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Supporting the transition to secondary school: The voices of lower secondary leaders and teachers

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ABSTRACT

Background: The primary-secondary transition is recognised as a challenging time for students, and poor transition processes can negatively affect the students' development. School professionals play an important role in enhancing the students' transition experience, but international literature calls for more research concerning their perspective on this transition.

Purpose: The aim of this study was to investigate what lower secondary school leaders and teachers in Norway emphasise when supporting the primary to lower secondary school transition.

Methods: A qualitative single case study approach was used. The participants were ten form teachers, their team leader and the principal ($n = 12$) within one lower secondary school. These were the individuals overseeing the transition process on behalf of a cohort of students who transferred to their school in August 2017. Data were collected through observations and focus group interviews. The data were transcribed and analysed qualitatively, inspired by the constant comparative method of analysis.

Findings and conclusion: Framed by their own experiences, the leaders and teachers emphasised ensuring predictability, establishing a safe psychosocial learning environment, giving the students time to learn to be lower secondary school students, and collaboration at the school level and with the families. These efforts are largely in line with what the research recommends. The findings indicate, however, that the teachers need more support during this process. The article concludes that a closer dialogical interaction with colleagues at the primary and secondary levels, parents and students could support the leaders and teachers to promote an even better transition.

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Primary to secondary transition; lower secondary school; teachers' perspective; leaders' perspective; support; qualitative case study

Introduction

This article is part of a larger study exploring how the transition into one Norwegian lower secondary school was carried out and experienced by students, parents and lower secondary teachers and leaders. To honour the voices of all groups of stakeholders (Lincoln and Egon Guba 2016), this study includes a separate analysis and presentation of the findings from each of these three groups. This article explores the teachers' and school leaders' perspectives. The participating students' and parents' perspectives are addressed in separate articles (Strand 2019, 2020).

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In Norway, most students transfer to separate lower secondary schools (grades 8–10) when they are approximately 13 years old. Research recognises this transition as complex and challenging for the students, as they are likely to face social and educational changes during a period when they are also in the state of puberty (e.g. Kvalsund 2000; Coffey 2013; Smyth 2016; Chambers and Coffey 2019). Although most students navigate the transition successfully, the majority also experience some challenges at the start of secondary school (Jindal-Snape and Miller 2008; West, Sweeting, and Young 2010; Waters, Lester, and Cross 2014; Smyth 2016; Strand 2019). Students with special needs and those who are unprepared for or dread the transition are more likely to experience poorer transitions than others (West, Sweeting, and Young 2010; Waters, Lester, and Cross 2014; Cantali 2019; Jindal-Snape and Cantali 2019). Poor transition experiences may cause problems for the students' academic achievement and negatively affect their social and emotional health. Efforts to smooth the transition can prevent such problems and lead to positive transition experiences, which can contribute as a foundation from which students can better progress academically, socially and emotionally (Waters et al. 2012; Hanewald 2013; Chambers and Coffey 2019).

Teachers have critical importance in supporting and guiding students towards a positive transition experience (Coffey 2013; Hanewald 2013; Hopwood, Hay, and Dymont 2016; McCoy, Shevlin, and Rose 2019). Few studies concerning teachers' perspectives of the transition, however, exist internationally, and more research is called for (Hanewald 2013; Hopwood, Hay, and Dymont 2016). The literature further shows a lack of research on the primary-secondary school transition in a Norwegian context (Kvalsund 2000; Strand 2019). Consequently, there is a lack of research-based knowledge on how lower secondary school professionals in Norway view and support this transition.

Purpose

This article aims to help close the identified gap in the literature by providing more knowledge of the lower secondary school leaders' and teachers' perspectives regarding support for the transition into lower secondary school. Capturing their voices can provide valuable information on how to support students from one level to another. The article is based on a qualitative case study conducted in a Norwegian context, framed by the following research question: *What do lower secondary school leaders and teachers emphasise when supporting the students' transition into lower secondary school?*

The following sections present related research and sociocultural perspectives on learning, which are used as the analytical framework of the study. The transition context, the method used and the way that data were collected and analysed are then described, followed by the findings and a discussion based on those findings.

