“Please Miss, Please!”: An observational study of young people’s social and emotional experiences post-transition to secondary school

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Abstract
The secondary school transition is considered a critical life event by practitioners and researchers alike, and the challenges presented by the pupils during this transition continues to be high-profile in educational, social and political contexts. This study focused on Year 7 pupils aged 11 to 12 years old in their first year of secondary school. Classroom observations of around 120 pupils using an open framework recording procedure offered real-time insights into the everyday lived experiences of these adolescents. The paper illustrates the skills and behaviours that children brought to their secondary school transition, and as such reveals how the transition should be perceived as both an event and a social and emotional learning process. The findings of this study highlight the challenges of flexibility and diversity within peer networks after the move to secondary school and the impact the transition can have on the pupils’ sense of self. The analysis is discussed in terms of implications for schools, practitioners and researchers with suggestions for further studies with this under-researched and vulnerable group.

Keywords
Classroom observation, secondary school transition, social and emotional learning, young people’s lived experiences

Secondary school transition research emphasises that young pupils who experience challenges at school during this critical phase are likely to face a greater risk of failure and poorer social and academic outcomes unless such problems are recognised and addressed early on (Anderman, 2013; O’Brien & Bowles, 2013; Serbin et al., 2013). To understand learning processes and academic outcomes (the how and what) of secondary school transition, practitioners must recognise the ways pupils engage with their experiences and how those social and emotional considerations and reactions are brought to the forefront during the transition (Jackson & Schulenberg, 2013; Jindal-Snape et al., 2020; Ng-Knight et al., 2016). It is difficult for policy discourses, teachers’ perspectives,
pedagogy, curriculum design and programmes of study to adequately account for the real-life, unpredictable, diverse nature of how young people experience secondary school transition and the social and emotional learning they engage in.

Mahmud (2020a) underlines that research based on pupils learning during the secondary transition is continuously changing and evolving, not least because of the COVID-19 global pandemic (see also Jindal-Snape et al., 2019; Leaton Gray et al., 2021; Scanlon et al., 2019). Additionally, there is a growing tendency in the neo-liberal education system to focus on academic outcomes instead of the learning processes (Ball, 2003; Gorard & Torgerson, 2006). Few studies are illuminating young people’s lived experiences of transition to secondary school. Of these, several have focused on the physical and logistical challenges of transition (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012; Hannah & Topping, 2013; Symonds & Galton, 2014), while others have investigated young people’s experiences of classroom-based projects and interventions (Cross et al., 2018; Greenaway et al., 2019; Siddiqui et al., 2016).

The importance of secondary school transition

One of the most critical stages of a pupils’ academic journey is the transition to secondary school. The process of transition from primary to secondary school can impact social and academic development that can also expose other challenges which can influence unsuccessful transitions. The secondary school transition has drawn national and international research. The focus has predominantly been on the learning environment changes and the social and emotional adjustment which has found discontinuation in learning and social groups (Davis et al., 2015; Hammond, 2016; Keay et al., 2015). Such discontinuation in social and organisational spheres has been argued to be one of the most significant elements that impact adolescents’ school transition experience (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012). Hayes and Vivian (2007) also highlight how the academic curriculum can be unconnected between primary and secondary school, which can be problematic as continuity in such core factors of education is essential for successful adjustment to any new environment, not only for conformity to secondary school. Smooth transitions are also imperative to the development of adolescents social and emotional abilities and consequently life skills (Hardgrove et al., 2014). The disparities during the transition can impact different pupils in different ways, for example, the differing levels of motivation may impact the pupils as not all of them will be inquisitive and inspired to learn in a new setting that is laden with diverse challenges. In addition, social, emotional, cognitive, physical and moral factors play a central part in the transition process (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005; West et al., 2010). Even though the secondary school transition is awaited and anticipated from up to a year before the move, the onus remains heavily on the young people to manage and navigate the transition from their familiar, secure primary school setting to a new environment with unfamiliar rules, standards and organisation (Symonds & Galton, 2014).

Undoubtedly, the move to secondary school incorporates a level of anxiety and stress, even for those who experience ‘smooth transitions’. Research has linked poor secondary school transition to negative social and employability outcomes in adulthood (Rice et al., 2011; Riglin et al., 2013). Therefore, this again highlights the criticality of this period to an adolescents’ well-being, continuous learning, growth and development. Torres (2015) points out that the experience of the transition is influenced by numerous factors and personnel including senior leadership in both primary and secondary schools, teaching staff, family support and involvement, primary school friendship groups and the pupils’ individual personal, social, emotional and academic skills (Hanewald, 2013; Topping, 2011). Taking these elements together strengthen the quality of the overall experience of moving to a new school and predictions for a positive transition can be made. Therefore, it is
crucial to understand that each element in the secondary school transition experience is contingent on the individual, school and the wider educational system.

**Importance of understanding pupil experiences**

The lack of exposure to pupils’ experiences and voice to inform pedagogy and practice in research is problematic. Research indicates that teachers’ viewpoints can be profoundly different from pupils’ viewpoints. Cefai and Cooper (2010) compared Maltese pupils and teachers understanding of the reasons of and appropriate management of misbehaviour and found that teachers framed behavioural problems to a ‘pupil-deficit’ model, for instance, the pupils’ personality, family problems and attention-seeking (see also Evans et al., 2004). However, the pupils linked behavioural problems to school-related factors such as teachers’ approach, bullying and teasing by peers (more contextual and interpersonal factors) (Cefai & Cooper, 2010). Such differing perceptions are significant as the school context is seen as a vital protective factor that develops social and emotional skills (Hart, 2012; Longobardi et al., 2016), and therefore, if teaching staff derivations of poor behaviour remain ‘pupil-deficit’, the school context, including the teachers’ behaviours, are less likely to be deemed as areas of transformation and development.

