seeking collegial professional development opportunities. The topic of transition has been for me, beyond other things, an excellent rationale for developing collegiality and building school community. I also discovered that research is as much about learning about oneself as it is about understanding others. In both accounts, I learned more than I could report and will continue to draw from this bank of experiences as I continue in my profession.

### **Coda**

This thesis has value beyond my own framework of thinking and teaching. It illustrates the significance of educators conducting research about their own

educational contexts. As I explored questions in my school, the participants of this study increased their awareness about the issues which surfaced during the transition to Nova High School. Discussions in this thesis could help direct future professional development or transition initiatives at Nova Middle School and Nova High School. Furthermore, other school communities may be able to use these findings to help direct research or to aid in the implementation of a transition program in their own schools.

My findings in this research were organized around the three strands of my research question: what are the students initial concerns about: a) the high school's climate, b) their social relations, and c) academics when they move from a middle school to a high school?

The students concerns about the high school climate at the beginning of September included a feeling of displacement and issues of fear. During this time period, students were positive about becoming involved in the school's extra-curricular activities. By the end of September, students had become used to the Grade 9 teachers' expectations. Each student had developed habits for completing her or his homework, "hooking off", or "hanging out." These habits responded to the high school's climate, reflecting a focus on the self rather than on a group of students as they were organized in the middle school. Having re-defined and put behind them the middle school experience, students explored the issues of responsibility and observed repeating students who were unsuccessful with Nova

High School's expectations. Students claimed that Grade 9 teachers did not care as much about them and negotiated new places to "hang out" in the school.

Social concerns discussed in this research included reactions to the students' class groupings. While teachers expressed concern about a "difficult combination of students," the students reported that they enjoyed having "different people in every class." Exceptions to this student response often involved a student's unhappiness about the lack of close friends in his or her classes. Those students who were without close friends in their classes were not as happy about their transition to Nova High School as those who were. As students interacted in their peer groups, they explored their own social status through the telling of jokes, loud voices, nicknames, and image.

The students' largest concern was the high school's academic expectations. "Myths of Math" were told, signaling the academic focus of high school. Depending on the combination of courses in which a student was enrolled during a semester, students reported different amounts of homework. An increase in the amount homework was the most verbalized complaint during the initial transition period. The difficulty of certain subjects, the length of classes, and the new structure of semestering heightened students' academic concerns. A change in the teaching methodologies towards a more traditional, transmissive curriculum was also experienced by students at Nova High School.

Based on the findings of this research, I have made recommendations which

uphold the significance of the school community as outlined by Hargreaves and Fullan (1998):

Communities today must look outward as well as inward and must include and give voice to all their members. Some advocates of community restoration present rather paternalistic notions of community where duty, loyalty and service are paramount. Here community goes with hierarchy. In many schools that describe themselves as families, the managerial professionals effectively become the school while everyone else is treated like dependent children. Family is not always the best metaphor for community.

Like others, we believe that schools should build not just any kind of community, but *democratic communities* which value participation, equality, inclusiveness and social justice, in addition to loyalty and service among all their members (Mertz & Furman, 1997). These communities should start in the classrooms in which students share responsibility for their own learning and for regulating each others' behavior. Involving students and parents in decision-making, teaching and learning decisions, parent conferences and assessment of achievement extend these democratic principles further. (p. 13).

This research emphasizes the importance of a democratic school community (as described by Hargreaves and Fullan, 1998) to respond to the needs of its students. The students' concerns about the climate of Nova High School appeal to educators, parents, and students to work collaboratively to provide Grade 9 students with a sense of belonging to the high school. Exploring the issues of care and responsibility in Grade 9 demands that members of the school community discuss these concerns openly and collectively to improve their clarity. To aid students with their social concerns as they enter Nova High School, the school community could work together to help students with their new groupings and

their new proximity to close friends. Other dialogues in the school community about homework, semestering, and teaching methodologies could help respond to the students' academic concerns.

As I explored the strands of my initial research question, I noticed larger patterns of concern: the neglect of students' voices, the lack of articulation of the roles and responsibilities of the members of the school community, the contradictory perspectives of Grade 9 teachers, and the philosophical shifts between progressive and traditional frameworks of curriculum. Recommendations which evolved from the analysis of the findings included a transition team which consists of representation from all of the members of the school community. I made specific suggestions for parental involvements in the transition process to Nova High School and offered directions for the professional development of the Grade 8 and Grade 9 teachers. As I discussed the roles of the Department of Education and Culture and the Regional School Board, I recommended that their contributions in the school community respond to the needs of students during school transitions. I hoped that my recommendations could point toward how the school community could be more effective and that they demonstrated my optimism about the potential impact that school-based research can have in a school community.

