

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

International Journal of Educational Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures

Experiencing the transition to lower secondary school: Students' voices

Gro Marte Strand

Department of Teacher Education, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, ILU, NTNU Kavskinnet, Gunnerus gate 1, 7012 Trondheim, Norway



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Primary to secondary transition
 Student experiences
 Psychosocial
 Learning culture
 Support
 Qualitative case study

ABSTRACT

This study seeks to explore how Norwegian students experience the transition to lower secondary school. Semi-structured interviews, observations, and letters were used to capture these experiences. The findings indicated that the students enjoyed the initial weeks of lower secondary school. Experiencing a safe psychosocial environment seemed to be a prerequisite for such enjoyment. Some changes related to the learning culture were difficult for the students to adapt to, and for some, the initial enjoyment declined half a year into lower secondary school. I argue that providing psychosocial support during this transition is crucially important. In order to adjust support and expectations in line with the students' levels of competence, teachers must be aware of the changes the students are encountering.

1. Introduction

Considerable research on the transition to lower secondary school has been conducted internationally (Smyth, 2017). Studies show that for students, the move from the seemingly familiar and less demanding environment of primary school to the unfamiliar and more demanding surroundings of lower secondary school is experienced as both complex and demanding. Since the students are simultaneously becoming young adults, the transition is even more complex (See for example Coffey, 2013; Kvalsund, 2000; Pratt & George, 2005; Tilleczek, 2010). Students report varied transition experiences, but the majority seem to have some difficulties at the start of lower secondary school, and it has been suggested that this transition is particularly demanding and problematic for students who are at risk of leaving school early (Tilleczek & Ferguson, 2007). Students with lower abilities, lower self-esteem, and who are unprepared for secondary school are particularly vulnerable to poorer school and peer transitions (West, Sweeting, & Young, 2010). In turn, students with negative transition experiences are more likely to experience poorer social and emotional health, including high levels of depression and anxiety at the end of their first year of lower secondary school (Waters, Lester, Wenden, & Cross, 2012).

The Norwegian government identifies the transition to lower secondary school as an important milestone in the lives of young adolescents and emphasises the importance of facilitating good transition experiences (Ministry of Education & Research, 2011). In order to facilitate the connection between the main school stages, the national curriculum in Norway emphasises a continuous education system from Grades 1 to 13. Furthermore, a national strategy aiming at increasing student motivation and learning outcomes in lower secondary school, involving more practical and varied teaching practices, was implemented from 2013 to 2017 (Ministry of Education & Research, 2015). Despite the importance attributed at the government level to facilitating a smooth transition process, the literature search shows that the transition from primary to lower secondary school has not featured strongly in the Norwegian academic agenda. Consequently, there is a lack of research-based knowledge on how this transition is experienced in

E-mail address: gro.m.strand@ntnu.no.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2019.06.009>

Received 7 November 2018; Received in revised form 11 June 2019; Accepted 23 June 2019

0883-0355/ © 2019 The Author. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

the Norwegian context. The majority of the students in Norway start in separate lower secondary schools in Grades 8–10, and it is official policy to transfer to the nearest public school, which students do at age 13. Unlike in many other international education contexts, the students do not receive marks on their academic performances in primary school. The choice of schools, the maturity of students, and changes in assessment practices are therefore aspects that may lead to specific experiences among Norwegian students.

The majority of international research in this field consists of quantitative studies, whereas qualitative studies are needed (Tilleczek & Ferguson, 2007). Qualitative studies are suitable in order to hear the individuals' voices and to understand the situation from their perspectives, and furthermore, to better understand the context in which participants in a study address an issue (Creswell, 2013). As the focus of the present study was to capture the students' voices in a Norwegian context, a qualitative approach was used based on the following research question: *How do the students experience the transition to lower secondary school socially, academically, emotionally, and personally?*

In the following section, I will provide a more detailed presentation of related research and the theoretical framework for the study.

2. Related research and theoretical framework

2.1. Related research

Most students report having mixed feelings about attending lower secondary school; they are both looking forward to and dreading it (Graham & Hill, 2005; Kvalsund, 2000). According to a study by Mellor and Delamont (2011), however, the students felt ready for lower secondary school, as they had outgrown the primary school setting. Several studies show that the painful and stressful experiences students anticipate prior to the transition are primarily based on structural changes (See for example Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Pratt & George, 2005; Waters, Lester, & Cross, 2014; West et al., 2010).

Before the transition, students are mainly concerned about social relationships. They see opportunities for new, positive friendships, but they are also worried that they might lose social status or experience separation from former classmates (Kvalsund, 2000; Topping, 2011). Students who are able to make friends and deal with changes are best able to cope and manage a relatively successful transition, as friends help the students to adjust to the new school setting (See for example Hagenauer & Reitbauer, 2013; Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Lester & Cross, 2015; O'Toole, Hayes, & Mhathúna, 2014; Pratt & George, 2005). In addition to peers, perceived support from teachers and parents has a major impact on how students adapt in the new school context (Bru, Stornes, Munthe, & Thuen, 2010; Coffey, 2013; Hanewald, 2013; Topping, 2011). The day-to-day interactions with teachers are critically important in facilitating the students' continued engagement with school during the transition process (Smyth, 2017). Students who experience changes related to an increase in teacher discipline and control practices, and situations that provide fewer decision-making opportunities in the lower secondary school, are found to be less motivated for school after the transition, as the students' desire for control over their own lives is growing (Eccles et al., 1993).

