

Abstract

Transitioning from primary school to secondary school is an important and defining stage for many pupils which can bring both positive and negative effects on pupil's wellbeing. It is a time that involves rapid physical, social and emotional development which can bring about feelings of loneliness, pressure of social acceptance, stress and a rise in depression and anxiety. While not all pupils will experience negative transition-related challenges, and post transition anxiety may settle within the first term, for a number of pupils the transition is an overwhelming process which requires a lot of support. Yet, little is known about the supportive relational practices that might attenuate the challenges pupils face as they move to secondary school. This article investigated the experiences of 8 newly transitioned Year 7 pupils as well as viewpoints and perceptions of 6 secondary school teachers. Specifically, the paper sought to understand the role of social and emotional learning (SEL) during the transition phase and the support systems in place to develop the pupils. The results from the semi-structured interviews highlighted the importance of belonging during this critical phase, followed by the need to improve the social processes and transitional support. Thus, in designing transition support activities, such efforts should strive to acclimate new secondary school pupils by providing inclusive, caring environments and positive connections with educators and peers.

Keywords: Secondary school transition; social and emotional learning; pupils; teachers

1.1 Introduction

Across the UK, Europe and USA, schools are introducing programmes aimed at enhancing the well-being of students and helping them flourish (Mahmud, 2019; CASEL; 2017; Deighton et al., 2018). Such programmes aim to teach students how to cultivate positive emotions and relationships, find meaning and feel a sense of achievement in their work – as well as look after their physical and mental health. But despite this progress, recent research has found that the well-being of students steadily declines as soon as they transition to secondary school, with the decline being sharper for girls than for boys (Burke and Minton, 2017).

The literature on primary to secondary school transition demonstrates that along with biological, cognitive and social transitions adolescents also experience a series of contextual adjustments while undergoing the transition from primary to secondary school. On the whole, it has been seen that the changes experienced by the early adolescents are not consistent with the developmental characteristics occurring at that time (for example the need for independence, intimate relationship with peers, enhanced self-awareness, heightened cognitive ability and matters relating to identity development - Eccles, 2004). In particular, school teachers have conveyed concerns regarding the inadequacy of social and emotional abilities, for instance, empathy, resilience and motivation demonstrated by the pupils during and post-secondary school transition. Consequently, there is a requirement to understand the level of emotional intelligence (EI) of pupils during the secondary school transition in the UK, and how intervention programmes can develop pupils' EI. Without such understanding, it will be difficult to comprehend whether current initiatives have equipped pupils to successfully transition to secondary school, or furthermore if pupils are fully equipped with the necessary social and emotional abilities to continue and flourish in education.

1.2 Background

The transition from primary to secondary school is experienced by different children every year. This particular transition has been recognised as a ‘critical life event’ (Lohaus et al., 2004), in addition to being ‘one of the most difficult transitions in children’s educational careers’ (Zeedyk et al., 2003, p, 4). The transition or transfer is characterised by social and contextual changes. Primary schools are generally characterised by smaller school buildings (Wassell et al., 2007), and the pupils are usually taught by a single teacher with one set of classmates. Anderson et al., (2000) highlighted the environmental shift when the pupils enter secondary school leading to an experience of change in the size of the school, shifts in the subjects taught, exposure to multiple teachers and classrooms, along with a shift in the pupil-teacher relationship and additional expectations (Anderson et al., 2000; Lohaus et al., 2004; Wassell et al., 2007; West et al., 2010). In addition to the above changes, there are also significant differences in the social aspects of secondary school. For example, contact with older pupils, growing friendship groups whilst alternatively the possibility of losing previous social groups, and greater importance on social comparisons (Vanlede et al., 2006; Aitkins et al., 2005; West et al., 2010). According to Tobbell and O’Donnell (2013), this new social dynamic is “more independent and relatively freer from adult observation” (p, 13). It is noteworthy that this particular transition happens during a developmental change for 11- 12-year-old children. The transition is parallel with consecutive changes in intellectual reasoning, physical development and hormonal changes, along with the social and emotional enhancement (Aitkins et al., 2005). According to West et al., (2010), the timeframe of this particular transition is recognised as a ‘developmental inequality’ as the developmental needs of the young people occurring at that time are not met by the school.