Background

Supporting the transition to lower secondary school: related research

To implement supportive interventions during the primary–secondary transition, school professionals need to understand the perspective of the stakeholders involved (Graham and Hill 2003; Hopwood, Hay, and Dymont 2016; Bagnall, Skipper, and Fox 2019). Because

of this, the wider literature concerning the parents and students as stakeholders is included to explore what the lower secondary teachers and leaders emphasise when supporting the transition.

Since parents play a vital role in ensuring that a smooth transition takes place, facilitating communication and information between home and school is important to help parents find and understand their role in the new context (Coffey 2013; Rice et al. 2015; Smyth 2016; Strand 2020). To prepare the students and parents to approach the transfer with a positive attitude, activities prior to the transition, like providing information and arranging meetings between new peers and teachers, are recommended (Chambers and Coffey 2019; Jindal-Snape and Cantali 2019; Strand 2020). Many parents and students have concerns related to social issues during the transition, while having friends and experiencing a safe psychosocial environment play a vital role for the students in adjusting to the new setting. Hence, monitoring friendships and providing social and emotional support, both before and after the transition, are found to facilitate more successful transitions (Waters et al. 2012; Coffey 2013; Rice et al. 2015; Strand 2019).

Adjusting expectations in line with the students' abilities and adapting the teaching to the students' needs from the start have a positive impact on the students' academic process (Munthe and Thuen 2009; Rice et al. 2015). Curriculum continuity across the school levels is important in this regard (Galton, Gray, and Ruddock 2003; Hopwood, Hay, and Dymont 2016). This is emphasised within the Norwegian grade 1–13 curriculum, while adapting teaching to the individual students' academic and relational prerequisites is required by law; however, only students with special education needs are entitled to individual measures (Education Act 1998). Lower secondary schools should receive objective and valid assessment information from the primary school concerning all students in this regard, and having information and understanding of the special needs of the transferring students is especially vital (Jindal-Snape and Miller 2008; Hopwood, Hay, and Dymont 2016). However, studies show that lower secondary schools tend to favour the 'fresh start' approach (Jindal-Snape and Miller 2008).

Schools must be aware not only of curriculum continuity but also continuity in ways of learning and the potentially changing ethos experienced by children and parents when facilitating the transition (Galton, Gray, and Ruddock 2003; O'Toole, Hayes, and Mhathúna 2014; Strand 2019). In Norway, this should include an awareness regarding assessment, as students receive marks for the first time in Grade 8 (OECD 2011). Further, the literature shows that the teachers should acknowledge that many students experience stress related to increased expectations regarding organisational skills at the lower secondary level (Rice, Frederickson, and Seymour 2011; O'Toole, Hayes, and Mhathúna 2014; Strand 2019). At the same time, schools must recognise that students also appreciate experiencing some changes, such as being treated more like adults and having more autonomy and trust than at primary school (Galton, Gray, and Ruddock 2003; Strand 2019). This suggests that schools must balance continuities and discontinuities when facilitating the transition (Galton, Gray, and Ruddock 2003).

Previous research suggests that schools tend to conceptualise the transition as a one-off event, primarily focusing on the short-term concerns of the students during the period immediately before and after the move to secondary school (Graham and Hill 2003; McLellan and Galton 2015; Jindal-Snape and Cantali 2019). Research suggests, however, that while most students find that it takes at least one term to

settle into the new context, many continue to require support (Kvalsund 2000; Coffey 2013; Hopwood, Hay, and Dymont 2016; Chambers and Coffey 2019; Strand 2019). Consequently, it is argued that schools need to think in the longer term when supporting the transfer and acknowledge that issues can arise at different times for different students (McLellan and Galton 2015; Chambers and Coffey 2019; Jindal-Snape and Cantali 2019). Further, the schools should acknowledge that the transition can be as demanding for the teachers too, and the sharing of resources and collegial support are important for them to enhance the transition (Munthe and Thuen 2009; Hopwood, Hay, and Dymont 2016; Jindal-Snape and Cantali 2019). Previous research also shows that teachers at both primary and secondary schools experience having limited knowledge about each other's transition activities and have concerns regarding the disconnectedness between primary and secondary school (Coffey 2013; Hopwood, Hay, and Dymont 2016). Thus, establishing closer communication between the primary and secondary schools can provide a better continuity between schools (Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2008).