A study by Hagenauer and Reitbauer (2013) identified a relatively high level of school enjoyment directly after the transition, whereas this initially positive enjoyment declined after a few months in the new context. They suggest that this can be understood in terms of "transition positivism," as positive expectations and feelings triggered by the upcoming transitions are likely to be maintained through the first weeks in the new school setting. When more realistic judgements of the new context develop, this may impact the decline in school enjoyment. Several studies show that students become more concerned about academic matters after some weeks in the lower secondary school. Specifically, students report changing academic expectations, more demanding learning situations, an increased amount of homework, and a higher academic level in lower secondary school (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Kvalsund, 2000; O'Toole et al., 2014; Smyth, 2017). Students tend to become more negative about their ability to cope with schoolwork during the transition process. Consequently, it has been suggested that the academic skills developed at the primary level provide an important foundation for this transition (Smyth, 2016, 2017, 2018). As students in Norway receive marks for the first time in Grade 8, this also contributes to their concerns (Kvalsund, 2000). Many students experience an abrupt transition when they are first graded because they are unprepared for it, and this can affect their motivation from the beginning in the new school (OECD, 2011).

Rice, Frederickson, and Seymour (2011) found that students adapt relatively quickly to most new settings and structures. However, changes such as greater responsibility in managing homework and remembering to bring equipment took longer to adapt to, and remained a concern for the students after the transition. A study by O'Toole et al. (2014) showed that the students experienced difficulties and extensive levels of stress related to organisational skills in the new school context. According to Ng-Knight et al. (2016), students with higher levels of self-control adapt better to the challenges in the lower secondary school; however, the students' self-control appears to decline during the transition period.

2.2. Theoretical framework

The current study seeks to understand the students' experiences through the lens of a sociocultural perspective on learning, which emphasises the interaction between human mental processes and the surroundings (Vygotsky, 1978). In line with this perspective, the context determines how people think and act, and all actions are situated and context-bound. When students are transitioning into a segregated lower secondary school, they transfer to a new context, that is, a new institution. According to Bakhtin (1986), an institution consists of its own social language, which includes culturally and institutionally conditioned values and ways to perceive the world. To participate in activities that are common in the new context, they must learn to master the tools that are used there

(Wertsch, 1998).

Students' understanding of their surroundings is established through participation in social and cultural activities using language as a tool. Therefore, cultural development and learning occur first at the interpsychological and then at the intrapsychological level (Vygotsky, 1978, 2001). On the individual level, learning should be supported within the individual's zone of proximal development, defined as the distance between what a person can do alone and what he or she can do with the help of a more competent other (Vygotsky, 1978). In this way, the person gradually acquires the necessary cultural tools, such as language, norms, and codes. The learning process is an active process, and according to Bakhtin (1981), meaning and understanding are created in dialogic interaction processes. Learning at school should therefore be facilitated as a set of dialogical and collaborative processes that allow students to interact with the context. Such a dialogical practice is characterised by an "inner persuasive discourse" in which the discourse belongs to both the sender and the recipient in the dialogue. This allows the student to assimilate what is happening or communicated in order to create his or her own understanding (Bakhtin, 1981; Wertsch, 1998). However, according to Wertsch (1998), it can be difficult to define whether knowledge is internalised. He suggests viewing internalisation by distinguishing between the concepts of mastery, understood as "knowing how," and appropriation, understood as "taking something that belongs to others and making it one's own" (pp. 50–53). The processes of mastery and appropriation are often interwoven, but Wertsch (1998) claims that it is possible to master something that has not yet been appropriated. If this is the case, the student will need support from a more competent other (Vygotsky, 1978) until the knowledge is appropriated.

The data-collection process, the analysis, and the way in which ethics and quality have been ensured in this study will now be presented.

3. Method

3.1. A qualitative case study

The purpose of this study was to investigate how students experience the transition to lower secondary school. Hence, a qualitative instrumental single case study design was employed to best understand the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). One bounded case study site, a lower secondary school, was chosen for in-depth examination. This school was identified through purposive sampling, as I wanted to study the transition within a school where the employees were interested in gaining research-based knowledge into their transition practice in order to develop this in the future.

3.2. The participants and data collection

The participants in this study included a cohort of approximately 165 students who started Grade 8 at the chosen secondary school, Oak School (a pseudonym), in August 2017. In line with the case study design, the data collection was extensive and drew on several sources of data (Creswell, 2013). The collection occurred from June 2017, when the students approached the end of primary school, to February 2018, when the students had attended Oak School for about half a year.

I observed the students as an outsider of the group (Creswell, 2013), taking field notes from a distance as a non-participating observer. The observations were guided by the research question. Observation is considered to be an important source of information in case studies (Creswell, 2013) and can contribute as a context and a preparation for interviews (Angrosino & Peréz, 2000; Postholm, 2010).

All the students wrote three letters to me about how they experienced the transition to Oak School. The first was written during their last week in primary school; the second, four weeks into secondary school; and the last one, half a year after the transition occurred. The students decided what topics they wanted to write about. Such texts can be a good source of data, helping the researcher to get a clearer picture of what is being studied (Berg, 1999; Creswell, 2013).