It is recognised that as a result of the secondary school transition, some pupils experience a drop in their achievement levels and emotional well-being (Anderson et al.,

2000). Galton et al., (2003) found long-term implications for pupils' attainment, reporting that in the first year of secondary school 40% of the pupils failed to progress academically. A number of US studies indicate that the transition from primary to secondary education has a negative impact on student grade point averages (GPA) and academic achievement (Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2009; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Seidman et al., 2003). Illustratively, US students who moved from a primary to a secondary school experienced a decline in grades following the transition, unlike students who were in the same grade but had not transitioned to secondary education (Felner et al., 1981). The drop in attainment has been linked to: a lack of continuity in the curriculum from Year 6 to Year 7 (Fouracre, 1993), underestimation of the ability of Year 7 pupils (Galton et al., 2003), and a decline in pupils' academic interest (Meece et al., 2006). In addition, with regards to adolescents' emotional well-being, the transition causes anxiety among the pupils amongst other emotional challenges (Jindal-Snape and Miller, 2008). Tobbell and O'Donnell (2003) allude that this higher level of anxiety lowers the capacity of cognitive processing, implicating the concern of the lack of academic progress made by some pupils. Other research has found that some pupils also struggle with lower self-esteem when going to secondary school (Wigfield et al, 1991), while West et al., (2010) pointed out that there are long-term consequences for pupils' psychological well-being.

Transitional support

Due to the concerns regarding the increasing number of pupils experiencing negative outcomes during the transition, considerable research in the UK has been carried out to explore this multi-faceted phenomenon (DfES, 2004). The research has investigated the experience of pupils, the risk factors for poor transitions, and evaluated the existing transitional support. The results from such research suggested that even brief transfer support programmes can demonstrate positive impacts on targeted pupils' levels of schools concerns

and reduce pupils' anxieties to the level of a 'typical' benchmarked group (Bloyce and Frederickson, 2012; Dawrent, 2008). Nevertheless, only a small body of the research has focused on the emotional aspects of the transition and enhancing such skills and abilities; therefore, by targeting the psychological processes underpinning this secondary school transition, it is hoped that better support can be provided to the pupils during this process (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2003).

The United Nations have set out a Sustainable Development Goals target to ensure all children are completing primary and secondary school education in the developing world by 2030, and therefore transitions will be a major global topic of importance in the lead up to achieving this goal. The UK Department for Education (DfE) have similarly recognised the significance of this transition and have highlighted a commitment by assigning research in enriching pupils' outcomes post-transition (Evangelou et al., 2008). Based on their assessment of existing transition provisions, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted, 2015) concluded that many primary and secondary schools have inadequate transition practices due to the intractable problem of academic and pastoral continuity across the schools. The Ofsted 'Wasted Years' report (2015) stressed that secondary school leaders, as well as their primary school colleagues, must address the concerns about the inadequate transfer arrangements by improving communication and information exchange and making children's transition as comfortable as possible. Ofsted emphasised the importance of meeting pupils' needs and suggested Local Authorities (LAs) and schools engaged in systematic evaluations of their transition support. This was supported by a finding from the National Foundation for Educational Research which suggested to "promote schools to consider the relationship between human development, the structure of schooling and the timing of the school" (NFER, 2006, p.3). A successful transition therefore seems to have fundamental importance, especially as having a negative experience of the

transition from primary to secondary school could pose long-term impacts on pupils' educational performance and psychological well-being (West et al., 2010).

Although schools have practices in place to support adolescents before and after the transition (Bevis and Gregory, 2005), for example in the form of visit days and meeting staff members, these practices have produced mixed findings, and so apprehension continues to exist amongst mainstream educators regarding such generic and universal programmes. There does not seem to be clarity or clear guidance on how to identify and support pupils during the secondary school transition, with pupils' emotional intelligence and wellbeing being somewhat overlooked throughout the transitional support (Sutherland et al., 2010). Ginsburg et al., (2008) claim that initiatives supporting pupils' social and emotional well-being in school's conflict with the traditional objectives of education. It was expected by families and practitioners alike, that teaching should only focus on the core subject curriculum, and the knowledge acquired through these subjects would be sufficient to overcome the difficulties pupils experienced in their adult life (Ginsburg et al., 2008). However, it is difficult to understand how this limited scope would help those pupils struggling with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties.

