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to secondary school: (how) does it work?
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Facilitating a successful transition to secondary school: (how) does it work?

A systematic literature review

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Abstract

For children the transition from primary to secondary school is sometimes difficult. Problems in the transition can have both short- and long-term consequences. Children and their parents can contribute to a smooth transition. However, information from children and their parents is rarely used. This review examines 30 empirical studies on the effects of interventions to ease the transition process. These are interventions which, in contrast to the usual information, focus on how children report about the transition. Although their perspectives differ, positive relations between the stakeholders in the transition process - schools, children and their parents - can help to improve the challenges presented by the transition.

Keywords: transition; child participation; child voice; support; stakeholders

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1. Introduction

Every year, after the summer break, many children around the world make the transition to secondary school. In the Netherlands approximately 185.000 children a year, after eight years of education at primary school, make the transition. This is not an uncomplicated step in a child's development because the transition is accompanied by many changes in both the school environment and in the social context. These changes can have positive or negative effects on children's well-being. It has been shown that poorer school and peer transitions can have negative long-term consequences on mental health (Chung, Elias & Schneider, 1998; Waters, Lester, Wenden & Cross, 2012).

Children frequently have mixed feelings about the transition. They look forward to secondary school but may also have reservations (Sirsch 2003). Children are looking forward to having more freedom, more challenges, and making new friends. At the same time, they are concerned about being picked on and teased by older children, having to work harder, receiving lower grades and being lost in a larger, unfamiliar school (Lucey & Reay, 2000).

Since the United Nations convention on the rights of the child (UN, 1989) was introduced, the involvement of children in decision-making has been an area of growing interest. The aim of this paper is to determine what the effect is of the involvement of children in the process to ease the transition to secondary school. Although a number of publications has analyzed student perceptions on the transition to secondary school and has made recommendations based on the content of what students say (Ashton, 2008, Bru et al., 2010, Cedzoy & Burden, 2005), little is known about the role of children as the owners of their learning process.

In this paper, we review the literature on the characteristics and interventions that contribute to a smooth transition. The aim of this systematic literature review is to identify empirical studies focusing on the effects of interventions to ease the transition process between primary and secondary school, especially interventions which, in contrast to the usual information, "give children a voice". Before we do that, we first define what a successful transition includes, and why it is important. After that we distinguish three stakeholders involved in the transition: the children and their parents, primary schools, and secondary schools. They are, with their background characteristics the focus of the paper.

Evangelou, Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Pammons and Siraj- Blatchford (2008) define a successful transition as consisting of the following five underlying dimensions.: 1. After a successful transition children have developed new friendships and improved their self-esteem and self-confidence; 2. they are settled so well in school life that they cause no concern to their parents; 3. interest in school and schoolwork has increased compared with primary school; 4. they are used to their new routines and, 5. the school organization and they experience curriculum continuity. This definition is used for the purpose of this review.

It is important that children can maximally develop themselves in line with their abilities. A smooth transition from primary to secondary school contributes to this. Zeedijk, Gallacher, Henderson, Hope,

Husband and Lindsay (2010) call the transition to secondary school one of the most difficult transitions in a pupil's educational career. Success in navigating this transition cannot only affect children's academic performance, but also their general sense of well-being and mental health (Waters et al., 2012; Zeedijk et al., 2010).

Not only the children but also society benefits from students who use their talents and do not drop out of school because of underachievement. Unnecessary absenteeism, dropout, grade retention and runoff should be avoided as much as possible (Bosch, Konermann, de Wit, Rutten & Amsing, 2008). Children who fail to make a successful transition frequently feel marginalized, unwelcome, and not respected or valued by others. This may initiate a disengagement process from school (Roderick, 1993 in: Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber 2000), lead to school dropout and poor academic achievement (Waters et al., 2012) and contribute to conflicts between the child and the school (Roderick, 1993 in: Anderson, et al., 2000).

2. Method

To find relevant literature about the involvement of children in the transition process, online databases ERIC (Education Research Information Center), Google Scholar and SocINDEX were searched using the terms: transition primary- secondary school; trans* primary- secondary school (*indicates a wide card option so trans* extracts transition, transfer, transitional, etc.). The keywords were paired with the keyword "support". The search of databases revealed 57 international studies of which 30 papers published between 1987 and 2011 were found to be relevant.

Included were peer-reviewed papers, written in Dutch, English or German and relevant to the research theme. The main criteria for inclusion were that the study examined typically developing children making the transition to secondary school. Due to different school systems between different countries and ages that children make transitions, an age range of 11- 13 was used. Studies were excluded if the children were outside that age range. Studies that focus on atypically developing children or focus on special groups, special themes or curriculum area were also excluded. Small case studies, containing less than 10 children, were excluded as well. This yielded 30 international, mostly descriptive, studies. The studies include various perspectives from parents, children, teachers and principals. They include a range of foci: aspects of the transition, children's background and personal characteristics (gender, adjustment, well-being and self-esteem, motivation) perceptions and expectations about support, preparedness, bullying, peer and teacher relationships and parental perceptions, involvement, choices and support. Most data are collected by questionnaires and interviews.