Theoretical framework: a sociocultural perspective on learning

This study is based on a sociocultural perspective on learning, in which the interaction between human mental processes and the surroundings is emphasised (Vygotsky 1978). According to this perspective, all human actions are situated in an institutional, cultural and historical context (Vygotsky 1978; Wertsch 1998). This implies that an institution, such as a lower secondary school, may have its own institutionally and culturally conditioned values and ways to perceive the world (Bakhtin 1986). To be able to participate in the activities that are common in a context, the individuals must learn to master the tools that are used there (Wertsch 1998). According to Vygotsky (1978, 2001), learning is an active process that starts on the social and external level by the use of tools and signs, with language as a central tool, before it is internalised in the individual. Vygotsky (1978) further emphasises that learning at the individual level must be adapted to the individual's zone of proximal development. This zone is defined as the distance between what the individual can do alone and what the individual can do with support from a more competent other.

To explore the school professionals' perspective concerning the transition to lower secondary school, it is relevant to add Bakhtin (1981) and his view on how meaning and understanding are created in dialogic interaction processes. He claims that participants who belong to a context will eventually take its conditioned conventions and interpretations for granted. However, Bakhtin (1981) emphasises that creative and innovative forces are only released if the basic assumptions, habits and definitions of a certain culture are subjected to discussion. By engaging in a dialogue that also opens for conflicting opinions, the development of meaning occurs. As such, facilitating a dialogue that includes other voices, such as the voices of the participating stakeholders, during the transition to lower secondary school is viewed as important. If this takes place, the individuals are not only subjected to the cultural and institutional context they are part of, but they will also become active actors who can interpret, change and influence the context (Wertsch 1998).

Method

The transition context and participants

To conduct the study, a qualitative method with a single case study approach was used (Creswell 2013). One bounded case study site, Oak School (pseudonym), was chosen for an in-depth examination. Oak School is a public lower secondary school that was identified through purposeful selection, as it met the criteria of being a grade 8–10 school where the staff wanted more insight into their transition practice to develop it further. The school has between 450 and 500 students and over 60 employees, and it is located in a part of a Norwegian city populated with inhabitants with relatively high socioeconomic status. Since the school recruits its students from this neighbourhood, the students have a relatively homogeneous socioeconomic background. The number of students with special needs is approximately 10%, which is at the national average (Udir 2018).

The transition process concerning the approximately 165 students who transferred to Oak School from its two neighbourhood public primary schools in August 2017 was investigated. The participants in this study consisted of the lower secondary school principal, the ten Grade 8 form teachers and their team leader. These were the professionals who oversaw the transferring students. The participants' work experience in school varied from 1.5 to 40 years. Both the leaders and eight of the teachers had previous experience in welcoming Grade 8 students. The form teachers were supposed to follow the cohort from grades 8 to 10.

The Grade 8 team leader oversaw the schools' pre-transition activities on behalf of Oak School. These activities were partly framed by a municipal guideline which described the following activities: the transfer of relevant student information from primary school, the assessment and decisions regarding special education needs, the composition of new student groups, school–home meetings (before and immediately after school started) and a guided visit for the students at the new school. The guideline did not describe how these activities should be conducted at a strategic and practical level, and Oak School had not developed any internal guidelines. Thus, they had to lean on previous years of experience when planning both their pre- and post-transition activities. The latter were mainly planned by the Grade 8 form teachers and the team leader during the last week before school started in August 2017. The form teachers were organised in three form-group teams, each sharing the responsibility for one to two classes. Throughout Grade 8, both the form-group teams and a joint-teacher team, including the team leader and all the teachers teaching Grade 8, had weekly meetings where daily teaching activities were planned.

Ethical considerations

The study complies with the ethical principles required by the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees (NESH 2016). Approval for processing personal data is gathered from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). The participants gave their consent to participate after being given written and oral information about the study. They were assured anonymity and confidentiality and guaranteed that they could withdraw from the study any time without explaining their reasons for this (Creswell 2013;

Kvale and Brinkmann 2015; NESH 2016). When reporting the data, a pseudonym is used when referring to the school, and the participants are referred to by their professional occupations rather than their names.

Data collection

The collection of data occurred from April 2017 to March 2018. In line with the study's case design, the material was collected in various ways (Creswell 2013), specifically through observations and interviews. The initial transition activities were observed as a non-participating observer (Creswell 2013). The activities being observed were: meetings where student information was transferred from the Grade 7 primary school teachers to Oak School, three arranged home-school meetings, meetings where the professionals planned the start-up for the Grade 8 students, and the students' first days at Oak School. The school was further visited during school hours several times during the period of data collection. Fieldnotes were written as descriptively as possible. The observations were guided by the research question and contributed as a context and a preparation for the interviews (Angrosino and Pérez 2000; Postholm 2010). The observations were an important way to get insight into what the lower secondary professionals emphasised during the pre-transition period and contributed further to confirm what the teachers and leaders stated in the interviews.