Current study

It therefore, seems that there are clear issues separating research and practice in education (Broekkamp and Van Hout-Wolters, 2007). The misalignment centres on the perceptions that research can produce inconclusive results and often the results of research are not easily applicable or identifiable in the classroom. In light of this, it is proposed that greater communication and cooperation is necessary between researchers, practitioners and pupils (Vanderlinde and Van Braak, 2010). Therefore, this research will investigate the function, significance and impact of utilising teachers' and pupils' perspectives of the secondary school transition, with a further aim to understand the experiences of the pupils as

well as the teachers' views and perceptions of social and emotional learning and transition support programmes in secondary schools.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

Interviews were conducted with practitioners and pupils to gain a more holistic picture of the transition from primary to secondary. Purposive sampling of 6 key practitioners (*3 males and 3 females*) consisting of tutors, curriculum designers and the Head of Year 7 involved in the transition phase of schooling were able to provide information about events and behaviours of young children, and how they as practitioners make sense of pupils' needs and experiences during the transition. All practitioners involved in this study had more than five years teaching experience and had experience of both primary and current secondary school settings which was fundamental for the selection in the sample. This presented the unique opportunity to gather an in-depth holistic understanding of the social and emotional conventions of the new year 7 pupils from practitioners who had experience of both primary and secondary school environments. The Head of Year 7, who had more than twenty years teaching experience, was also the lead staff member who navigated the transition period for the pupils. A randomized sample of eight pupils (mean age = 11 years and 4 months; 4 boys and 4 girls) from Year 7 took part in the semi-structure interviews. The interviews explored the experiences of the pupils in their transition to secondary school and investigated how they perceived the differences between primary and secondary school, how supported they felt and any areas for future consideration regarding the transition. The interviews with the pupils took place three months after their transition, and it was felt that this was a suitable time gap for their views and experiences to be authentic.

2.2. Procedure

Consent was gained from all participants before they participated in the semi-structured interviews. All participants received information sheets which indicated the nature of the study. The interviews were conducted by the researcher in an unoccupied meeting room at the secondary school in the autumn term. The semi-structured interview guide was designed to include questions on the participants' knowledge of social and emotional learning, and suggestions of how to best support pupils during the transition. Questions mostly concerned behaviour of pupils in the current Year 7, although participants were also asked to give recommendations that could potentially benefit future pupils during a similar transition phase. As far as possible, questions remained singular, open-ended and without cues for answers (Patton, 2002; Robson, 2002). At the onset of each interview, the participants were reminded of confidentiality and advised that they could ask to terminate the interview at any time. Each interview started with a brief description of the researcher's role and nature of the study and lasted for approximately half an hour. All interviews were tape recorded with the participants' permission and the audio recordings were then transcribed in preparation for analysis.

2.3. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This approach to analysis involves the identification, coding, and analysis of patterns within the data (Boyatzis, 1998). A thematic approach was taken to the analysis of the data, based on its broadest definition as 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This may enable the answering of specific questions and facilitate the identification of cross-case similarities and differences (Braun & Clarke, 2006), such as the variability in behaviours across settings which were anticipated in this study. Unlike content analysis, which advises against placing data in more than one category (Cohen et al., 2009), thematic analysis allows data items to be categorised within multiple

themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was necessary for this study, where a specific data item, such as certain behaviours that incorporate two or more social and emotional constructs, maybe relevant in various sections and its omission from either category would potentially negatively affect the interpretation of results. Finally, thematic analysis allows for contextual information to be taken into account (in accordance with Braun and Clarke's definition of a "contextualised" thematic analysis). Acknowledging factors arising from the context is particularly important for this research as it focuses on exploring the experiences of pupils educated within a secondary school context.