An overview of the reviewed studies and their characteristics is presented in table 1 (appendix). Table 1 shows, in alphabetic order, per author the theme and the main results of each study. The sample sizes and measures are also indicated.

The reviewed literature is diverse. The sample sizes differ between N=10 and N= 7,883, Questionnaires and students and teachers reports are frequently used. Most studies are descriptive and only a few studies provide solid evidence. Despite the different perspectives of the reviewed literature and the diverse assumptions of the researchers there is agreement about the key aspects which influence a successful transition. Important aspects are: the involvement of all stakeholders in the interventions and a good communication between all stakeholders (Coffey, 2013; Green, 1997; Jindal-Sape & Miller, 2008; Lester et al., 2012a), the formation of a supporting network (Topping, 2011), priorities for preparedness for autonomy and relatedness (Gillison Standage & Skevington, 2008) and for making relationships at secondary school, related to safety and belonging (Ashton, 2008), awareness for gender differences (Chedzoy & Burden, 2005; Chung et al., 1998) and for children who are vulnerable for a poorer transition (Chung et al., 1998; Jindal- Snape & Miller, 2008; Pratt & George, 2005; Lester et al., 2012a; Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Rudolph et al., 2001).

In the transition to secondary school various stakeholders, who have an interest in a successful transition, are involved. All stakeholders - the children and their parents, primary- and secondary schools - have their own approaches to smoothen the transition. It was clear that the selected papers could be linked to the stakeholders and to their characteristics. Consequently, this classification is used to organise this review. We distinguished the factors that can contribute to a smooth transition and describe if and how they can lead to interventions to facilitate a successful transition.

3. Factors influencing the transition

The transition from primary to secondary school represents a significant challenge to the stakeholders who are involved in the process. The children, parents and teachers have to adapt to the new circumstances. While this process may be stressful, positive interrelationships can help to improve many of the challenges (Coffey, 2013).

All stakeholders have their own approaches to smoothen the transition, as is shown in figure 1. In this figure we distinguish the three stakeholders, with their background characteristics, who influence the transition and hence the development of the child. For children it is important that their development continues in accordance with their capabilities. Schools have an interest in a smooth transition because it proves the ability to anticipate on the feeding-/ primary school and the adaptive capacity of the secondary-/ receiving school. Primary schools prepare children to realize their academic potential at secondary school and secondary schools are responsible for curriculum continuity and continuity in attainment. The parents are positioned in the circle of the child because they are inextricably linked with the child. They are the constant factor in all development stages of the child and are ultimately responsible for the education of the child and for the choices involved (Bosch et al., 2008).

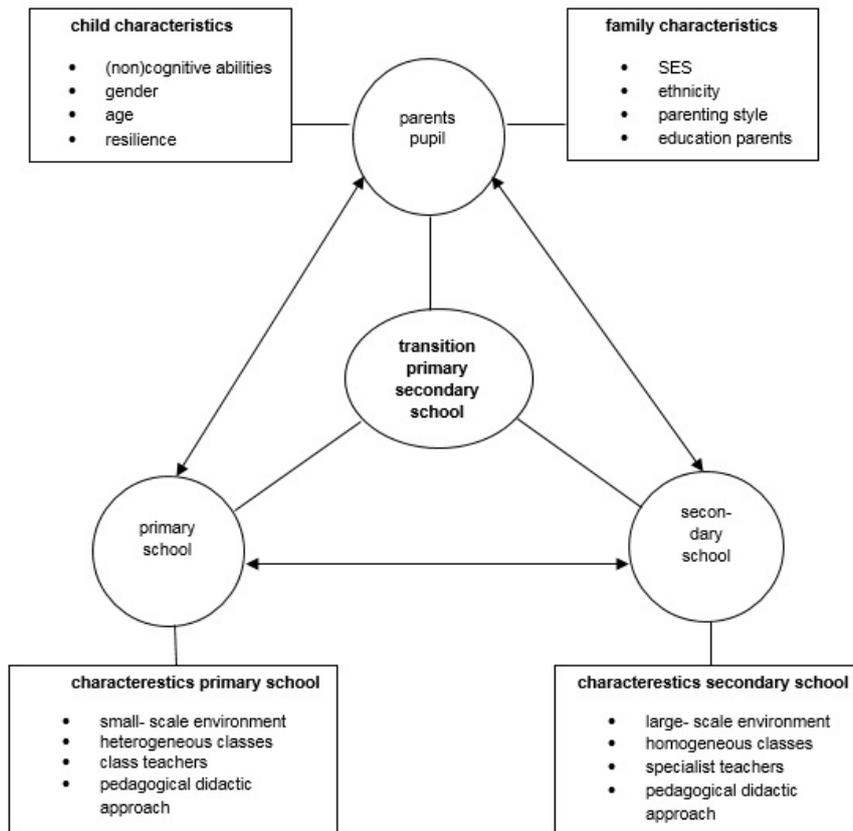


Figure 1: stakeholders involved in the transition primary- secondary school

3.1 Child- and family characteristics

Adjustment difficulties to both school and peer social systems at the beginning of secondary school are related to personal characteristics of the child (West, Sweeting and Young, 2010). Changing school, especially if the child moves to a secondary school with fewer children with a similar ethnical background, may have a negative impact on children's' school career. Even children who are doing well in primary school can experience transition disruptions if their ethnic group is smaller at the secondary school (Benner & Graham, 2009, in: Hanewald, 2013). The transition can pose specific problems and concerns for children from minority cultures and can make them vulnerable for a poor transition. Socio- economic factors, socio- ethnic factors/ race, gender, prior problem behavior and low academic achievement can all have an impact on the transition to secondary school (Anderson et al., 2000).