With the aid of a semi-structured interview guide, focus group interviews were conducted (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015). At the request of the participants, the interviews were conducted in the form-group teams during their weekly meeting at Oak School; the two leaders were interviewed in a group of their own. Thus, there were four groups, consisting of two to four informants. All interviews were conducted twice: the first time two months after the students' started at Oak School, and the second time about half a year after the point at which they started. All groups were asked the same six open-ended questions. Specifically, they were asked, 'Can you tell about what you have been thinking and working with so far to facilitate the transition for the cohort in question?' Further, they were asked to elaborate on how they had experienced the transition so far, what characterises a positive transition for the students, and their perceptions of the roles of the primary and lower secondary school staff. Finally, they were asked about the roles of the students and their parents, as well as their own expectations for each.

Data analysis

The interview transcripts and field notes were read by the author. Inspired by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and the constant comparative method of analysis, the text was coded line by line. When patterns among the codes were discovered, these were interrogated with questions, such as when, why and under what conditions the themes occurred and what they were leading to (Strauss and Corbin 1998). To keep track of the findings and constantly compare the codes and empirical findings with each other, memos were written to continuously conduct primary analysis. This analytical work led to four main categories. As the participants had several perceptions related to two of the main categories, it became necessary to structure these further, by conducting axial coding to develop sub-categories within them. The following main and sub-categories were

developed: (1) ensuring predictability; (2) establishing a safe psychosocial learning environment; (3) becoming a lower secondary school student: (i) a responsible and independent adolescent and (ii) academic tools; and (4) the need for collaboration: (i) collaboration at school and (ii) home–school collaboration. Member-checking (Lincoln and Egon Guba 1985) was used to ensure the quality of the work. The categories and their content were presented for the participants, and they stated that the descriptions were accurate.

Findings

Overall, the analysis identified that the participants emphasised ensuring predictability, establishing a safe psychosocial learning environment, giving the students time to learn to be lower secondary school students and collaboration. The main categories and sub-categories form the structure and headings for the following presentation of the findings. The author has translated the anonymised quotations from the data into English, in a way that is as close to the original phrasings as possible.

Ensuring predictability

The leaders emphasised that, prior to the transition, sufficient information should be given so that all stakeholders knew what was going to happen. To prepare for the new students' needs for pedagogical adjustments, information about students with special education needs or other academic, health or social challenges that Oak School had to be aware of in advance was provided by the Grade 7 primary school teachers. One leader emphasised the need to prevent possible prejudice being transferred and to ensure that these students' challenges were discussed respectfully in a way that 'attends to the students' dignity'. The teachers and leaders did not perceive it necessary to get information about students who had no specific challenges in primary school. They stated it was for the best for these students if the teachers were not influenced by how the primary school viewed them. One teacher stated, 'I think they should get as "fresh a start" as possible. I think it is good for them to change schools and start over.' Another teacher explained, 'I often think that what has been in the reports has turned out to be wrong. They [the students] have often managed to use the opportunity to change their behaviour [for the better].'

One leader underlined the importance of reducing possible concerns among parents and students by giving them well-planned and consistent information about the lower secondary school and how the transition was organised. Most of this information was given during two parent–school meetings before the transfer and one directly after. The teachers and leaders emphasised the importance of creating a welcoming atmosphere and being open to the parents asking questions. Using humour, they aimed to present the transition as a positive event. One leader said that the composing of new classes could cause worries, especially among parents. He encouraged the parents to avoid transferring any concerns they might have to their children by telling them that 'the most important thing for this transition to go well is not to be worried. Don't worry about class composition and what class your child is in. Your job as a parent is to soothe your kid.' Oak School collaborated with the Grade 7 teachers to make sure that all students had at least one

close friend in their new class. Information about the new classes was sent to the homes well before the transfer, and a guided visit, in which parents and students met the new teachers and classmates, was arranged by the end of primary school. One teacher said, 'I think that's a really nice meeting because they get to see us. Like we're not quite new to them when they come in the fall.'