I have used individual qualitative in-depth interviews to capture the students' perspectives and experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The participants in these interviews were chosen through purposeful selection, where I aimed at selecting students with different expectations and experiences about starting at Oak School. In total, 17 students (eight boys and nine girls) were chosen to participate in the interviews. These students were identified by the content of their two first letters, in which they revealed different thoughts concerning topics such as getting new teachers, new peers, or facing new academic challenges. None of the 17 students had special education needs. Oak School is located in a part of the city populated with families with relatively high socioeconomic status, and the students at Oak School score well on national tests. Because of this, the students had a relatively homogenous background. Despite this, they revealed different expectations and experiences in their letters. Some were looking forward to starting lower secondary school, some were excited, and others had worries. Oak School recruits students from two primary schools, and students from both of these schools are represented.

I designed a semi-structured interview guide (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015) with six open-ended questions that were used in all the interviews. In this way, I opened up the possibility of themes I had not considered in advance would be part of the conversation. In the prepared questions, I asked the students to describe how they experienced being a lower secondary school student, and how they experienced the transition emotionally, personally, academically, and socially, as well as to describe what they wanted their future at Oak School to be. The interviews lasted from 20 to 60 min and were carried out at Oak School during school hours. All the interviews were conducted twice: first, five to eight weeks after the students started at Oak School, and second, about six months after school had begun. I audiotaped and transcribed each of the interviews.

3.3. Data analysis

The transcribed interviews constituted the primary data for the analysis, and the transcriptions have been analysed using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The unit of analysis was the student's experiences, and the purpose of using this method was to develop an interpretative understanding of those experiences. The student letters and the observations were used to support the analysis of the interviews. Through coding and categorising, I defined three main categories: "A new psychosocial learning environment," "A new and more demanding learning culture," and "The experience of active support." As the students had many perceptions related to "A new and more demanding learning culture," it became necessary to structure this category further to develop an understanding of what it included. This was specified by examining the different relationships that created it at a dimensional level using axial coding (Postholm, 2010; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Consequently, four subcategories were defined: "Increased freedom and responsibility," "More varied lessons," "A new assessment culture," and "Increased learning pressure."

3.4. Quality and ethics

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles according to NESH (2016). To ensure the quality of this study, I used multiple sources to triangulate the data (Creswell, 2013), as the findings from the interviews are supported by the findings from the student letters and the observations. Through thick descriptions, I have aimed at maximising the opportunity for naturalistic generalisations, meaning that the presented findings may have importance beyond the study context if the readers of this article can get inspiration and adjust the findings to their own context (Postholm, 2010; Stake, 1995). Thus, the article could inspire the development of transition processes to lower secondary school in similar contexts.

A description of the school context follows, after which the findings of the study are presented. The above-mentioned categories and subcategories form the structure and the headings for the presentation of the findings.

4. Description of the school context

Oak School is a public school located in a city in Norway, and it has about 470 students from 13 to 16 years of age in Grades 8–10. In 2017, the new Grade 8 students were reorganised into four different groups with separate classrooms. Each class had a team of two to three teachers who shared the academic and administrative responsibility for the students in the class, and most of the school days were spent within this group. It was emphasised that all students should have at least one friend they already knew well in this group. The students were informed about which class they belonged to three months ahead of the transition.

The students were introduced to Oak School in the spring of 2017 while they were still attending primary school. Older students visited them and described life in the lower secondary school, and in June they joined a guided visit to Oak School, during which they met their new classmates and teachers for the first time. The first two weeks at Oak School in August 2017 were devoted to allowing the students to gain familiarity with the new physical surroundings, new routines, new tools, and their new classmates and teachers before the academic work was gradually introduced. One week was also dedicated to developing reading skills and strategies within the subjects. The students got their initial tests with marks (from 1 to 6) approximately six weeks after beginning at Oak School, and they received their first report cards in January 2018, just before the second interviews were conducted.

5. Findings

5.1. A new psychosocial learning environment

The majority of the students stated that before starting at Oak School, they feared that they might lose contact with former friends, get very strict teachers, or be subjected to bullying as a result of the psychosocial changes caused by the transition. At the same time, they were looking forward to meeting new classmates. They emphasised the importance of having at least one friend or acquaintance with them in their new class. One of the boys said this was important "so you're not alone in the class."

Some students said that they believed that it would take a long time to get to know their new classmates, but as one boy put it, "it happened surprisingly fast." The students pointed out that an important reason for this was that the teachers emphasised social activities during the first days and weeks. Activities that were mentioned as important were different name and collaborative games, a sport tournament, and an outdoor overnight trip in which all 165 students and their teachers participated. During the activities that I observed as a researcher, the students and the teachers showed an active interest in getting to know each other, often through the use of humour. One boy discussed the teachers' role: "They have been good at – not only that we should maintain friendships, but also get new friends. Not just look at each other like people from different primary schools, but also look at each other as part of the same group." The students said that they appreciated getting to know their new classmates, and they also liked their new teachers. A few weeks after the start of school, one girl observed, "I think they seem very nice. In a way, the teachers have been, like, open and ready to meet us. I think that has been good."

During the first interview, the students reported that they experienced the environment in their new class to be good. They exemplified this by little arguing, good togetherness, and an experience of being treated as adolescents by the teachers. One of the boys said that this experience had a positive effect on his academic work: "I get to focus better at school, and then I get better graduation grades." Some students also reported that they learned to become better at socialising because of the social changes.