Students are the impetus for, motivation behind, and benefactors of this research. Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) recommend that educators "Involve

students in their own learning, in the partnerships you build with people outside school, and in how you manage educational change. Making students your first partners is the prime directive in building all other partnerships with people 'out there' beyond the school" (p. 95). As such, students' voices are important instruments in the symphony that is the school community. As an educator, I am called upon to be a conductor in my classroom. The questions raised through this research provide a rough musical score for me to follow. As I begin to arrange this music into parts and dynamics, this score cues me to look out to the symphony, as my ability to respond to the concerns and the needs of the adolescent musicians before me determines the quality of music we can create.

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## **Appendix A: Data Production Log**

### **September 2 - 18**

- ▶ I “hung out” with Grade 9 students before school (8:00 am to 9:00), recess and lunch.
- ▶ I attended classes until after lunch. I wrote in the research journal from after lunch until school dismissed.
- ▶ I went for a walk to think about the research for an hour after school

### **September 9**

- ▶ Nova High School’s principal and the Grade 9 homeroom teachers approved the student questionnaire
- ▶ I sent home the parental and student permission letter to participate in the research

### **September 11**

- ▶ The student questionnaire was conducted

### **September 12 & 13**

- ▶ The student questionnaire collated, and the responses were typed

### **September 14**

- ▶ The student questionnaire responses were given to Grade 9 homeroom teachers for distribution
- ▶ I began to ask more focused questions during non-instructional time

### **September 18**

- ▶ I arranged times for the staff interview

### **September 21 - 24**

- ▶ I “hung out” with Grade 9 students before school (8:00 am to 9:00), recess and lunch.
- ▶ I attended classes most days until after lunch. I wrote in the research journal and completed other tasks as outlined below from after lunch until school dismissal. I continued the walks after school
- ▶ I conducted the staff interviews
- ▶ The principal of Nova High School and the Grade 9 homeroom teachers approved the parent questionnaire

**September 22**

- ▶ The parent questionnaires were distributed
- ▶ I conducted several staff interviews

**September 23**

- ▶ I transcribed half of the teacher interviews (14 hours)

**September 24**

- ▶ The student focus group session was held
- ▶ I continued the staff interviews
- ▶ The parent questionnaires were collected and I collated data (Part A)

**September 25**

- ▶ I attended Nova Middle School's meeting about action research
- ▶ I attended a Grade 9 team meeting
- ▶ I attended a Grade 8 to Grade 9 transition meeting
- ▶ I transcribed the student focus group

**September 27**

- ▶ I typed the results from the parent questionnaires

**September 28**

- ▶ I visited another high school with a similar structure as Nova High School
- ▶ I "hung out" with Grade 9 students and attended classes while visiting this school
- ▶ I arranged a visit to a third high school (this visit was canceled due to unexpected school closure and was rescheduled for November)
- ▶ I transcribed more of the teacher interviews from the audio tape

**September 29**

- ▶ I attended classes at Nova High School
- ▶ I conducted, transcribed, and typed the parent interviews

**September 30 - October 2**

- ▶ I "hung out" with Grade 9 students before school (8:00 am to 9:00), recess and lunch
- ▶ I Attended classes until after lunch, typed the teacher interviews in the afternoon, and transcribed more of the teacher interviews and the student focus group session

**Appendix B: Nova Middle School Mission Statement (1989)**

At Nova Middle School we believe that our school should be student-centered, enthusiastic, compassionate, approachable, involved and committed to middle level education. We believe that the programs should be relevant and flexible, stressing high individual academic excellence. We believe that the programs should encompass exploratory, inter-disciplinary and life skills activities in order to facilitate physical, social and emotional growth of the middle level students. At Nova Middle School we believe that middle level education extends beyond the boundaries of the school, into the community and beyond to enhance learning in a meaningful manner.