The factor age does not seem to influence the transition process but self-confidence and academic support do. McGee et al., find that regardless of age, there appears to be evidence that the transition may lead to a decrease in academic attainment. This seems to be caused by the transition itself

(McGee, Ward, Gibbons, & Harlow, 2004). Children, who believe that they cannot exert much influence over their success in school and who experience little academic support, report more school related stress and become more depressed when they experience a transition into secondary school, but not when they remain in the same school (Rudolph, Lambert, Clarc & Kurlakowsky, 2001).

Personal factors, such as socioeconomic status (SES) and gender, in particular seem to be predictive factors for the perceived threat to the transition to secondary school (Sirsch, 2003). A lower SES may lead to lower achievement (Vaz, Parsons, Falkmer, Passmore & Falkmer, 2014). Among children from low socio- economic (SES) households 72% did not get used to the routines at secondary school and 58% did not settle in very well (Evangelou et al., 2008). Children from higher SES households had the highest score for academic competence while children from socially disadvantaged households were having the lowest scores.

Gender differences are related to subject area. Girls perceive that close friend support and school support declines during the transition period, boy's self-report an increase in school problems during that period. School functioning during the transition period is a greater challenge for boys than for girls, while girls struggle to form new friendships with a new set of girls (Martinez et al., 2011 in: Hanewald, 2013). The majority of children moving to secondary school look forward to more freedom, new challenges, other subjects, different teachers and the opportunity to make new friends. Overall, girls make the transition more easily than boys and seem to be more settled after transition (Marston, 2008, in Hanewald, 2013).

School climate and school attachment as perceived by children themselves is correlated with misbehavior and aggressiveness. Violence and delinquency are related to negative perceptions of the school climate. Children's positive perceptions of school climate and academic motivation are linked to teacher support (Hanewald, 2013). Familiarity with the new school makes the transition easier (Sirsch, 2003). Teachers and children have different perceptions of where problems lie (Topping, 2011). Children tend to think there is a problem with delivery of the programs while teachers tend to think that the students bring the problems with them (McGee et al., 2004).

Children showing high levels of psychological distress prior to transition are at a greater risk than their peers for a stressful school transition (Chung et al., 1998; Riglin, Frederickson, Shelton & Rice, 2013). Boys at risk tend to show adjustment problems (academic achievement and school behavior) whereas girls at risk show more generalized adaptive difficulties following the transition (Chung et al., 1998). Self-esteem is related to children's perceived social, physical and cognitive competence (Nottelmann, 1987).

Children with lower ability and lower self-esteem have more negative school transition experiences which leads to lower levels of attainment and to higher levels of depression. Of all children 3%-5% experienced depression and 3%- 6% was anxious (Lester et al., 2012a). Anxious children experience peer victimization and thus poorer peer transition more frequently, which leads to lower self-esteem, more depression and anti- social behavior and therefore to a poor transition to secondary school (West et al., 2010). Of the children who were victimized 12- 21% experienced depression and 16- 22%

anxiety. Increased victimization at the end of primary school led to increased depression at the beginning of secondary school. Increased depression at the end of primary school leads to increased victimization for boys (Lester et al., 2012a).

Evangelou et al., (2008) found that children, who experience a successful transition, have developed friendships and boosted their self-esteem and confidence after moving to secondary school. These children have received more help from their secondary school to settle in. Most of their primary school friends move with them to the same school and they have one or more older sibling(s) at the same school. They find that the older children at their school are friendly. Children are at risk of not expanding their friendships and boosting their self-esteem and confidence if they experience bullying while at secondary school. Problems with bullying are most acute among children with special education needs (SEN) (Vaz et al., 2014). Of them 37% has problems with bullying, compared with 25% of the children without SEN (Evangelou et al., 2008).

Children from low or medium socio-economic status (SES) households are also vulnerable for a less smooth transition into school life if they experience bullying while at secondary school (Evangelou et al., 2008) and are less academically competent (Vaz et al., 2014). Three of every ten children has experienced bullying during their lives (Evangelou et al., 2008). Pellegrini and Long (2002) found disruptions in peer affiliations during transition to secondary school, peer victimization and increased use of aggression by boys possibly to establish peer status. The factors gender, prior problem behavior, low academic achievement, low SES and ethnicity are not independent of one another. They can be combined (and are) in many ways (Evangelou et al., 2008). Boys with a high level of psychological distress showed a significant decline in academic attainment and an increase in psychological distress while girls showed a significant increase in only psychological distress (Chung et al., 1998).