Establishing a safe psychosocial learning environment

One of the teachers stated that, during the first weeks of school, 'we have a lot of focus on getting to know each other and a sense of belonging within the class and learning environment.' Several name games and collaborative activities were conducted in the classes; the teachers also spent time with the students during their first breaks and arranged a joint sports day and an outdoor overnight trip with the entire student cohort for this purpose. Each student and their parents were invited to a conversation with the form teacher to help them become better acquainted. One teacher justified these activities by stating that 'if you do not thrive, you will not achieve anything. That is why we have had a lot of focus on that, they should have it all right. We wait before we stress the subjects.'

The teachers and leaders further aimed to monitor the students' well-being throughout school and said that they continued to discuss social issues with the students after the start-up. A sociometric survey was carried out half a year after school started. Since it was discovered that a few students were about to fall behind socially, measures in cooperation with the school leaders were initiated to help them.

Becoming a lower secondary school student

The teachers underscored the point that it took time for the students to become accustomed to the demands and expectations they met at Oak School: 'The transition lasts almost until the first semester is over, because the students experience so many new things, every week and every month.' One teacher stated, 'We have explained to the students that it is a matter of learning, like, to learn to be a lower secondary school student. That we do not expect them to know how, but that we should learn it.' Another teacher stated, 'And that is kind of good to observe; they mature in a way, during those months.'

A responsible and independent adolescent

The informants emphasised naming and treating the students as 'adolescents', not 'children'. They exemplified this by expecting the students to start working more independently and taking more responsibility for themselves and their equipment. Time was spent to practise proper routines and work habits with the students, such as showing up on time to the correct classroom and making more independent choices regarding their academic work. The teachers also wanted the students to do homework more independently from their parents now, and one stated, 'It is not Mum and Dad's job to find out if you have homework in English from one day to another.' They informed the parents that they should show interest in their adolescents' schooling by discussing school with them rather than controlling their academic work. A teacher said, 'That is something we have

pointed out: “You have to start talking more at home.” The teachers perceived that their expectations regarding independence skills could be experienced as a big change for the students but argued that these skills were necessary to learn, as modern society and further schooling require this. One teacher stated that ‘the transition should not be so smooth that they do not notice that it is a transition. It should be a transition.’

Academic tools

The teachers stated that giving the students training to master the academic tools used in lower secondary school, such as marks as a tool for assessment, should be the Grade 8 teachers’ responsibility, not the primary schools’. They aimed to give the students a smooth academic beginning by introducing the content and working methods used at Oak School. They gave the students training in using digital tools, collaborative learning and project work and arranged a special theme week where reading strategies within all subjects were the focus.

The teachers observed that many students entered Oak School with a fear of marks and stressed the importance of settling the students’ worries regarding this. They did not assess the students with marks during the first weeks, as they first wanted the students to be more familiar with the requirements of lower secondary school. They also communicated to the students and parents that learning and development based on the student’s own prerequisites were more important to consider than focusing on what marks the student got. One teacher said, ‘We have three years left – we do not stress with anything. The marks during the first semester – they are not important.’

The teachers stated that they aimed to adapt their teaching to the students’ academic prerequisites and emphasised the importance of assessing each student’s level within the subjects to ensure this. This mapping indicated that most students were well prepared academically and mastered the academic transition as expected. However, it turned out that a higher-than-expected number of students had, from Oak School’s point of view, a worryingly low level of goal achievement. The teachers explained that some of these students most likely had special education needs, but to organise the necessary individual measures could take months. Since Oak School was not prepared for these students beforehand, they explained that this could cause difficulty with meeting these individual needs when school started, causing a more challenging transition for some students. A teacher stated, ‘Frustrating for us. Because then we are unable to provide adequate educational adaption to all students, and they suffer.’

The need for collaboration

Collaboration at school

A unified transition practice and a well-functioning collaboration at Oak School were emphasised as important factors in facilitating a positive transition. The leaders composed a team of Grade 8 teachers who worked well together to ensure this. The teachers underlined, however, the need for more time to learn from each other’s transition practice across the form-groups and the teachers of Grades 9 and 10. They also suggested that the school leaders should make sure an internal annual transition plan was developed to ensure a more consistent praxis at school. They stated that the lack of such initiatives led to differing practices from year to year. They feared this caused confusion among the

students and parents, while it also made them uncertain regarding their own transition practice. One teacher stated, 'Since our practice differs and we do not have any common plan for such things, I find it difficult to stand up for what we do.'