## **Appendix C: Characteristics of Exemplary Middle Schools**

A consensus has emerged among today's middle level educators about what a good middle level school is like. The following characteristics are most commonly identified:

1. A philosophy based on the unique needs and characteristics of the early adolescent learner
2. Educators knowledgeable about and committed to teaching the early adolescent
3. A curriculum balanced between the cognitive (subject-centered) and affective (student-centered) needs of the early adolescent
4. Teachers who use varied instructional strategies
5. A comprehensive teacher advisory program
6. An interdisciplinary team organized at all grades
7. A flexible block master schedule
8. A full exploratory program
9. Both team planning and personal planning time for all teachers during the school day
10. A positive and collaborative school climate
11. Shared decision-making where the people closest to the "client" are involved in the decision-making process of the school
12. A smooth transition process from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school
13. Intramurals, interest based mini-courses, clubs, and social events
14. A physical plant that accommodates teams and provides spaces for both small and large group meetings
15. A commitment to the importance of health and physical fitness for all students on a regular basis
16. A commitment to involving families in the education of early adolescents by not only keeping them informed of student progress and school programs but by giving them meaningful roles in the schooling process
17. A positive connection between school and the community through student service projects, business partnerships, and full use of community resources with the school curriculum
18. Consistent use of cooperative learning strategies in the classroom
19. An emphasis on the use of higher order thinking skills and hands-on instructional strategies
20. The involvement and empowerment of students wherever possible to do so

National Middle School Association. (1996). What are the program components of an exemplary middle school? Here's what we think. Columbus: Author.

## Appendix D:

### Comparative Structures of Elementary, Middle, and High Schools

School Program	Elementary	Middle	High
Teacher-student relationship	Parental	Advisor	Choice
Teacher organization	Self-contained	Interdisciplinary team	Department
Curriculum	Skills via drill	Skills via exploration	Skills via Depth
Schedule	Self-contained	Block	Periods
Instruction	Teacher directed	Balance	Student directed
Student grouping	Chronological	Multi-age or developmental	Subject
Building plan	Classroom areas	Team areas	Department areas
Extra Curricular	All	Interest	Ability

Table from George, Paul S. (1988). What is a middle school--really?  
Gainesville: University of Florida.

## **Appendix E: Possible Activities in a Transition Program**

### *Activities for staff*

- ▶ **Grade 8 teachers could identify potentially at-risk students who would then be carefully monitored by the guidance counsellor and the Grade 9 staff**
- ▶ **The high school administration could spend some recess and lunch times at the middle school to informally speak with students**
- ▶ **High school students who register late could be given a tour of their new school**
- ▶ **High school administrators, when filling Grade 9 teaching assignments, could consider teachers who have had middle level teaching experiences**
- ▶ **A transition team could be created to oversee the transition program**
- ▶ **Teachers could be inserviced on the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual characteristics of early adolescents**

### *Activities for students in Grade 8*

- ▶ **The students could be asked to identify activities which they believe would help them in their transition**
- ▶ **Middle level students could receive a copy of the high school's newspaper and handbook in advance of the school year**
- ▶ **The Grade 8 students could attend high school performances**
- ▶ **The guidance counsellor could organize an advocacy program for students**

**entering the high school**

- ▶ **A “Big Brothers and Big Sisters” program could be established between the Grade 8 and Grade 9 students**
- ▶ **Grade 8 students could volunteer to shadow a Grade 9 student for the day and then report back to his or her Grade 8 peers**

*Collaborative activities for peers in Grades 8 and 9*

- ▶ **The Grade 9 students could visit the Grade 8 classrooms and answer questions from the eighth graders**
- ▶ **Grade 8 and Grade 9 students could exchange pen-pal letters**
- ▶ **Grade 9 students could give guided tours of the high school**
- ▶ **The Grade 9 students could return for a second visit with the Grade 8 classrooms in June to respond to any last minute concerns**
- ▶ **A group of Grade 9 students could be trained in the Spring to facilitate and guide the Grade 8 transition program**

*Activities for students in Grade 9*

- ▶ **A high school Halloween activity could put closure on the transition program**
- ▶ **Exploratory experiences could be extended into the high school curriculum**
- ▶ **The high school curriculum could be molded to meet the incoming**

**students' past educational experiences**

- ▶ **A study skills program at the high school level could be created**
- ▶ **Academic teams of teachers at the high school level could be arranged**
- ▶ **The first day of school could be for Grade 9 students only**

*Activities for parents of students in transition*

- ▶ **Parents and students could be involved with curriculum bridging committees**
- ▶ **Parent meetings and high school open houses could be offered**
- ▶ **The guidance counsellor and the high school's administrators could speak at parent organization meetings and elementary schools in the early Spring preceding the transition**
- ▶ **Parents could be encouraged to write to the school with their concerns about the transition and then the high school administration could respond**
- ▶ **Parents of students who have previously made the transition could be invited to parent information meetings**
- ▶ **Packets of information about the high school could be sent out to families over the summer**
- ▶ **A television show could be produced for the local cable company to broadcast information about the high school and the transition process**
- ▶ **Parents could be invited to a breakfast which would act as an orientation**