3. Findings

The themes from the interviews are closely related to the interview data, arising from the talk of the practitioners and pupils around experiences prior to and beginning of secondary school, the complexities of secondary school, and support around transition. Analysis of the interview discussions revealed three major themes: secondary school environment, transition support, social processes and relationships, and belonging. For the purpose of anonymity and clarity, teachers will be alluded to as Teacher 1 – Teacher 6 and the pupils will be alluded to as Pupil A – Pupil H.

Theme 1: Transition support

The responses from the sub-question to the pupils “Can you tell me about any help your primary school gave you to prepare for secondary school?” produced a theme around ‘transition support.’ Responses alluded to both effective but also comparatively inadequate pre- and post-transition support. The support received before and after moving to secondary school consisted of issues such as preparing for future changes, finding one’s bearing around the new secondary school and introduction to various subject materials. All eight pupils involved in the interviews were able to recollect the pre-transition support their primary

school provided, which consisted of prior visits to the secondary school in addition to presentations ‘about you’ so the teachers could learn something about the pupils before starting school. Nevertheless, the pupils were unable to recall the effectiveness of the support or determine whether the support was significant:

“They took me around the school, but I had forgotten them by the next year” (Pupil A).

One pupil was completely indifferent to the pre-transition support suggesting that the duration of the support could have been longer:

“We did so many little things and activities. I couldn’t enjoy any of them and would have liked some more time to do them” (Pupil C).

A possible explanation of such views can be linked to the relevance of the support given and the personal characteristics of the one receiving the support. Pre-transition support appeared ineffective, with the pupils not considering the support as influential, while half of the pupils questioned whether anything had taken place at all. Contrary to the pre-transition support, all pupils were able to recall what happened when they initially started the secondary school:

“We had lunchtime club, or older pupils who would help us in our class (pupil mentoring) like one did yesterday” (Pupil D).

The pupils’ perception of post-transfer support is to be expected as the pupils were currently receiving or recently received the support during the time of the interviews, whilst the pre-transition was received six-eight months prior and hence possibly why it was forgotten and viewed as irrelevant. Numerous secondary schools, including the school used in this study, have started to develop orientation programs aimed at parents and pupils, amend secondary school curriculum and modify pedagogic approaches to improve the transition to secondary school and to meet and support pupils' developmental needs. Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, such developments by the school continue to

overlook the emotional and non-cognitive aspects of the transition. The teacher's comments suggest however, that certain changes from primary to secondary school life may be causing particular concern:

“Another challenge is that all of a sudden they've got to be more independent in all things” (Teacher 4).

With one teacher highlighting the pressing concern of the change of the dynamics of the school:

“They've gone from being the oldest pupil in a smaller school to the youngest pupil in a much larger school...there's the issue” (Teacher 6)

The teachers' comments indicate that pupils take time to adjust to their new environment, however, during such process uncertainty and uneasiness can manifest and impact the pupils in many different ways. This in contrast to what the pupils' felt. Three pupil, when probed about secondary school now and the future, displayed high degrees of concern and worry associated with moving to year eight:

“I felt like I want to drop out go back to my primary school” (Pupil E).

This degree of anxiety stemmed from difficult tests, the unfamiliarity of the future, strict teachers and higher demands on work as the pupils advance within the school:

“You first start off with just a little homework or none, but as you go up and change classes, it gets to more and more” (Pupil C).

The pupils will continue to face new and unexpected challenges throughout their educational lives, and thus, emotional and social learning should be continuously provided to equip pupils to be able to deal with them appropriately. For one pupil, he suggested a solution to the anxiety of advancing to Year 8 which was either remaining in Year 7 or going back to primary school; his reasons being: “because it feels safe” (Pupil E).

Theme 2: Social processes and relationships

From the analysis of the interview data, both the teachers mentioned the diversity in interactions during the transition phase. Whilst the pupils have to deal with a change in the environment they also have to deal with a change in personnel at various levels especially at an academic level in secondary school. The teachers in this study discussed how having a number of different teachers posed a challenge to the pupils:

“Here they have specific specialist subject specialists.....It's difficult to deal with different teachers they meet” (Teacher 6).