Collaborating with the primary schools to get student information and compose new classes was also viewed as important, but the informants highlighted the need to establish a closer primary–secondary collaboration than at present. One leader exemplified this by saying, 'We sometimes think that the primary schools have too little overview of the students' achievements. That is something we need to discuss with them.' One teacher stated that this should include a discussion about how goal achievement is defined: 'Average achievement. Yes, what does that really mean? Average achievement of what?' The teachers stated that they did not know how the primary school teachers prepared the students for the transition, and one stated:

I am just assuming, but I think they prepare the students well academically, but they talk too little about how much more responsibility they must take for themselves. But it is no wonder why, because we have not met the Grade 7 teachers and told them, 'this is what the students will encounter next year – you have to start preparing them.' We need systems for that as well.

When discussing this, one teacher questioned, 'So – should I be on a high horse and go tell the primary teachers, "You are not doing your job"? That is so wrong.'

Home–school collaboration

The informants stressed the importance of establishing a relationship with parents soon after the start-up. One teacher explained, 'If you have established that relationship, it is easier to meet and discuss eventual difficulties. So that parents at least understand that we want the best for them and their kids.' On a weekly basis, the teachers communicated with the parents using a digital communication application. At the request of the parents, they began sharing the students' plans for homework with the parents some time after school started. A second conversation between the form teachers and parents was arranged half a year after the start-up.

The teachers wanted the parents to relate to the information given from the school and noted that parents should feel confident that they would be contacted if the teachers had concerns about a student's schooling. One teacher stated that 'the parents also feel stress during such a transition period – it may be easy to forget some of the information provided.' They stated that the parents should contact Oak School and ask for additional information if something was perceived as unclear or they questioned the school's practice. They further stressed the importance of meeting and communicating openly with parents in these situations.

Discussion and implications

This small scale case study aimed to investigate what lower secondary school leaders and teachers emphasise when supporting the students' primary to secondary school transition. As presented above, the analysis identified thematic categories that suggested the emphases. The findings will now be discussed across the categories, in the context of existing research and through the lens of a sociocultural perspective of learning.

To ensure a predictable transition, the Oak School leaders and teachers emphasise the preparation of both parents and students. The findings indicate that their main aim during the first meetings with parents and students was to settle emergent worries. These efforts are important, as the literature suggests that unprepared students who dread the transition are more exposed to difficult transition experiences (West, Sweeting, and Young 2010; Waters, Lester, and Cross 2014; Jindal-Snape and Cantali 2019). Many parents and students enter the lower secondary school with concerns related to social issues (Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2008; Rice et al. 2015; Smyth 2016; Strand 2020). This suggests that the efforts to make sure that all students have friends with them in their new class, giving information about this well in advance and arranging meetings with the new class and teachers before the transfer, are important. Interestingly, the teachers and leaders in this study found that parents were more concerned about the composition of classes than were the students; thus, it is important that they communicate clearly that parents should not pass these concerns on to their children. Further, the school's emphasis on establishing and monitoring a safe psychosocial learning environment after the transition is vital, as friendships are found to support students in better adjusting to the new setting (Waters et al. 2012; Coffey 2013; Rice et al. 2015; Strand 2019). According to Vygotsky (1978), learning starts on an external, social level, and thus the students need to have peers and teachers they can trust and discuss issues with in order for learning and understanding of the new context to be internalised. For the same reason, Oak School's efforts to establish a relationship with the parents from the start are decisive, as the students' development of understanding for the new school context will be jointly constructed in interaction with their home context. By stating that they want parents to relate to the information given by the school, the findings indicate that the professionals want to define the role of the parents. As they further want the students to do their homework more independently from parents, a change in the role of parents from the one they had in the primary school is required. In addition to offering information, the staff perceives it as necessary to communicate openly with the parents and encourage them to ask questions. Such communication is important, as it more likely opens up a dialogical interaction (Bakhtin 1981) with the parents, which is necessary for them to develop meaning and an understanding of the new context. As the school professional must consider and understand the perspective of parents (Bagnall, Skipper, and Fox 2019), a dialogue is also important for this to take place.