**session**

- ▶ **Presentations about curriculum to parents could help explain the expectations in high school, and the connections to the middle school's curriculum**
- ▶ **Guest speakers could be arranged to present at parent organization meetings about the transition process, high school semestering, or other requested topics**
- ▶ **A monthly breakfast could be offered where parents could attend and discuss concerns with the principal**
- ▶ **The guidance counsellor could offer a parent information program about developmental needs of adolescents, and the role of the school's guidance program**
- ▶ **Interim report cards could be used in October to inform parents about their child's adjustment to the high school.**

**Appendix F: Sample of the Student Questionnaire**

**Part A: Checkmarks**

Please put a checkmark in SA, A, D, or SD to represent what you think about each of the following statements:

**(Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)**

SA	A	D	DS	<i>General School Climate Questions</i>
				I feel safe in the senior high area of the school
				I feel known and important in school this year
				I intend to get involved in the high school's extra-curricular activities
				My worries about moving to high school were exaggerated and they are no longer a concern
				I am comfortable in the senior high area of the school
				I found moving to Grade 9 a big change
SA	A	D	SD	<i>General Social Questions</i>
				I find making friends easy this year
				I hang around with the same group of friends that I did last year
				I like having different people in every class
				I feel comfortable meeting new people in school this year
				I don't like having a timetable of classes that is different from my friends
SA	A	D	SD	<i>General Academic Questions</i>
				The teachers expect too much from me in my school work
				The teachers don't expect enough from me in my school work
				My teachers know what I've done in my previous years of school
				I am overwhelmed with the amount of homework I have this year
				I would feel comfortable talking to my teachers about problems with school
				I would feel comfortable talking to my teachers about my personal problems
				I would feel more comfortable talking to a teacher from last year about a personal problem than a teacher I have right now
				I feel that the Grade 8 teachers prepared me for the Grade 9 courses



## **Appendix G: An Interview Guide Used During the Student Focus Group**

### **Is there too much homework?**

- ▶ Is it just in Math class?
- What happens if the homework is not done?
- ▶ Have your study habits changed this year?
- ▶ How much homework is reasonable?
- ▶ Should there have been more homework last year?

### **Do you feel prepared for Grade 9?**

- ▶ Academically?
- ▶ Organizationally?
- Where *do you not* you feel prepared?
- Do you feel more accountable / responsible? What makes you feel this way?

### **Do you like semestering better--why or why not?**

- ▶ Do you miss having any of the following classes: Homeroom, Technology Education, Related Studies, Sustained Silent Reading, Personal Development and Relationships, Quiet Time?
- ▶ Are all of the classes long? If not, why are some more than others? *What* makes time go by easier?
- ▶ How much do you miss having someone you can depend on being with you all of the time?
- ▶ Have your friends changed because of the new class groupings?

### **What suggestions do you have for making the transition better?**

- ▶ What advice would you give to Grade 8 students? Grade 8 teachers?
- Is there a difference between the Grade 8 teachers and the Grade 9 teachers?
- What else should I know?

## Appendix H: Sample of the Parent Questionnaire

As part of my research study, I am interested in your understanding of your son's / daughter's move from Grade 8 to Grade 9 at WRHS. Please take a couple of minutes to complete this questionnaire and have your student return it to me at school by Thursday, September 24. Thanks in advance!

Steven Van Zoost (WRHS: 798-2239)

### Part A: Checkmarks

Please put a checkmark in SA, A, D, or SD to represent what you think about each of the following statements:

(Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

SA	A	D	SD	
				I believe that moving to Grade 9 was a big change for my son / daughter
				My worries about my son / daughter moving to Grade 9 were exaggerated and they are no longer a concern
				I believe that my son / daughter feels safe in the senior high area of the school
				My son / daughter hangs around with the same group of friends that s/he did last year
				My son / daughter is making a lot of new friends this year at school
				My son / daughter is overwhelmed with the amount of homework s/he has this year
				I feel comfortable approaching a Grade 9 teacher about any concerns that I might have about my son / daughter's school year