“Coming from one teacher and one group all the time to classes with different teachers....and coming across different characters and different personalities is challenging” (Teacher 5).

The pupils on the other hand were ambiguous in their experience of interactions with teachers both liking some and being dismissive of others. According to three of the pupils, they believed that they experienced varying responses from the teachers; some acted like friends, some were smothering, and others were encouraging. Teachers have different interactions and expectations from the pupils in a secondary school setting compared to that of a primary school:

“yeh...(when asked if the teachers were different) teachers are not the same- for example, one teacher is strict every time in the classroom” (Pupil C).

Pupil D had understood that the teachers had different expectations and demeanours and pupils needed to change their behaviours to suit the situation, with both negative and positive results:

“I'm completely different from Mr. X's class to Miss Y's class. It just wouldn't work if I acted the same way all the time”.

According to Pupil A, they recalled a time the teacher allowed a fellow pupil to leave the class in order for the pupil to calm down since the teacher was aware of the pupils'

special needs, however, such teaching style was unique to that teacher only and “other teachers wouldn’t do that.” The pupil elaborated that this teaching/disciplinary style made all the pupils feel at ease leading to a favourable opinion of that teacher: “All the pupils like him (referring to the teacher).”

The pupils’ perceptions of the teachers in the new (secondary school) educational setting was seen to be a significant factor in the transition affecting levels of self-confidence, teacher interactions, and pupil participation. The pupils’ awareness of different situations at the beginning of secondary school was also critical in determining the pupils’ engagement in class:

“I hate my class teacher, she is always shouting – she shouts at me all the time” (Pupil A).

This suggests the importance of pupil-teacher relationships and its possible impact towards pupils’ learning. Teachers may also need to develop an understanding of their actions and practices and such implications on the classroom environment and their pupils. According to pupil E, he would only pay attention in class if he had a good relationship with his teacher:

“There is no need for me to raise my hand up with everyone else because I never get picked (when talking about a teacher he was not fond of).”

According to some of the pupils, the style of teaching at secondary school was important for them. Shouting from the teachers seemed to distance some of the pupils from learning which discouraged them from completing school work. This may have led them to believe that the teacher disliked them. Another school-level change which can negatively affect the developmental stage of the pupils linked to diversity in interactions is the breakdown of friendship groups, especially as early adolescence is a period when peer relationships are progressively important. One teacher describes:

“Instead of dealing with a specific small group they suddenly have to deal with lots of different people” (Teacher 4).

“Suddenly they’ve got a wider range of people to learn to trust” (Teacher 6)

“Others find that the mixing with different people, making new friends....dealing with a larger number of pupils is difficult” (Teacher 6)

Moreover, in schools, pupils construct their identities and status via their friendship groups and social interactions. Social hierarchies emerge in schools as some social networks gain greater social prominence and authority than others which can affect social experiences. For instance, popular “cliques, wannabes, middle groups, and social isolates” were identified by Adler and Adler (1998) in the social pyramid in primary schools. In this study, the teachers reported that determining rank amongst friendship groups was a common challenge for the pupils when it came to adjusting:

“There’s very much a top dog....there is a pecking order” (Teacher 3)

While Teacher 2 stated, “they’re trying to look like the big boss.”

Due to the significance of social hierarchies and social position for some adolescents, some pupils might see their academic achievement impede their social position leading to avoidance of academic activities and exertion of minimal effort when completing academic tasks. Many of the teachers, when asked specifically about academic challenges, found that this posed considerable difficulty for the pupils when they come to secondary school:

“They are not comfortable enough yet to look silly, or they’re still worried about getting it wrong” (Teacher 2)

“They don’t want to appear like they don’t know so they don’t put their hands up” (Teacher 5).

“They are worried about what their mates say.”; “They don’t want to get it wrong and get the mickey taken out of them” (Teacher 4).