The second interview showed that the majority of the students were still experiencing a good psychosocial environment.

However, some said that they missed friends who belonged to other classes, since they only randomly met them during the lunch hour. As one girl said, “In a way, we slid apart from each other.” In her last letter, another girl wrote about serious difficulties connected to friendships that occurred a few months after the start-up: “After a while, I got so depressed that I did not even want to do homework. I was shunned and I felt alone. The school year started good, now it is terrible. I miss my old class.”

5.2. A new and more demanding learning culture

5.2.1. Increased freedom and responsibility

A sentiment that was repeated by several students was “I feel much more free here, and we have much more responsibility.” Being allowed to leave school during break time was presented as an example of this newfound perceived freedom. The students also said that they were offered more choices in terms of academic tasks. One boy stated, “Like, here it is like this: we get a task, but how we choose to solve it is up to us. Before [in primary school] they told us how to do it, but here it is more free. So we have to stand a little more on our own feet.”

The students liked this newfound freedom. They said that they were ready for it, and it gave them a feeling of being treated as adolescents. As the previous quotes show, the increased freedom also required them to take more responsibility for themselves. Many students reported that getting this responsibility was demanding during the first few weeks, but after a while they got used to most of the routines that were applied during school hours. However, the vast majority of the students reported that the increased responsibility related to structuring their own work, and especially the plan for homework, was difficult to master. One girl explained it in the following way:

Every subject has its own digital plan. It kind of says what we should do before the lesson, which in a way is homework, and then what we do during the lesson and what we do after the lesson. It is a little hard to keep up with because I forget it because we do not have any places to keep it.

Consequently, the students were at risk of forgetting to complete their tasks on time, and several students reported this as stressful. One student said, “It perhaps made me less motivated for homework; it kind of seems like we get a lot of homework since we have to check out different files.” The students said that the teachers had shown how they could structure and organise their homework, but one girl stated that it was still challenging: “we just do not manage it ... but perhaps there is a reason behind the plan. It will maybe be easier later on.” However, the vast majority of interviewed students still found the new plan for homework difficult to master half a year after the start of school. The students in one of the classes said that because of this, just before the second interview, the teachers had started to structure more of the homework on behalf of the students. These students appreciated this change and experienced it as a great relief. One boy said, “Thank God for the new plan,” while another said, “The new plan, I think, works better because it looks a little more like the one we had at primary school.”

5.2.2. More varied lessons

Many students reported that, during Grade 7, they became tired of primary school because they experienced the lessons to be quite similar, but as one student noted, “Here at Oak School it is a bit different.” All the students stated that they experienced the lessons in secondary school to be more varied than those in primary school. They exemplified this by talking about lessons with more cooperative learning, making films, web pages, blogs, and digital presentations, and using digital textbooks in addition to regular reading and writing tasks. They also said that they had some new optional subjects that contributed to a feeling of a more varied school day. The students explained that the varied lessons helped them to remember the curriculum better and made the academic work more interesting. As one boy expressed, “Now we do it in a lot of different ways, and it’s like, then it’s a little fun to learn.”

5.2.3. A new assessment culture

The students said that they received more tests in secondary school than they were used to in primary school, and they had differing perceptions of this. Some students enjoyed the tests because, as one girl put it, “it kind of leads to something.” Others reported that they found the tests to be stressful. For example, one boy said, “I wish it was a bit more like – you could be able to show academic skills during the period you are working. Not during one day and test that determines how good you are.”

The students said that they looked forward to getting marks and found it exciting, but the majority also reported concerns, as they believed that it was crucial to get good marks from the very first day. One boy said, “I thought I would get bad marks. I was afraid of that. Yes, really.” However, their worries were somewhat calmed after the beginning of the school year, since their new teachers explained that the test results in Grade 8 would not define them as students or count for their graduation following Grade 10. They also reported that their parents told them that as long as they put an effort into their schoolwork and did their best, it should be good enough, regardless of the marks they got. The students received feedback on their tests in addition to marks, but they perceived the marks as more accurate and informative than the feedback. As one boy said, “Marks make it more serious.” All the students further stated that they aimed at receiving marks of 4 and above, and some experienced peer pressure related to getting good marks. One girl stated, “There is a little, or it is very much, a pressure regarding marks. Between the girls in the class in particular.” Only one girl said that she experienced pressure regarding test results from her parents. Many students reported that getting good marks was important for them so that they would have access to a good high school education in the future. The majority of the interviewed students said that they were mostly satisfied with their results so far, although many also found the marks to be demanding. In the last letter, one student wrote, “The first semester has been stressful, and getting marks has been extra stressful.”

5.2.4. Increased learning pressure

About one-third of the students mentioned in their first letters that they feared they would get an increased workload in lower secondary school from day one, but as one student mentioned in his first interview, “We started quite calmly.” The students said that the academic focus became more prominent after a few weeks at Oak School. A word that recurred among all the students when reflecting on the academic demands was “more.” One student said, “The pressure is higher here, that you must achieve ... there is more of everything somehow, if that makes sense?” Some found this demanding and stressful. One boy wrote the following in his last letter: “It’s very stressful because you get homework in several subjects at the same time, and there can be a test in Religion and Spanish in the same week, for example.” Some students, however, found the amount of schoolwork to be appropriate and as expected. One girl said, “They [the teachers] are very good at calculating what we are able to do at home, and they do not give that much homework, we get time to finish it at school. So that’s good.” The option to finish homework during school hours motivated many to work more effectively, and this contributed to an experience of more learning than in primary school.