Parental involvement can affect the transition process and the school achievement before and after the transition. It can be categorized into three dimensions: direct participation, academic encouragement and expectations for attainment (Chen & Gregory, 2010, in: Hanewald, 2013). Children have a smooth transition from primary to secondary school if their parents remain a constant support, monitor their activities and intervene positively (Hanewald, 2013). Studies in the US have shown the importance of factors at home, such as the presence of books and a place to study, for a successful transition. Parental involvement is seen as important in the transition. Parents need to maintain rules, check on homework, discuss the schoolwork, and monitor their child's social life and academic progress (McGee et al., 2004). This affects children's school achievement. If parents and school are not on line parental support is less likely to be effective (McGee, 2004).

Family support is also linked to achievement after transition. Both, school and family should create and keep an environment for reinforcing and renewing children's academic motivation (Kakavoulis, 1998). Children from lower SES households often lack parental support including parental interest and participation in the school process, the extent to which they talk with their children about school and

the extent to which parents supplement the learning process with educational activities (Anderson et al., 2000).

Children living with both biological parents seem to perceive fewer concerns about the transition to secondary school than their peers from single- parent or blended families. It may be that intact families often have a higher quality of interactions which may prepare the children better to stressful events like the transition to secondary school (Duchese et al., 2006, in: Hanewald, 2013).

3.2 Preparing for a successful transition and support

In many school systems, in the final grade of primary school children and their parents are advised which secondary school is the most suitable. In making this decision three parties with desires or preferences are involved: the children, their parents and the teachers. The choice for a secondary school is determined by cognitive competences (performance, and test results), non- cognitive factors (attitudes, motivation, and interests) and the teacher's judgments (Driessen, Slegers & Smit, 2008).

Children must be prepared for a successful transition. Children who have the knowledge and skills to succeed at the next level (academic preparedness) and who are able to work by themselves and stay at the task (independence and industriousness) as well as children who conform to adult standards of behaviour and effort and children who are able to cope with problems and difficulties are more likely to be successful at the next school level (Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Ward et al., 1982; Snow, Gilchrist, Schilling, Schinke & Kelso 1986; Timmins 1989 in: Anderson et al., 2000).

The literature shows that the environmental context has a stronger effect on the success or failure of a school transition than developmental characteristics (Anderson et al., 2000). The relative importance of the environmental context suggests the possibility that educators can contribute greatly to facilitate successful school transitions. However, few efforts have been made to do so (Anderson et al., 2000). One of the main features affecting a successful transition is whether children received considerable help from their secondary school. Help can include procedures to help the children to adapt and to know their way at secondary school. Schools organize induction and taster days, and offer information support and assistance by lessons and homework to help children adapt (Evangelou et al., 2008).

During the transition children pass through two types of discontinuities: organizational/ formal (departmentalization) and social (fear of getting lost, and being victimized) (Anderson et al., 2000). The greater the discontinuity the child perceives, the greater the support that is needed. To help vulnerable children cope with, and even benefit from, the period of transition, we need to focus more on the social and personal experience sat this time (Jindal- Snape & Miller, 2008). There is a need for interventions to improve social and mental health outcomes (Lester, Waters & Cross, 2013). Waters et al., (2012) suggest early detection of children who are vulnerable to a poor transition to enable support, tailored to their particular needs, to increase their connection to the new school environment to minimize the potential of long-term negative implications (Waters et al., 2012). Support can be

informational, tangible, emotional and social. Regardless of the type of support, parents, peers and/ or teachers can provide it (Anderson et al., 2000).

There is a consensus in the literature that well designed and implemented transition approaches can assist in the process of supporting students, their families and school staff (Hanewald, 2013). Most schools have developed systems to ease the transition process. Their emphasis is often on administrative and organisational procedures, in contrast with children and their parents who are especially concerned with personal and social issues (Jindal- Snape & Miller, 2008). Head teachers frequently pay little attention to peer relationships or the importance of friendship during the transition process (Pratt & George, 2005). The sensitivity of secondary school teachers to the children's psychosocial transfer and their awareness of the importance of social relations may well play a significant role in helping children (Chedzoy & Burden, 2005). Attention should be paid to facilitate the formation of interpersonal relationships between children in the new school (Coffey, 2013; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013).

An important aspect in the adjustment to a new school is the students' sense of belonging and their socio- emotional functioning (Cueto, Guerrero, Sugimaru & Zevallos, 2010, in Hanewald, 2013). Children who feel supported by teachers are found to have a positive motivational orientation to schoolwork and to experience positive social and emotional wellbeing (Bru, Stornes, Munthe & Thuen, 2010). Teachers' ability to support students is a crucial element for better learning.

3.3 The relationship between primary and secondary school

Coffey (2013) finds that positive relationships and good communication channels amongst and between the stakeholders before, during and after transition are crucial to improve the transition (Coffey, 2013). For a smooth transition the teacher plays a critical role (Coffey, 2013; Topping, 2011) and sharing information concerning the child is valuable to support transitions (Chedzoy & Burden, 2005; Green, 1997). Nevertheless, information shared between schools is usually generic information on the curriculum rather than information about individual children (Topping, 2011). Schools generally pay little attention to peer relationships or the importance of friendships (Pratt & George, 2005). Information from primary to secondary school, also needs to provide personal and social factors to make secondary schools alert to children who may be more vulnerable when they move (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Although it is known that sharing information, between primary and secondary school, focused on personal and social factors smoothens the transition, less is known about the results when children receive the opportunity to participate actively during the transition trajectory by sharing information with their secondary school teachers.