Theme 3: Belonging

Linked to the social aspects of transition, a common theme encompassed both practitioners and pupils talking about a sense of belonging and being part of the new secondary school; the desire to feel accepted and being identified with the new school. A sense of belonging is of fundamental importance for pupils to effectively function and succeed in a learning environment (Connell and Wellborn, 1991; Deci and Ryan, 2000; Osterman, 2000) potentially directly influencing motivation. A teacher explained how social groups change during the change from primary to secondary school:

“They used to have a bond in primary school and all of a sudden....want to go separate ways” (Teacher 5).

In addition to how the pupils were finding it difficult to adjust to such changes:

“They’re trying to hold on to primary school friendship groups” (Teacher 5).

On the other hand, when they begin secondary school, some teachers noticed that for some pupils it is a challenge to find a sense of belonging:

“They haven’t found that group or that order that they fit in to” (Teacher 3). “It’s a struggle....finding where they fit in” (Teacher 3).

Some teachers then alluded to the adverse effect that this could have on the pupils socially. A teacher revealed that:

“They try to get in with a difficult wrong group...or they try and change themselves to be like other people” (Teacher 4).

“The child doesn’t feel part of a group or the rest of the group gang up on him” (Teacher 4).

“Then you have the next circle of friends and hangers-on who want to chip in” (Teacher 1).

This is in line in what the pupils mentioned throughout the interviews. Six of the pupils highlighted the importance they placed on being accepted by their peers as a sense of attachment to the school, however, the teachers also mentioned the negative aspects of

friendships; that a critical problem the pupils have is that they cannot balance the social and the academic aspects of school. As the pupils are now able to move freely between classes in secondary school this can become distracting as Teacher 6 mentions:

“They might be in and out; they might come in hear a friend outside, and so they go back out again.”

Another teacher stated how it was important not to mix the two (academic and social):

“Those situations that happen at break and lunch and not bring them into the classroom leave that outside” (Teacher 3).

A different teacher expressed the same concern and went on to explain why this leads to difficulties not only for the pupils but also the teachers:

“It the clash between social and academic interests) affects the whole kind of approach of what you’re trying to do in a lesson in terms of learning and teaching” (Teacher 1)

When asked about ‘The most important thing in helping someone to settle in/enjoy secondary school?’ the notion of belonging was strongly alluded to by both teachers and pupils, but understood by the pupils as not being singled out by teachers and not standing out from other peers. Being identified as a secondary school pupil was seen to be positive as most of the pupils wanted to attain a sense of belonging while simultaneously fearing it could disappear by attracting negative attention:

“I need to be careful, watch what I do, how I speak, learn to think before saying stuff.

Otherwise they may not like me” (Pupil D).

Pupil D added that fitting into the class was essential, which held future implications. According to three of the pupils, additional support from the teachers in class was not perceived as favourable due to how the other pupils could react and thus, the feeling of standing out was again brought to the forefront. One pupil feared being hurt since they had experienced bullying in primary school:

“People say stuff. I can handle a joke but sometimes someone can misunderstand, and it goes past being a joke” (Pupil B).

One of the pupils clearly described the wish of being perceived like ‘everyone else’:

“I want to be seen as normal – like everyone else” (Pupil E).

Concerning the fear of being the centre of attention in class when starting secondary school, there was a fear of attracting negative attention from the teachers due to off-task behaviour or academic challenges, as pupil C mentioned:

“If I make a mistake then that’s it- the pupils will laugh at me, and the teacher could get angry or something.”

In addition, two pupils felt that not only classmates but also teachers provided the chance to generate a sense of acceptance; pupil A mentioning:

“It’s really important to get on the right side of your teachers....it works both ways...if they (the teachers) know you for being good in their class it feels nice to come to their class because you know they won’t shout at you”.

The fear of getting into trouble can be perceived as an attempt to belong to the school community in Year 7 as being told off or getting detention would be a means of standing out which enhances a psychological separation from the school community (Crosnoe, 2011). The role of the teacher in supporting the pupils inside and outside of the classroom during the transition was noted to influence the pupils belonging to a group:

“Because I am not the only one that he helps, but the whole of us....that feels nice because all of us are getting help together” (Pupil A).

This could imply that support from the teachers that was not clearly personal or directed at one particular pupil, but rather at the whole class could enhance the notion of belonging. It may therefore help for teachers to understand how to develop such belonging in

their pupils and understand how some of their practices may work detrimentally in facilitating this concept.