The students did not have much to say about the content within specific subjects. They found the academic progression to be natural and built on the curriculum from primary school. However, several students reported that the subjects they personally found difficult at primary school were still difficult and demanding at Oak School. One boy stated, “They [the teachers] take it for granted that we have learned everything we need to learn at primary school ... If I did not get it at primary school, and then they start talking about it, then it’s hard to understand what they mean.”

5.3. The experience of active support

Some of the student experiences were related to how they perceived the support they received during the transition process. The teachers in primary school had given them information about the marks, academic demands, and routines they could expect at Oak School to prepare them for the transition. Some also got a voluntary opportunity to receive marks on a couple of tests. One boy said, “We heard that it is very important to get good marks. If not, you fail through all the years at secondary school.” The students reported that some of this information led to confusion and even worries after the beginning of the year at Oak School, as it turned out to be misleading. One student mentioned, “It is obvious that the primary school teachers do not know how the secondary school actually works. Some of the routines they said were important to practice are not important at all here at Oak School.” The students also expressed that the transition would have been easier if they had been better prepared to handle the routines at Oak School.

The students reported that they were given some time to settle in physically, psychosocially, and academically when starting at Oak School. They felt this was important, and one girl said, “If not, it might have come a little too suddenly because they expect more of us, and different things now than at primary school.” Several students expressed that it could be difficult to understand what the new teachers expected regarding some of the new routines. One girl stated, “In a way, they do not tell us what they expect from us, so one must try to figure it out by oneself in a way ... they should understand that it’s the first time we are going to lower secondary school; maybe it’s not all we’re good at, yes.” One of the boys added that it was obvious to him that the teachers at Oak School had little knowledge about how the students were used to working in primary school.

Everybody agreed that their parents were motivated and able to give support with homework if this was requested by the student. Some students said that it would have been harder to meet the academic demands and get the desired test results at Oak School without this support. Several students also needed their parents to remind them to do their homework, while others needed help to realise when they should do less work to avoid wearing themselves out.

Despite the challenges many of the students experienced during the transition, all the interviewed students viewed their transition to lower secondary school as positive. One of the boys summarised it as follows: “It was a bit unusual at first, a bit of a hard transition, but now it’s much better. And you get used to the routines here ... I’m enjoying myself, and I’ve got many new friends.”

The findings will now be discussed in relation to the theoretical framework and related research before the article is concluded. Some findings from previous research, which have not been described previously, will be presented when relevant to the discussion.

6. Analysis and discussion

The study shows that the students experienced the initial weeks after beginning at Oak School as positive, as also found by [Hagenauer and Reitbauer \(2013\)](#). They found the psychosocial environment among peers in their new classes to be safe surprisingly quickly. It appeared that knowing at least one person in the new class provided a basis for a certain social confidence, as this made it easier and safer to socialise within the new group. Furthermore, the way in which the teachers met the students – with kindness, humour, and emphasising social activities during the first weeks – was important. The findings indicate that experiencing a safe psychosocial environment was a prerequisite for this initially positive transition experience, as it was obvious that the students were primarily focusing on how to fit in with their new peers and teachers during this period. This concurs with earlier research, which has found that the day-to-day interactions with teachers during the transition are important ([Smyth, 2017](#)), while making new friends is also a primary objective of students when starting lower secondary school ([Pratt & George, 2005](#); [Rice et al., 2011](#)). As mentioned earlier, studies also show that students who are able to make friends are most likely to have a successful transition (See for example [Hagenauer & Reitbauer, 2013](#); [Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008](#); [Lester & Cross, 2015](#); [O’Toole et al., 2014](#); [Pratt & George, 2005](#)). The experience of a supportive psychosocial environment is important according to sociocultural theory. As the learning process starts on the social and external levels before learning has been internalised in the individual ([Vygotsky, 1978, 2001](#)), a safe and supportive psychosocial environment is necessary for the establishment of good learning relationships so that learning can occur in the new context. However, the findings show that students could miss friends who belong to other classes, and a few students experienced

serious social difficulties that appeared some months after the transition; one student even described herself as depressed because of feeling alone. This indicates a need to facilitate social activities over a longer period and across the different classes; this was also suggested by some of the students.

In line with previous research, the students identified several changes in expectations and activities related to gaining more freedom and responsibility, assessment, more varied teaching, and learning pressure. In order to participate in these activities, the students had to learn to master the tools required to cope with the new expectations they faced (Wertsch, 1998). The students reported that they rapidly adapted to changes such as gaining more freedom and more varied lessons. These changes contributed to an appreciated feeling of being treated as adolescents, hence growing older. Together with an experience of a safe psychosocial environment, this seemed to increase the students' motivation and school enjoyment directly after the transition to Oak School. This concurs with Ryan and Deci (2000), who found that contexts supportive of autonomy, competence, and relatedness enhance motivation for schooling. Along with varied teaching, these topics were also emphasised at Oak School in line with the national strategy for increasing student motivation in the lower secondary school (Ministry of Education & Research, 2015). I suggest that the efforts of the school staff in this work can explain why the findings at Oak School differ from those in previous research, in which students' motivation was found to decline as they experienced more controlling teachers and fewer opportunities for decision-making after the transition (Eccles et al., 1993).