McGee et al., (2004) examined schools in New Zealand and found disappointing few contacts between primary- and secondary schools to manage the transition effectively. In schools where there was contact, it mainly concerned the transfer of information about students, familiarizing students and their parents with the secondary school, sharing facilities and teacher contacts about curriculum and teaching (McGee et al., 2004). One of the issues facing secondary school teachers is how much they

want to know or should know about their students coming from primary school. Is it best to know very little so as to give students “a fresh start”, or is it best to be well briefed on each student? Teachers at secondary school, faced with children from a variety of feeder schools, tended to start on the same level for all children regardless of previous achievement. This resulted in a loss of continuity in the curriculum because of the transition (Huggins & Knight, 1997 in: McGee et al., 2004).

McGee et al. (2004) found that teacher expectations often differ between primary and secondary school. Once at secondary school, the children experience the workload as lower, including less homework, than they had expected at primary school. This raises the question of whether primary and secondary teachers understand each other’s work and whether steps should be taken to ensure that they do (Green, 1997) because previous experience or achievement is often disregarded by secondary schools. This corresponds to the findings from Evangelou et al., (2008) that secondary schools do not appear to trust the data on children provided by primary schools.

3.4 The formal and the informal context: school characteristics and peers

There is no consensus about children’s experiences with the transition. On the one hand the literature shows that most children make the transition to secondary school without difficulties but it can be stressful for some children. Most children report they expected to like going to secondary school, 15 % does not expect to like their secondary school (Nottelmann, 1987). Cedzoy and Burden found 92% of the children looking forward to the transition (Cedzoy & Burden, 2005). Midway the first period at secondary school 88% of the children reported to be settled (Coffey, 2013) and at the end of the first term at secondary school one in ten children did not enjoy the transfer (Cedzoy & Burden, 2005).

On the other hand, West et al. (2010) found that the majority of children had some difficulties in dealing effectively with the start of secondary school. A quarter found the experience very difficult. In contrast to other studies (McGee et al., 2004) more concerns were expressed about the formal school system than the informal system of peer relations (West et al., 2010). McGee et al. (2004) found that continuity of peer group appears to be associated with continuity of achievement. Low achievers at primary school may do better with a new peer group at secondary school when they are influenced positively by their new peers (McGee et al., 2004).

Ashton (2008) and West et al. (2010), describe that children’s school and peer concerns constitute two dimensions during the transition, the formal school- system (size of school, different teachers, work volume) and the informal social peer- system (different kids, older teenagers, bullying). Children can be successful in one area but not in the other and higher factor scores on the two dimensions represent poorer transitions.

Children in secondary schools often report a decrease in the sense of school belonging and perceived quality of school life. Children who were bully victims at primary school are more likely to feel less connected in primary school and may expect to feel less connectedness in secondary school (Lester, Cross, Shaw & Dooley, 2012a). Green (1997) found that all children at secondary school expressed concerns about making friends. Having friends is important for the security of walking into different

rooms as well as who to sit next to. When a child moves to secondary school with some known friends, knows older children at school or has sibling at the same school, some of the anxiety about making friends is alleviated (Green, 1997). This corresponds to the findings of Pratt and George (2005), They found that the continuity and development of peer group relations and friendships was the most important for the children.

Having friends of your own is important because loyal, 'real' friends are a protection against being bullied (Mellor & Delamont, 2011). Mellor and Delamont distinguish rational anxieties (being separated from current friends, anxieties about the curriculum, the buildings and the range of different teachers) and irrational anxieties: myths or scary stories heard from older children. Friendship can serve as a social support. Green (1997) also reports that some children were concerned about being bullied by older students. Such fears were based on rumors, spread by older students. In reality such bullying did not occur (Green, 1997). In contrast to the findings of Green (1997) a large scale survey in 40 countries revealed 10.7% of adolescents reporting involvement in bullying (as perpetrators), 12.6 % as victimized and 3.6 % as bully victims (Craig et al., 2009 in: Lester et al., 2012a). Behind the rational anxieties lies the children's culture with irrational fears, often spread by the stories of older students (Mellor & Delamont (2011). The children were particularly concerned about the way in which their behavior at secondary school was perceived by their peers. They did not want to be seen as 'a nerd' but rather aimed to be seen as being 'cool' (Green, 1997).

4. Interventions to facilitate successful transitions

To help children who are at risk for a poor transition, interventions that provide adequate information and social support activities, that help forming friendship networks, could be crucial. They could help children coping. Prior to the transition, at primary school, children need to be prepared for holding more responsibility for their learning. They need to learn to think about strategies for learning independently in a more challenging curriculum with clear goals of academic achievement like at secondary school (McGee et al., 2004). When children enter secondary school, motivation increases significantly. Both, school and family should care for creating and maintaining a highly motivating environment for reinforcing and renewing children's academic motivation (Kakavoulis, 1998).