In line with the Norwegian Education Act (1998), the lower secondary school staff aimed to adapt their teaching to the students' prerequisites from the start. According to previous research, this requires that the new teachers receive valid and objective information from primary schools (Jindal-Snape and Miller 2008; Hopwood, Hay, and Dyment 2016). The findings suggest that the staff are aware of this on behalf of the students with special needs or challenges. By respectfully discussing these students and thus avoiding the transfer of prejudices, they aimed to obtain information that was as objective as possible. In line with findings by Jindal-Snape and Miller (2008), they preferred a 'fresh start' on behalf of the other students. They argued that it was better to get to know the students independently. The findings indicate that the teachers felt that this was caused by their previous experience of not being able to rely with confidence on the information they receive from the primary schools. From the teachers' point of view, this emerges, as previously stated, because 'the reports have turned out to be wrong', and because of

concern that a higher-than-anticipated number of students than the school was informed about from the primary school had a low level of goal achievement. The latter indicates that Oak School had a different perception of students' academic achievement compared with the collaborating primary schools. Statements from the participants suggested that the reason for this difference was that collaboration had not been established across the school levels regarding assessments.

Consequently, challenges in adjusting the teaching for some of the low-achieving students appeared during the first semester. This can be criticised, as these students are among the most vulnerable during the transition to lower secondary school (West, Sweeting, and Young 2010; Cantali 2019). This implies that curriculum continuity is not enough. Continuity from primary to secondary school, in terms of how the level of low academic achievement is judged, and a common understanding of who requires special education also need to be established. This can ensure that the information that is transferred is experienced as more objective and valid, which can prevent students within the 'grey zone' between special and regular education from being subjected to a more demanding transition than others. This finding also gives a basis to question the 'fresh start policy', as this most likely prevents the school from getting information regarding some of the low-achieving students. It is a reason to believe that getting valid information about all students' academic achievements would better equip the lower secondary school to adjust the teaching to all students' needs from the start.

The teachers were clear that the students should experience some changes when entering Oak School. They emphasised that the students should be treated more like adolescents. Because of this, they expected the students to be more independent and take responsibility for themselves. It is reasonable to assume that the experience of more trust and autonomy comes with these expectations, and this is a change the students are likely to appreciate (Galton, Gray, and Ruddock 2003; Strand 2019). This requires, however, that the students learn the new tools and skills required at Oak School (Wertsch 1998). By emphasising that the students must learn to *be* lower secondary school students while at Oak School through learning the required academic working methods and habits of lower secondary school, as well as by gradually introducing marks as a new tool for assessment, the findings suggest that the professionals are aware of this. As suggested by previous research, they perceive that it takes at least one semester for the students to learn this and hence settle into lower secondary school (Kvalsund 2000; Coffey 2013; Hopwood, Hay, and Dymont 2016; Chambers and Coffey 2019; Strand 2019), and that the students grow more mature during this process. Contrary to findings from previous studies stating that schools tend to conceptualise the transition as a one-off event (Graham and Hill 2003; McLellan and Galton 2015; Jindal-Snape and Cantali 2019), and despite a municipal guideline that ends immediately after school starts, this indicates that the professionals at Oak School are thinking in longer terms when supporting the transition.

According to a sociocultural perspective, the teachers should be aware that their expectations and how they support the students' learning of, and in, the new context must be adapted to the students' zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978). This requires knowledge concerning what the individual student can do alone and with support from a more competent other. The teachers mainly obtain this knowledge by assessing the students' level after the start-up. But, consistent with previous research, the lower secondary school teachers state that they lack knowledge concerning how the

students were accustomed to working and how they were prepared for the transition in primary school (Coffey 2013; Hopwood, Hay, and Dymont 2016). By stating that they have not met the collaborating primary school teachers, this also suggests that these teachers lack knowledge of the context the students transfer to. This finding is concerning, as the teachers at both school levels need to know and understand each other's contexts in order to adapt their support to the individual student. In addition, previous research shows that continuity in ways of learning must be provided (Galton, Gray, and Ruddock 2003; O'Toole, Hayes, and Mhathúna 2014; Strand 2019). This needs to be addressed, as the teachers assume Grade 7 teachers do not prepare the students well enough in taking more responsibility for themselves. This can lead to students meeting expectations that are not adapted to their own zone of proximal development and could perhaps help to explain why many students experience stress related to organisational skills at the lower secondary school (Rice, Frederickson, and Seymour 2011; O'Toole, Hayes, and Mhathúna 2014; Strand 2019).