Perceived changes related to assessment, increased learning pressure, and taking more responsibility for their own work seemed to become more prominent after the students spent some time at Oak School. Several students said that they got used to some of these changes quickly and found them appropriate and even motivational. This seemed to be true when the students found the expectations regarding responsibility skills and academic support to be appropriate and in line with their individual zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). However, not all the students got used to and appreciated all the identified changes, and I will explore these challenges further.

Students who experienced a lack of mastery of a subject's curriculum well at the primary level found the same subject as difficult to understand at Oak School. As also found by Smyth (2016, 2017, 2018), this suggests that academic skills developed at the primary level provide an important foundation for the transition to lower secondary education. It also indicates that the content of the lessons in the lower secondary school were not always experienced as being within the individual student's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). According to sociocultural theory, this could impede both learning and motivation, and the findings suggest that these students were in need of more academic support from the teacher as a more competent other (Vygotsky, 1978). It is reasonable to assume that a lack of appropriate teacher support affected the experience of the learning pressure negatively, as they had to catch up with the subjects and, furthermore, this made the students more dependent on support from the parents in order to get their desired results.

Problems regarding marks are found to arise among Norwegian students because the assessment practices differ between primary and secondary school (OECD, 2011). Many students in this study entered lower secondary school with a fear of marks. This suggests that they were not well prepared for receiving marks when they entered Oak School. Both their parents and their new teachers initially calmed the students' worries, as they told them that marks in Grade 8 are not considered to be crucially important. Nevertheless, several students reported that they were chasing high marks in order to get access to their preferred upper secondary schooling three years in advance. Some also experienced peer pressure regarding marks, and this finding was more prominent among the girls. This indicates that the attitudes communicated by the parents and teachers were not a part of these students' "own"; that is, they were not appropriated (Wertsch, 1998). As a result, many students experienced stress regarding marks even though they were told that they should not. This gives cause for concern, as the perceived pressure of performing is found to increase even more through lower secondary school, and especially among the girls (Bakken, 2018). The findings show a need to create a closer dialogue with the students regarding marks, allowing them to assimilate what the teachers communicate in order to create their own understanding (Bakhtin, 1981; Wertsch, 1998).

In line with the findings of Rice et al. (2011), the perceived expectation regarding taking greater responsibility in managing their own work (and especially homework) seemed to be the most difficult change for many students to adapt to. Half a year after the transition, the vast majority of students reported that they still found this to be difficult. In addition to organisational skills, the students had to master a digital platform to organise their work. The students reported that the teachers gave them lessons in how to organise and how to use this platform. Interestingly, even though they were able to explain to me as a researcher how they should organise the work, they found it difficult, and some even stated that they did not manage to do it. This shows that the tools necessary for managing their own homework were not appropriated by all the students (Wertsch, 1998). This can explain why several students experienced stress related to organisational skills, something also found by (O'Toole et al., 2014). I also suggest that the lack of skills in managing their own work contributed to the difficulties some students perceived in managing the experienced learning pressure. According to Ng-Knight et al. (2016), students' self-control skills decline when the students transition to lower secondary school. They suggest that the stress related to the transition process may affect the students' self-regulatory capacities, and neuropsychological and developmental changes during adolescence may also affect this capacity. This indicates that the teachers' expectations regarding the students' organisational skills related to homework were not in line with the students' zone of proximal development. It is evident that the students needed more support from a more competent other (Vygotsky, 1978) to organise themselves and handle the homework system at Oak School. I suggest that this support must balance between a student's desire for freedom and control on the one hand and the student's level of organisational skills on the other hand. As the findings show, the students in one of the classes received more appropriate support regarding this half a year after the beginning of school, and this was experienced as a great relief.

The findings show that despite the previously discussed challenges, all 17 interviewed students summarised the transition as being positive. At the same time, several students reported an increased experience of stress related to academic demands and assessment

after spending time in the school. The findings from the interviews and letters indicate that this contributed to a decline in school enjoyment for some students after a few months at Oak School, as also found by [Hagenauer and Reitbauer \(2013\)](#). The reason might be that the initial transition positivism declined as the students developed a more realistic judgement of what the new school environment expected from them. In the framework of sociocultural theory, the students' own experiences can contribute to further exploration of how support can best be applied during the transition period to prevent this decline in school enjoyment. [Bakhtin \(1981\)](#) stated that learning at school should be a dialogical process, characterised by an inner persuasive discourse that allows the student to interact with the context. There is reason to believe that this practice occurs at Oak School, as several students report that they received good support and time to settle into the school.