According to Anderson et al. (2000) interventions to facilitate a successful transition should be comprehensive, should involve parents, and receiving schools should make every effort to create a sense of community belonging (Anderson et al., 2000). Parents can contribute to a smooth transition by participating in their child's schooling. When they do so the child should achieve at a higher level (Coffey, 2013). Pellegrini and Long (2002) suggest fostering relationships during the first year of middle school by organizing social and interest- specific events. Effective lines of communication need to be established between parents and the school so that both can work effectively together for the benefit of the children (Coffey, 2013). Green (1997) recommends an ongoing information exchange between primary and secondary teachers to facilitate the transition process and to reduce unnecessary discontinuity (Green, 1997).

Children struggling with the transition need support, provided by multiple groups. Parents can provide support with respect to homework (Coffey, 2013; Jindale-Sape & Miller, 2008; Kakavoulis, 1998; Pellegrini & Long, 2002). Take into account of existing friendships, when classifying the children, can also support children (Green, 1997). Teachers at secondary school that are more accessible to students facilitate successful transitions. Simply being available to students is a form of teacher support. Positive peer relationships promote adjustment to the new environment, the secondary school. In supporting these peer relationships teachers can play an important role. Hamm et al. (2011) in Hanewald (2013) found that teachers more attuned to peer group affiliations promote more positive contexts and have students with improved views of their school's social climate and adjustment during the school transition period. Coffey (2013) noted that the teacher is the key person in helping the child settle.

Lester et al. (2012a) conclude that there is a need for transition programs with a focus on early-targeted interventions to minimize health risks to children from bullying and to minimize the impact on the school environment. They suggest a critical time to implement bullying intervention programs (that address peer support, connectedness to school, pro-victim attitudes and negative outcome expectancies around perpetration) is prior to the transition to, and within the first year of secondary school (Lester et al., 2012a). Waters et al. (2012) suggest to develop an intervention based on best practice guidelines, to help children to negotiate the transition.

Many school transition interventions have a single and relatively narrow focus. Essential components of a transition model are: developing a planning team, generating goals and identifying problems, developing a written transition plan, acquiring the support of all those involved in the transition process and evaluating the process (Anderson et al., 2000). A focus on relationships and empathic school personnel can ensure that both child and parent concerns are acknowledged and accounted for when planning transition programs (Coffey, 2013). Topping found that having an external supporting network is crucial for a successful transition (Topping, 2011).

Some children are vulnerable to poor academic progression and disengagement during the first year of secondary school. Especially children with conduct problems and children who do not like school as well as boys with depressive symptoms and school concerns may need special support (Riglin et al., 2013). Preventively oriented school psychologists need to understand different paths of adaption to the school transition in order to identify the characteristics of children at risk and provide them with early intervention services for their specific needs (Chung et al., 1998).

5. Conclusions

In this review we have identified empirical studies, focused on the effects of characteristics and interventions to ease the transition from primary to secondary school, especially interventions which give children a voice. We are interested if, and how, children are involved in interventions to ease the transition and in the effect of those interventions on the transition process.

We distinguished three stakeholders (children with their parents, and primary and secondary schools) involved in the transition process, who would benefit from a successful transition and can influence it by their background characteristics (Jindale- Snape & Miller, 2008). Unfortunately, little evidence is found of educational partnership or cooperation between these stakeholders. Although educators can do a great deal to facilitate successful school transitions (Anderson et al., 2000) few efforts have been made to work together or to realize effective lines of communication. All stakeholders seem to approach the transition process from their own, different perspective, and adjust interventions according to their own perspectives. The effectiveness of these efforts however is rarely evaluated.

The influence on the transition process of school characteristics, such as differences between the primary and secondary school in the school environment and in pedagogical didactic approach, is barely investigated in the literature. The reviewed authors just give recommendations to facilitate successful transitions, suggestions for practice and targets for school interventions. Schools do not focus as much on their emotional climate as they do on academic requirements. The literature shows the need to help children to develop their social and personal skills and to enhance their self- esteem also (Ashton, 2008; Coffey, 2013; Gillison, et al., 2008; Zeedijk et al., 2003) but there is a lack of proven effective interventions in this area.

Very close links between primary and secondary school teachers are found to be essential for successful transitions (Green, 1997; Jindale- Snape, & Miller, 2008). These close links would make them aware of children who are vulnerable for a poor transition (Cedzoy & Burden, 2005; Chung et al., 1998). In practice this is not obvious. Teachers, who prepare children for the transition or support them after the transition, do not always have sufficient information about the children.

Family backgrounds, including cultural and socio- economic factors, can pose specific transition problems. Children from families in poverty, and from larger and lower educated families, do worse than their peers, especially when they are young compared to their classmates (Topping, 2011). Their parents, who can be a reliable source of information about their child, are less likely to be involved in school activities and to support school (Topping, 2011).

Little evidence is found of interventions that focus on partnership or cooperation between parents and schoolteachers during the transition process. There is an agreement about the importance of support from external networks (Topping, 2011). In particular, the support from the family is described as extremely important (Anderson et al., 2000; Coffey, 2013; Green, 1997; Jindale- Snape & Miller, 2008; Lester et al., 2012a; Lester, Dooley, Cross & Shaw, 2012b; McGee et al., 2004) but is often neglected by schools. Parents usually do not participate in the decisions about the transition.

Children's personal characteristics such as ability, self-esteem, depression and anxiety, and gender can influence the adjustment to the school systems and to the peer-/ social systems and can lead to a poorer transition (West et al., 2010).