4. Discussion

This study focused on gaining a school perspective of pupils' transition to secondary school. The main aim of the study was to investigate the experiences of the pupils as well as the teachers' views and perceptions of the secondary school transition. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and eight interviews with pupils in Year 7. Three main themes were derived from the analysis: secondary school environment, transition support, social processes and relationships, and belonging, and they will now be deliberated within the wider context of transition.

The notion of belonging was found throughout this research and alludes to the feeling of being part of a group and/or school (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008). Teachers explained how some pupils find it difficult to fit in and adjust to new social environments and indicated how it could have adverse social effects. The teachers described how they felt the pupils were unaware of how particular emotions lead to particular behaviours and how some lessons had been disrupted by pupils who lacked understanding of their social and academic conditions. This seemed to be an interesting finding as seeing the experiences from the pupils' side gave a different understanding of the situation. The pupils inferred that they hoped to be accepted by the new children in their new school and if achieved, they would be happy. Belonging was perceived to be a positive characteristic, yet, they were nervous and apprehensive of attracting negative attention. The pupils' expression of concerns is also in line with previous research that has highlighted that pupils during the transition express greater levels of anxiety for reasons such as being accepted, moving between classes in school, size of school, the impact of past friendships and academic performance (Bellini, 2004; MacNeil, Lopes and Minnes, 2009; Tantam, 2000). For such reasons, 'fitting in' seems critical and of fundamental

importance in the lives of pupils during the transition period, but can be seen as disruptive from the teachers' viewpoint. Schools and practitioners may look to examine effective approaches in the context of wider inclusion and participation which has mainly been a focus for pupils with mental and physical disabilities. Effective secondary school integration programmes could be put in to place to educate pupils to recognise differences as an invitation to create more inclusive communities which could divert the pressure away from practitioners to 'fix' pupils that do not 'fit in' or are 'disruptive'.

Furthermore, it can be seen that the changing policy domains are playing a part in reinforcing and reproducing inequalities through systems and practices that privilege certain pupils. The inequalities are being exacerbated by the power of academies and free schools to select certain pupils over others (Weis et al., 2014), the tax breaks for private schools, and the underfunded and increased competition between comprehensives (Gorard, 2014), all which accumulate to create an environment where the select few are set on the path to succeed while the rest are left stranded. Nonetheless, some believe that these neo-liberal reforms have the ability to accomplish more efficiency and competitiveness in conjunction with a forward-looking, impartial and socially progressive agenda (Giddens 2007). Yet, others reject this by arguing that the practices motivated by the values and principles of social justice and equity are hindered by the focus on individuals' performativity rather than the broader and collective aspects of schooling such as developing social and emotional learning (Ball 2003) and thus there needs to be a refocus on a more informed pedagogy of educational practice.

It could be argued that some pupils are already being exposed to opportunities to enhance their social skills during and post-primary transition with various structured extracurricular activities such as participation in sports days and breakfast clubs (Eccles et al., 2003; Gilman et al., 2004). However, such extracurricular activities are not accessible for all pupils, particularly economically disadvantaged pupils (Gilman et al., 2004). Moreover, for

those pupils that are attending such extracurricular activities, these activities are not preparing pupils to understand, separate and regulate between the social and emotional aspects of schooling. Teachers and the school must allow the pupils an extended period to settle into their new environment post-transition with studies consistently revealing that pupils who experience a better understanding of their 'self' in educational environments are more motivated, more engaged in school and classroom activities, and more dedicated to school (Osterman, 2000). This implies that the most effective transitions/intervention support should run at significant time points (i.e. during transitions, exam times, etc) in order for the pupils to reach an extensive understanding of the support provided and possibly apply the skills learnt more effectively. The idea of an extended post- transition phase could also help the pupils in enhancing their emotional and social skills to develop their social networks. The development of a social support system in the early periods of the transition could have a stress-buffering effect (Sirsch, 2003), and it is likely that a well- established social network and the related positive support in coping with situations could lead to a less negative perception of events and improve academic engagement.