However, statements such as “in a way they do not tell what they expect from us” and “perhaps there is a reason behind the plan” also indicate that the students have to understand by themselves what is required of them and why. This is characterised by an authoritative discourse ([Bakhtin, 1981](#)). Such a discourse does not provide room for the students' interaction with the context, as they simply have to accept what is, and this impedes the learning process. I therefore argue that students need more support to learn to master the new required tools, along with the help of a more consistent practice of inner persuasive discourses, and, as previously discussed, a practice that is compatible with their zone of proximal development ([Bakhtin, 1981](#); [Vygotsky, 1978](#)). This requires that the teachers in both primary and lower secondary schools know what changes the students actually encounter. However, several statements in this study show that the students perceived that both their former and their new teachers lacked this knowledge. As a result, some of the knowledge the students obtained from their primary school teachers turned out to be wrong, and some of the expectations they met at Oak School were not experienced as consistent with how they were used to working in primary school. This indicates that closer cooperation between primary and secondary school teachers is needed to inform appropriate actions for adjusting their support and expectations in line with the students' competence both before and after the transition. There is reason to believe that the students would have been better prepared to handle the routines at Oak School if this had taken place. Such enhanced collaboration between schools has also been proposed by the [OECD \(2011\)](#) in order to facilitate better school transitions.

7. Concluding comments

The present study focused on how Grade 8 students in one lower secondary school in Norway experienced the transition to this school socially, academically, emotionally, and personally. Many of the findings revealed in this study reflect those found in international studies. The students experienced the transition as complex, requiring them to handle multiple changes at the same time (See for example [Coffey, 2013](#); [Kvalsund, 2000](#); [Pratt & George, 2005](#)). This indicates that experiences related to the lower secondary school transitions in many ways coincide across age, social background, and school contexts.

The most noteworthy finding was how important it was for the students to fit in among their new peers. In this study, the vast majority of students experienced the transition as positive in terms of social issues. They quite rapidly found the psychosocial environment in the new context to be familiar and safe, and they felt that their teachers made an important contribution in facilitating this feeling. This seemed to contribute to the students' school enjoyment and academic motivation. A few students experienced social difficulties that appeared some months after the beginning of the school year, and this had a negative impact on their school enjoyment. In line with findings from other studies (e.g., [Coffey \(2013\)](#)), this confirms that extracurricular activities provided by the school staff in secondary school are important to ensure that students form and maintain friendships in the new context.

The students identified several changes regarding academic expectations, which resulted in a new and more demanding learning culture. All the students appreciated the experience of receiving more personal and academic freedom along with more varied lessons, and found this positive and motivating. However, some students struggled to handle the new assessment culture and the learning pressure they felt. Furthermore, the majority of the students found it difficult to take responsibility for organising their own academic work, especially homework. There is reason to believe that the students would benefit from a closer relationship between the demands they encounter in primary school and those in the lower secondary school. Teachers must be mindful of these issues. The findings indicate that closer cooperation between teachers in Grades 7 and 8 could contribute to improving this situation.

The experiences related to social and academic changes contributed to emotional experiences that could best be described as an “emotional roller coaster.” The students reported mixed feelings of joy and excitement, fear and stress. Most of the students seemed to handle this emotional turmoil effectively. However, the feeling of not being able to meet some of the new academic demands or being socially isolated contributed to a demotivating level of stress for some students that could also lead to depression. It is also worrisome that more students reported about stress half a year after the transition than during the first weeks. This demonstrates the importance of providing both academic and social support over a longer period of time to prevent emotional stress. As stated by [O'Toole et al. \(2014\)](#), emotional support is especially important during the transition to lower secondary school.

The findings indicate that half a year after the start of the school year, the majority of the students experienced life at Oak School as everyday life rather than as a state of transition. In their own words, the students “were about to get used to it.” As also found by [Kvalsund \(2000\)](#), this suggests that it takes until the middle of the second term in the first year to find their way in the new school. Despite the complexity the students experienced, all the interviewed students expressed that the transition was a positive experience that contributed to a personal experience of growing older.

Further studies are required to understand how the cooperation between teachers in primary and lower secondary schools occurs and how it can be developed to provide an improved transition processes. Studies should also consider using parents as an additional source of information in order to better understand their contribution during the transition to lower secondary school.

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial or not-for profit sectors.