The involvement of children in decision making by giving them a voice has been an area of growing interest. In the literature on the transition to secondary school the active role of the child remains somewhat underexplored as few studies have focused on the perspective of the children. The absence of any direct consultation with the children involved in the transition process, demonstrates the low priority given to this aspect of transfer. It should be possible for secondary schools to learn from children by asking incoming students about their thoughts about the transition, and ask recently switched students about their experiences and what they can suggest to smoothen the transition for other children. When teachers are able to explore teaching and learning through the eyes of the children they might be able to develop strategies based on first hand evidence.

The results of the review suggest that, of the stakeholders included in the transition process, children (and their parents) are under- represented both in the decision making and in the interventions which provide information to the other stakeholders. We found suggestions to reduce risk factors for vulnerable children and their parents, to foster the need for support and for a good communication between all stakeholders, and to be aware of each other's perspectives. The analyses of the literature indicate that, to gain sight on the active role of children during the transition, there is a need for further research. Issues such as the way children can be partners in the transition process, how they can inform their stakeholders on an effective way and how this information can be evaluated still have to be investigated. What the consequences are for a successful transition and how the collaboration between stakeholders and educational practice at primary and secondary school can help children who are vulnerable or at risk off a poor transition also needs to be investigated.

Appendix

Table 1: Literature transition primary school- secondary school

| author(s) & year | sample | themes | measures | main results |
|--|--|---|--|---|
| Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber (2000) | Review | The reasons that transitions are difficult, the kinds of students that have the greatest difficulties and the process of disengagement from school | | Attention for students' preparedness for transition, kinds of support and recommendations for facilitating successful transitions |
| Ashton (2008) | N=1673 | Children's perceptions of transfer to high school | Questionnaires, discussion, student drawings & writings | Children can be a very valuable resource in improving transition. |
| Bru., Stornes, Munthe & Thuen (2010) | N=7205 | The degree to which students' perceptions of teacher support are related to school type (primary versus secondary) | Questionnaire | A linear downwards tendency for perceived teacher support with no obvious abrupt change between primary and secondary school |
| Chedzoy & Burden (2005) | Review N=207 | Review on the reactions of students to transfer Study: student expectations about school ethos, academic work, relationships, aspects of personal development | Questionnaires | The existence of myths disconfirmation of those myths after a short time. The need for careful consideration of the most appropriate form of learning experiences after transition |
| Chung, Elias & Schneider (1998) | N= 99 | Changes in patterns of individual adjustment during transition | Questionnaires Students and teachers report | Three distinct patterns were identified across genders |
| Coffey (2013) | Six larger secondary schools | The importance for schools to focus on relationships during transition | Questionnaires Interviews (parents, teachers and students) | Positive relationships between the stakeholders can help to ameliorate the challenges presented by transition |
| Driessen, Slegers & Smit (2008) | N= 7883 (data from PRIMA study 2002) | The influence of pupil background characteristics, and a number of class and school characteristics on the transition to secondary school in the Netherlands | School-administration, tests, questionnaires, teacher and school report | Over- recommending, not related to ethnicity, cognitive level of the class or type of community, still occurs. Performance weighs more heavily than social- ethnic background. |
| Evangelou, Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons & Siraj-Blatchford (2008) | N= 550 (children) N= 569 (parents) | -Transition practices, success factors, support, experiences and expectations of pupils and parents -Background characteristics | Interviews Questionnaires (parents, children, teachers and local authorities) | For successful transitions social adjustment, institutional adjustment and curriculum interest and continuity, need to be taken in account by planning transition strategies |
| Green (1997) | N= 10 (students) Their parents & teachers | The psychological and social aspects of transition | Interviews (parents, children and teachers) Observations Document review | It is vital to facilitate transition The need for a challenging curriculum and information exchange between primary and secondary teachers |
| Gillison, Standage & Skevington (2008) | N=63 | Changes in quality of life and student well- being immediately after the transition to secondary school | Quality of life questionnaire | Support for the needs for autonomy and relatedness would enhance the quality of life of students over the transition to secondary school. |
| Hanewald (2013) | Review | Literature review to identify and describe how and why transition is critical and to unpack it in what ways | | Teacher educators need to incorporate transition programs and strategies so teachers can deal with transition problems. |
| Jindal-Snape & Miller (2008) | Review | Theoretical perspectives from the literature on resilience and self-esteem are employed to examine key aspects of the process of transition from the perspective of the individual child. | | In order to help vulnerable children to cope with, and even benefit from transition we need to focus more on the way social and personal experiences are interpreted at this time. |
| Kakavoulis (1998) | N= 340 | Pupils' motives for school learning at the end of primary school. How are these motives differentiated during their transition to secondary school? How are motives correlated to gender, intelligence, achievement, as well as to socio-economic and educational level of the pupils' parents? | Questionnaires Academic Motivation Self-Rating Inventory | Academic motivation increased after transition. This was not related to gender or socioeconomic status. Primary school academic motivation was related to school achievement and father's occupation. |
| Lester, Cross, Shaw & | N=3459 | Examination of bully- victim | Questionnaires | An association between support, |