As the significance of peer relationships has been alluded to, both the teachers and pupils also commented on the challenges pupils face with the new teacher-pupil relationships. Ozer et al., (2008) mentioned teacher relations as a protective factor in the transfer to secondary school and the data in this study support this claim. Previous research suggests that the more supportive school setting (in regards to institution, teachers and peers) the better the outcomes for the pupils (Anderman, 2002). Teachers are important and influential members of the school, and the pupils mentioned both encouraging and dismissive comments with regard to their teachers. The pupils revealed that they received a wide range of different interactions from their teachers at their new secondary school combined with a large (mainly supportive) adult network. Parts of the Year 7 interview discussion was associated with the

(in)different help provided and the pupils' perceptions of the teachers involved during the transition. Such perceptions of the teachers following the transition from primary school have the potential to affect academic attainment, participation levels, in addition to the sense of belonging. There seemed to be a common theme around the pupils wanting to be heard by the teachers but also a form of misunderstanding and miscommunication between said pupils and teachers.

A recommendation of this study therefore is to shift the onus from a pupil deficit model of the transition, to shifting the onus onto teachers in developing a more socially and emotionally intelligent classroom and environment. It could be beneficial for teachers and practitioners to be trained in social and emotional learning and developing empathy skills, as well as educational practitioners becoming more research informed. This could enable practitioners to become engaged in a structured process of learning to help them make clear links between their individual assumptions and research knowledge (Katz and Dack, 2014). This practice may assist schools and practitioners in creating a better understanding of pertinent issues and challenges pupils face. However, this could prove to be challenging as continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers such as accredited programmes run by the Education and Training Foundation or even non-accredited CPD such as peer coaching, shadowing, mentoring, being an active members of a committee or the likes thereof are generally lacking in the development of teacher's baseline understanding of children's social and emotional development, teacher-student relationships, mental health issues and the learning environment (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). If schools train practitioners in developing social and emotional teaching and become more research informed, they could develop their expertise in its application and start to recognise how, where and why to be most effective, and potentially positively impact and enhance the educational environment for the betterment of the pupils (Brown, 2017; Flyvbjerg, 2001). As discussed previously, a limitation of

previous transitional intervention programmes has been the lack of communication and cooperation between researchers, practitioners and pupils (Vanderlinde and Van Braak, 2010) and the “one size fits all” learning programmes. This study has tried to address this by gaining the schools’ perspective of secondary school transition and transitional support in a bid to personalise and advocate for a context-specific transitional intervention programme.

5. Conclusion

There exists a scarcity of studies within the extant peer-reviewed research literature that directly relates to how practitioners and pupils themselves report experiencing transition (Dray et al., 2017; Fautley and Savage, 2010; Virtanen et al, 2019). Nonetheless, it is of great importance that both groups are involved in the determining the relevance of emotional health and wellbeing initiatives that are designed to support pupils during the move (Day et al., 2006). The interviews carried out in this study found that pupils had difficulty in understanding their experiences and seemed unaware how particular emotions led to particular behaviour. Pupils who are able to deal with myriad of circumstances positively enjoyed a healthier educational experience and attainment (Parker et al, 2009; Zeedyk et al, 2003; Zajacova et al., 2005). The triangulated findings from the teacher and pupil interviews highlighted the challenges the pupils faced with regards to understanding their own behaviours and the effect it may have on others; as well as pupils having difficulty in understanding the educational context in terms of their teachers and peers. It appears that the Year 7 pupils respond to feeling valued by their peers and teachers, whilst simultaneously struggling to handle conflicting situations and challenging emotions which has the potential to impact on children’s and teachers wellbeing. This study thus, advocates for a more personalised approach that may support pupils who will undertake the transition. The researcher also believed because of the increasing rhetoric of schools to focus on pupils’ performance rather than holistic learning, there seemed to be a short-term impact of support

programmes during the transition without much long-term effect. Therefore, the introduction of universal assessment and monitoring of social and emotional development would go some way to redress the balance in recognising the importance of socio-emotional learning in enabling pupils to fulfil their potential in life: socially, emotionally and academically.

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