References

- Angrosino, M. V., & Peréz, K. A. M. (2000). Rethinking observation: From method to context. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.). *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 467–478). (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*, Vol. 1. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays*. University of Texas Press.
- Bakken, A. (2018). *Ungdata 2018 Nasjonale resultater [Youngdata 2018 National results]*. (NOVA Rapport 8/18). Retrieved from <http://www.hioa.no/Om-OsloMet/Senter-for-velferds-og-arbeidslivsforskning/NOVA/Publikasjoner/Rapporter/2018/Ungdata-2018-Nasjonale-resultater>.
- Berg, G. (1999). *Skolekultur : Nøkelen til skolens utvikling [School culture : The key to school development]*. Oslo: Ad notam Gyldendal.
- Bru, E., Stornes, T., Munthe, E., & Thuen, E. (2010). Students' perceptions of teacher support across the transition from primary to secondary school. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 54(6), 519–533. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2010.522842>.
- Coffey, A. (2013). Relationships: The key to successful transition from primary to secondary school? *Improving Schools*, 16(3), 261–271. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480213505181>.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions* (3 ed.). Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage.
- Eccles, J. S., Wigfield, A., Midgley, C., Reuman, D., Iver, D. M., & Feldlaufer, H. (1993). Negative effects of traditional middle schools on students' motivation. *The Elementary School Journal*, 93(5), 553–574.
- Graham, C., & Hill, M. (2005). *Negotiating the transition to secondary school*. *Nfer*, 53–57.
- Hagenauer, G., & Reithbauer, E. (2013). "It's cool but challenging". The Relevance of Basic Need Fulfillment for Students' School Enjoyment and Emotional Experiences at the Transition from Primary to Secondary Education. *Orbis Scholae*, 7(2), 23–42.
- Hanewald, R. (2013). Transition between primary and secondary school: Why it is important and how it can be supported. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 38(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2013v38n1.7>.
- Jindal-Snape, D., & Foggie, J. (2008). A holistic approach to primary-secondary transitions. *Improving Schools*, 11(1), 5–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480207086750>.
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2015). *Det Kvalitative Forskningsintervju [The Qualitative Research Interview]* (3 ed.). Oslo: Gyldendal akademisk.
- Kvalsund, R. (2000). The transition from primary to secondary level in smaller and larger rural schools in Norway: Comparing differences in context and social meaning. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 33(4), 401–423. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-0355\(00\)00025-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-0355(00)00025-2).
- Lester, L., & Cross, D. (2015). The relationship between school climate and mental and emotional wellbeing over the transition from primary to secondary school. *Psychology of Well-being*, 5(9), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13612-015-0037-8>.
- Mellor, D., & Delamont, S. (2011). Old anticipations, new anxieties? A contemporary perspective on primary to secondary transfer. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 41(3), 331–346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2011.607154>.
- Ministry of Education and Research (2011). *Motivasjon - Mestring - Muligheter [Motivation - Mastery - Possibilities]*. (Meld. St. Nr. 22 (2010-2011)). Retrieved from <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/0b74cdf7fb4243a39e249bce0742cb95/no/pdfs/stm201020110022000dddpdfs.pdf>.
- Ministry of Education and Research (2015). *Strategi for lower secondary education in Norway. Motivation and mastery for better learning*. Retrieved from https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/kd/vedlegg/grunnskole/strategiplaner/f_4276_e_web.pdf.
- NESH (2016). *Forskningsetiske Retningslinjer for Samfunnsvitenskap, Humaniora, Juss og Teknologi [Research Ethical Guidelines for Social Science, the Humanities, Law and Technology]*. Retrieved from Oslo: Norwegian National Committees for Research Ethics. https://www.etikkom.no/globalassets/documents/publikasjoner-som-pdf/60125_fek_retningslinjer_nesh_digital.pdf.
- Ng-Knight, T., Shelton, K. H., Riglin, L., McManus, I. C., Frederickson, N., & Rice, F. (2016). A longitudinal study of self-control at the transition to secondary school: Considering the role of pubertal status and parenting. *Journal of Adolescence*, 50, 44–55.
- O'Toole, L., Hayes, N. H., & Mhathúna, M. M. (2014). A bio-ecological perspective on educational transition. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 140, 121–127. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.04.396>.
- OECD (2011). *Improving lower secondary schools in Norway*. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/education/school/48126045.pdf>.
- Postholm, M. B. (2010). *Kvalitativ Metode : en innføring med fokus på Fenomenologi, Etnografi og Kasustudier [Qualitative Methodology : An introduction with focus on Phenomenology, Ethnography and Case Studies]* (2 ed.). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Pratt, S., & George, R. (2005). Transferring friendship: Girls' and boys' friendships in the transition from primary to secondary school. *Children & Society*, 19, 16–26.
- Rice, F., Frederickson, N., & Seymour, J. (2011). Assessing pupil concerns about transition to secondary school. *The British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 81, 244–263. <https://doi.org/10.1348/000709910X519333>.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well being. *American Psychologists*, 55(1), 68–78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>.
- Smyth, E. (2016). Social relationships and the transition to secondary education. *The Economic and Social Review*, 47(4), 451–476.
- Smyth, E. (2017). *Off to a good start? Primary school experiences and the transition to second-level education* (5) Dublin: The Stationary Office, Dublin.
- Smyth, E. (2018). Shaping educational expectations: The perspectives of 13-year-olds and their parents. *Educational Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2018.1492518>.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage.
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. M. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research : Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2 ed.). Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage.
- Tilleczek, K. (2010). Building Bridges: Transitions from elementary to secondary school. *Education Canada*, 48(1), 68–71.
- Tilleczek, K., & Ferguson, B. (2007). *Transitions and pathways from elementary to secondary school: A review of selected literature*. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/studentsuccess/TransitionLiterature.pdf>.
- Topping, K. (2011). Primary–Secondary transition: Differences between teachers' and children's perceptions. *Improving Schools*, 14(3), 268–285. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480211419587>.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (2001). *Tenkning og tale [Thought and language]*. Oslo: Gyldendal akademisk.
- Waters, S., Lester, L., & Cross, D. (2014). Transition to secondary school: Expectation versus experience. *Australian Journal of Education*, 58(2), 153–166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944114523371>.
- Waters, S., Lester, L., Wenden, E., & Cross, D. (2012). A Theoretical Grounded Exploration of the Social and Emotional Outcomes of Transition to Secondary School. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 22(2), 190–205. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jgc.2012.26>.
- Wertsch, J. V. (1998). *Mind as action*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- West, P., Sweeting, H., & Young, R. (2010). Transition matters: Pupils' experiences of the primary-secondary school transition in the West of Scotland and consequences for well being and attainment. *Research Papers in Education*, 25(1), 21–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671520802308677>.