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| Dooley (2012a) | | pathway during transition period | | connectedness to school, pro-victim attitudes, outcome expectations and level of bullying involvement. |
| Lester, Dooley, Cross & Shaw, (2012b) | N=3459 | Relationships and gender differences among adolescents during transition process | Self complete questionnaires for times over 3 years | Depression in males is a precedent and antecedent for victimisation and for females an antecedent only while anxiety is for both genders a precedent and antecedent. There is a need to interventions. |
| Lester, Waters & Cross (2013) | N= 3459 | Association between feeling connected & mental health | Questionnaires | Need for interventions to improve social and mental health outcomes |
| McGee, Ward, Gibbons & Harlow (2004) | Review | The relationship between transition and academic achievement, adjustment to secondary school and impacts on different groups of students | Analyses of literature and key informants | There are important gaps in information about transition in the New Zealand context and particular issues need further investigation. |
| Mellor & Delamont (2011) | Cohort project ORACLE and from a recent ethnographic project | Perceptions of children in 1977-1978 and 2003- 2004 are compared to explore whether anxieties and anticipations have changed | Ethnographic observations, qualitative interviews and children's writing | The core concerns of pupils facing the transfer to secondary school have continuities, especially in the areas of friendship and sense of independence |
| Nottelmann (1987) | N= 445 | Explore the issue of timing in school transition and the effect on children's competence and self-esteem. Examine the effect of school transition in teacher ratings | Children's self-report and teacher ratings | Entry in secondary school represents significant change from elementary school but most children negotiate the transition without undue difficulty |
| Pellegrini, A. & Long, D. (2002) | N= 154 | Bullying and victimization during transition from primary to secondary school | Self- report, peer nominations, diary, direct observations, , teacher measures | Bullying mediated dominance status from primary to middle school. Boys target each other, not females, in aggressive bouts. Contact with peers decreased with the transition, and then increased. Social affiliation as an inhibitor of victimisation. |
| Pratt & George (2005) | N= 30 | Students' concerns regarding their attitudes to friendship How negotiate the children their new environment | Semi- structured interviews Questionnaires | Children's priorities, having a best friend and belonging to a social group, are different to those advocated by school (concerning behaviour, curriculum, and academic issues). |
| Riglin, Frederickson, Shelton & Rice, F. (2013) | N= 202 | The relationship between psychological functioning at the beginning of year 7 with attainment at the end of year 7 | Self- and peer report, questionnaires | Depressive symptoms, school liking and conduct problems predicted lower attainment. School concerns predicted lower attainment for boys, the effect of depressive symptoms were significantly stronger for boys. |
| Rudolph, Lambert, Clark & Kurlakowsky (2001) | N= 329 | The role of maladaptive self-regulatory beliefs as vulnerability factors for academic and emotional difficulties during transition | Self- and teacher report questionnaires | The transition experience was found to interact with pre-existing maladaptive self- regulatory beliefs that formed the basis for depressive vulnerability |
| Sirsch (2003) | N= 856 | Children were asked to appraise the transition to secondary school, which was perceived as a challenge and a threat | Questionnaires | Personal factors seem to be predictive factors for the perceived threat towards the transition to secondary school. Very few students perceive the transition as both a low challenge and a low threat. |
| Tobbel & O'Donnel (2013) | N= 35 (6 focus groups) N= 30 (5 focus groups) | The experiences of students in their transition to secondary school. The focus is on relationships with their new teachers. | Observation one to one and Focus group interviews Document analyses | Attention must be paid to facilitate the formation of interpersonal relationships which may lead to learning relationships |
| Topping (2011) | Review | Teacher's perspective and child's perspective | | Children were concerned with peer relations, bullying, self- esteem and external support networks. Teachers were concerned with the attainment dip. Some children are more vulnerable for a poor transition. |
| Vaz, Parsons, Falkmer, | N= 266 | To determine the contribution of | Questionnaires | Personal background factors |

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| Passmore & Falkmer (2014) | | personal background and school contextual factors on academic competence and mental health functioning | | accounted for the majority of the variability in post transitional academic competence and mental health functioning. The contribution of school contextual factors was relatively minor. |
| Waters, Lester, Wenden & Cross (2012) | N=1500 | The impact of the transition experience on adolescent social and emotional health, both immediately following transition, and at the end of the first year in the new school environment. | Questionnaires | 31% Experienced a difficult/ somewhat difficult transition and experienced poorer social and emotional health after the first year |
| West, Sweeting & Young (2010) | N=2000 | Pupils 'experience of transition, predictors of poorer transitions and consequences for educational attainment and pupil well- being | Survey's, self-complete questionnaires, mini- interviews | Respondents of lower ability and lower self- esteem experienced poorer school transitions; the effects were seen within and beyond secondary education |
| Zeedijk, Gallacher, Henderson, Hope, Husband & Lindsay (2003) | N= 472 | Pupils and parent's concerns, skills that were perceived to be useful, aspects to which children looked forward and suggestions by which schools could facilitate the transition. | Questionnaire (children, parents and teachers) | Bullying was a major concern for all groups, followed by fears of getting lost, increased workload and peer relationships among others. Teachers rarely identified children's individual abilities, focussed instead on institutional initiatives that carries the risk for creating a degree of helplessness. |

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