**Part B: Short answer questions**

1. What are your biggest concerns about your son / daughter moving to Grade 9 this year?
  
2. What are you happy about in your son / daughter's move from Grade 8 to Grade 9?
  
3. Who, or what was most helpful for you in preparing for this year of school?
  
4. What do you wish someone had told you about Grade 9 before your student began the school year?
  
5. What do you think of the semestering system in Grade 9?
  
6. What suggestions do you have that might help improve the transition from Grade 8 to Grade 9?

**Part C: What else should I know?****Part D: Please circle**

1. Name of the school your son / daughter attended last year:

Windsor Regional High

Other

2. Grade level of your son / daughter last year:

8

9

10

## Appendix I: Parent and Student Letter of Permission

September 2, 1998

Dear Grade 9 Student and Parent / Guardian(s):

With the permission of the Regional School Board and Nova High School's administration, I will be conducting some academic research this Fall at Nova High School. This research will be used in a thesis at Acadia University. I am interested in following my previous students to Grade 9 to observe their transition from Nova Middle School to Nova High School.

**This research involves a student questionnaire and a group interview, and therefore I am seeking your permission, as well as your son's / daughter's, for them to participate in this study. Please return this page to school ASAP.**

If you have any question, ideas, or if you are interested in the findings of this research, please contact me at 123-4567 (Nova High School). Thanks!

Sincerely,

Steven Van Zoost

-----  
Name of Student: \_\_\_\_\_

I give permission for my son / daughter to participate in this research:

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Parent / Guardian's signature)

I agree to participate in this research:

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Student's signature)

## Appendix J: Responses from the Parent Questionnaire

### Part A: Responses from all participants

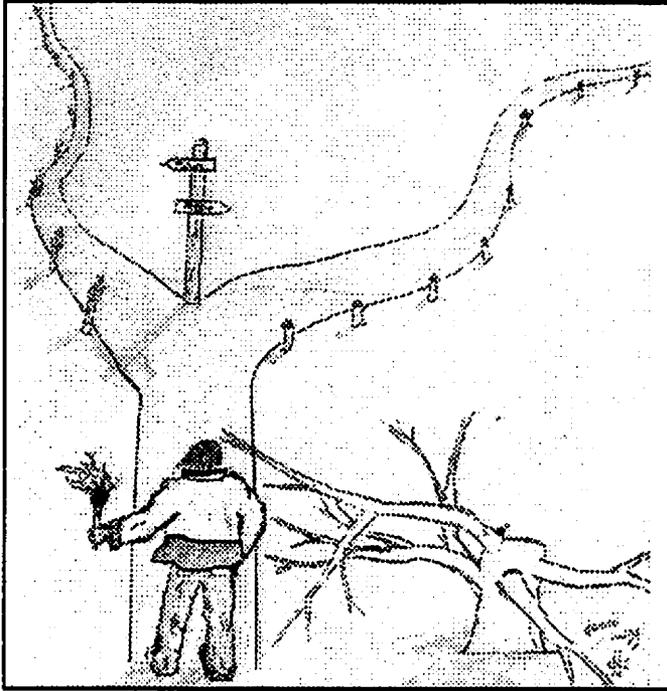
(Unanswered, Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

U	SA	A	D	SD	
	4	21	22	7	I believe that moving to Grade 9 was a big change for my son / daughter
7	2	32	10	3	My worries about my son / daughter moving to Grade 9 were exaggerated and they are no longer a concern
	10	42	2	0	I believe that my son / daughter feels safe in the senior high area of the school
1	14	36	2	1	My son / daughter hangs around with the same group of friends that s/he did last year
	3	26	23	2	My son / daughter is making a lot of new friends this year at school
	2	14	32	6	My son / daughter is overwhelmed with the amount of homework s/he has this year
1	13	39	0	1	I feel comfortable approaching a Grade 9 teacher about any concerns that I might have about my son / daughter's school year

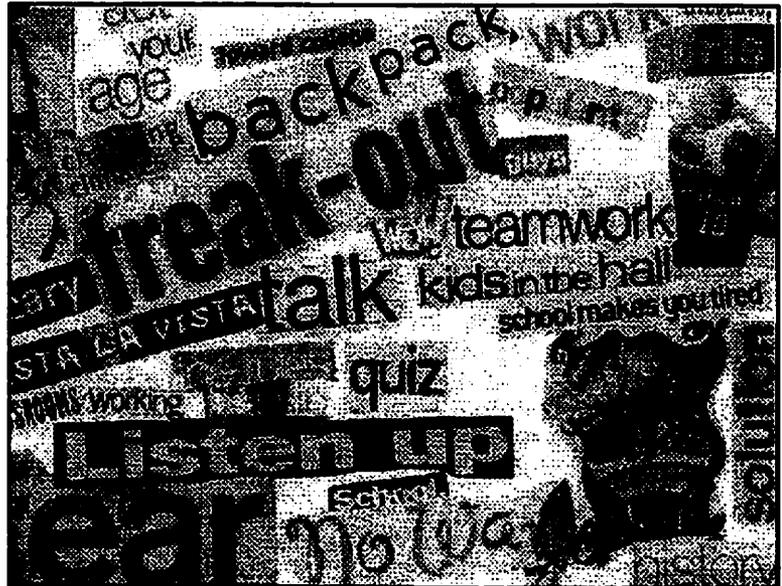
**Appendix K: Responses from the Student Questionnaire**  
**Part A: Responses from all participants**  
(Unanswered, Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