By emphasising the need for closer collaboration with the primary schools, the informants show awareness concerning these issues. From a sociocultural point of view, this collaboration cannot, as one of the teachers pointed out, be characterised by the lower secondary school teachers and leaders being 'on a high horse'—understood as being the one who owns the power of knowing what works best. Using Bakhtin (1986), this suggests that teachers at both school levels must learn to understand each other's contexts, values and ways to perceive school. Such meaning is first created at an external level and requires dialogical interaction (Vygotsky 1978, 2001; Bakhtin 1981). This implies that both school levels must be open to discussing possible conflicting opinions or taken-for-granted conventions concerning the transition. Not only the primary schools but also Oak School must be open to the possible need to change their practices with, and expectations of, the transferring students. If this takes place, both school levels should be better equipped to facilitate more continuity regarding assessment, ways of learning and what is expected of students.

The Oak School staff's point of departure in how they support the transition to lower secondary school was their own experience and prior knowledge. The teachers stated that the lack of time to learn from their colleagues created uncertainty regarding their own practice and shows that the school must also acknowledge that the transition can be demanding for them (Munthe and Thuen 2009). As highlighted by the teachers, they need collegial support and the sharing of resources in order to improve their transition practice (Hopwood, Hay, and Dymont 2016) and to develop a more consistent practice from year to year. If this is to be enhanced, they need to be assisted by more competent others in their own zones of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978). These may be colleagues, as they suggest themselves, but external teachers too, such as the primary school teachers previously discussed, or other resource persons. The literature indicates that schools need to include the needs and perspectives of the transferring students and parents (Jindal-Snape and Miller 2008; Hopwood, Hay, and Dymont 2016; Bagnall, Skipper, and Fox 2019). Hence, parents and students are important resource persons as well. From a sociocultural perspective, this implies that the lower secondary school should include the voices of all stakeholders in a dialogue and be open for all actors to interpret, change and influence the transition context and practice (Wertsch 1998). Furthermore, by including the voices of parents and students, the schools would be

better equipped to find the tipping point within the students' need for continuity versus discontinuity (Galton, Hargreaves, and Pell 2003). Interestingly, the participants did not problematise the municipal guideline, but the teachers call for an internal annual plan—something which would also contribute as an important resource. The meaning and knowledge developed from a dialogue that includes all participants could contribute as an important basis in developing this plan. The advantage of such an internally developed plan, as opposed to an external plan, is that it more likely adapts to the specific transition context.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that the findings presented here are based on a small sample of professionals from one lower secondary school. Further studies, including more schools—that is primary schools and schools within different socioeconomic neighbourhoods, are needed. Generalisation is not intended from this study. However, by using thick descriptions, the aim has been to develop naturalistic generalisation so that readers of this text can learn or get inspiration from the case study presented (Stake 1995; Postholm 2010; Creswell 2013). In this way, the findings may have resonance beyond the present context, as they can contribute to knowledge on how to support students in similar primary–secondary school contexts internationally. For example, it is interesting to note that this study suggests that a discontinuity in how the students' academic achievement is perceived exists across primary to lower secondary school transition: there are reasons to suggest that this finding may be widely experienced and should be explored further.

Conclusion

This study aimed to contribute to the international literature by presenting an analysis of lower secondary school leaders' and teachers' perspectives regarding support for the transition into lower secondary school. The analyses indicate that what the lower secondary school leaders and teachers emphasise when supporting the students' primary–secondary school transition largely concurs with what the literature recommends. They put efforts towards the academic, social and emotional aspects of the transition by focusing on a predictable transition in order to avoid worries, ensure a safe psychosocial learning environment, give the students time and support to become lower secondary school students, adapt their teaching to the students' prerequisites and collaborate at a school level and with the parents. The findings also suggest, however, that the teachers call for more support from their colleagues in order to learn and develop their transition practice. Further, in terms of communication with the primary schools, there are reasons to suggest that the professionals need more opportunities to adapt teaching and expectations in line with all the students' prerequisites. Overall, the study suggests that a closer dialogical collaboration with all stakeholders, which includes students, parents and the professional community at both the primary and lower secondary schools, should be established, in order to implement a transition practice in line with what the lower secondary school professionals emphasise as important.

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