<b>U</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>DS</b>	<b>General School Climate Questions</b>
	37	77	3	0	I feel safe in the senior high area of the school
	11	63	38	5	I feel known and important in school this year
5	37	47	21	7	I intend to get involved in the high school's extra-curricular activities
4	40	53	14	6	My worries about moving to high school were exaggerated and they are no longer a concern
	40	70	6	1	I am comfortable in the senior high area of the school
	27	37	41	12	I found moving to Grade 9 a big change
<b>U</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>General Social Questions</b>
1	28	68	17	3	I find making friends easy this year
1	32	59	19	6	I hang around with the same group of friends that I did last year
	51	55	9	2	I like having different people in every class
	36	70	10	1	I feel comfortable meeting new people in school this year
2	17	25	48	25	I don't like having a timetable of classes that is different from my friends
<b>U</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>General Academic Questions</b>
1	12	22	67	15	The teachers expect too much from me in my school work
1	0	4	66	46	The teachers don't expect enough from me in my school work
7	3	56	45	6	My teachers know what I've done in my previous years of school
	32	32	43	10	I am overwhelmed with the amount of homework I have this year
	13	54	38	12	I would feel comfortable talking to my teachers about problems with school.
3	4	13	48	49	I would feel comfortable talking to my teachers about my personal problems.
1	24	51	28	13	I would feel more comfortable talking to a teacher from last year about a personal problem than a teacher I have right now
	33	68	11	5	I feel that the Grade 8 teachers prepared me for the Grade 9 courses

**Appendix L: Students' Art About the Transition to Nova High School**



**Figure 1: Two paths--past and future**



**Figure 2: Collage**

## **Appendix M: Possible Activities for Grade 9 Orientation**

- ▶ The students could receive schedules in advance.
- ▶ A labelled map of the Grade 9 area and a timetable of the senior high schedule could be posted or distributed.
- ▶ An “extra-curricular fair” could be arranged in the gym to display the school’s extra-curricular activities. Students could visit and talk with leaders of these teams, clubs, committees, bands, or groups to learn how to become involved in the many activities at Nova High School. The larger school community might be interested in attending such a fair.
- ▶ Visits from the Grade 8 teachers during the first week could be used to “check up” on their previous students. I recall several students telling me concerns because they knew me, rather than approaching an unfamiliar teacher, administrator, or guidance counsellor. I also know that my curiosity, attachment, and interest with my previous students is especially high during the month of September.
- ▶ Grade 8 homeroom reunions could be organized (perhaps very informally during a lunch time where the Grade 9 classrooms could become designated meeting places of the specific homeroom classes from Nova Middle School).
- ▶ Study skills sessions could be offered to address issues identified by

students (e.g. more homework, semestering, mnemonics). This could be done by Grade 9 teachers or delivered through the guidance program.

- ▶ A buddy system could be established: students choose a friend with similar course selections during the Grade 9 course registration period (Spring of Grade 8) and they are placed in all of the same classes together. This would ensure that students knew at least one other person in every class.
- ▶ Grade 9 social events could be organized, such as a “Fun Night” of movies, sports and/or games held during evening at school.
- ▶ The transition team could ask the students, “With what do you need help?” during the transition using similar data production techniques as used in this research.
- ▶ Student myths and creative expressions of the transition to Grade 9 could be shared with Grade 8 students preparing for the move to high school.
- ▶ The strategies for learning a timetable as told by previous Grade 9 students (see Chapter Four) could be shared with Grade 8 students.
- ▶ A newsletter, pamphlet, or booklet about Grade 9, perhaps generated by Grade 9 students, could be prepared and mailed out in the summer, or at another suitable time.
- ▶ “Check-ups” could be done by the Guidance Counsellor and Grade 9 Vice-Principal, listening to difficulties and directing students to appropriate resources.