Furthermore, previous research in the UK and USA highlights that practitioners do not have adequate training and knowledge to fully understand the social and emotional needs of the pupils (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). This could be acutely true as there is a lack of robust continuing professional development (CPD) for practitioners and teachers in these particular topics. Therefore, taking into consideration the shortage in teacher CPD and proficiency in recognising and addressing social and emotional needs of the pupils, the research bias of interventions and systems informed by teachers (combined with the fundamental disparities between teacher and pupils’ viewpoints), it is unsurprising that current systems, policies, and practices in schools have not always corresponded to and supported the pupils’ social and emotional needs.

It is not the objective of this study to imply that pupil engagement and voice in research is more important than other voices such as practitioners, parents and policymakers to influence practice, procedure and policy, but that it does epitomise a vital contribution to the field. Practice and research that proposes to engage young people have numerous ostensible goals and aims with foundations in legal, educational, political, economical and societal matters (Hartas, 2011; Tangen, 2008). They are seen as giving marginalised communities and individuals a chance to become involved, promote visibility, empower, be heard and offer a foundation to create more effective interventions and systems in schools (Edwards, 2019). Despite that, simply engaging pupils does not equate to empowering them, as empowerment comes if the elicited information leads to real change.

The naïve belief that pupil participation and voice could change the existing conditions and shift the onus instinctively to pupils via simply engagement has been contested by numerous authors (e.g. Fielding, 2007). Sellman (2009) also alludes that the tools and systems such as steering groups, task forces, councils and others can be interpreted as a ‘Trojan horse, a surreptitious means of inserting adult middle-class values and preferred means of communication into provision. . .in the name of pupil empowerment’ (p. 35). Numerous authors have tried to tackle these issues (e.g. Nind et al., 2012; O’Connor et al., 2011; Ravet, 2007) by converging on more effective methodologies for engaging and empowering adolescents. For this reason, this study utilising classroom observations aimed to document and provide a snapshot of how a cohort of Year 7 pupils actively experienced and responded to a wide range of social and emotional learning experiences immediately following the transition to secondary school. By focusing on one cohort of Year 7 pupils it was possible to explore the individualised nature of young people’s experiences of secondary school transition in the classroom.
Method

Observations were undertaken by the researcher in this exploratory study to explore and widen the understanding of pupils’ experiences following the transition to secondary school. In addition, they provided vital real-time data (Yin, 2009) about behaviour and conduct between the pupils and revealed how social and emotional learning is truly operating in schools (Mertens, 2014). Observation data also incorporated observations on teacher-pupil interactions and challenging behaviours in the lessons.

John et al. (2014) argue that observations are an important method in research, considering that researchers theorise what he or she has observed or experienced. The qualitative method of observations in this study is also linked to the social constructivism paradigm, primarily concerned with the quality of the pupils’ classroom experience, rather than with the identification of cause-effect relationship. The outcomes in the observations were focused on exploring the pupils’ social and emotional learning in their ‘own territory within naturally occurring settings where conditions continuously develop, and pupils interact with each other to give rise to a process of ongoing change’ (Willig, 2013, p. 27). This was an alternative approach to asking pupils directly about their needs. Even though observations are commonly considered to have strong ecological validity (the ability of findings to be generalised to a real-life setting – Andrade, 2018), as naturally occurring phenomenon are observed (Fossey et al., 2002), the biases of the researcher can affect the observations, as it may prompt the researcher to only select or note information that supports their hypotheses. The biases of the researcher can be controlled through the use of observation schedules to some extent. An observation schedule is a form prepared prior to data collection that delineates the behaviour and situational features to be observed and recorded during observations (Given, 2008). Even though observation schedules can restrict the information that the researcher records, an observation schedule was deemed suitable as the researcher was able to control how rigid or flexible to have the observation schedule. As such, the researcher prepared notes on classroom activities; key language used in the classes; and general classroom behaviour and engagement. The researcher recorded the observation on an observational schedule and the researcher made attempts to reflect on the process (Walter, 2019).

Researchers can adopt different roles in observational fieldwork. The selection of the role depends on the problem to be explored, the participant’s desire to be studied, in addition to the researchers’ previous knowledge of the context. The present study uses a complete observer role, whereby the researcher and the observation are unobtrusive and unknown to the participants (Walter, 2019). The researcher could not choose a more active or participant role because of the researchers’ external status to the school and that members of staff did not want the researchers’ participation in the lessons. Therefore, the concern of the researcher was to minimise intrusion on the lessons observed in a bid to cause as little inconvenience as possible to the teachers who agreed to their lessons being observed. Another major challenge was that the use of a non-participant role failed to nurture strong relationships among the pupils in the class. Nevertheless, the purpose of the study was to capture rich and meaningful data in a natural school setting; capture the intricate interplay between pupils and their peers and pupils with their teachers; capture informal social and emotional learning in motion and action (not just theory).

Sample

Data was collected from observations of seven lessons of all newly transitioned Year 7 pupils in a state secondary school based in Hampshire. All Year 7 pupils were chosen with the hope to make the findings as generalisable as possible for this age group and to understand the transition
phenomena for the general population. Each lesson consisted of 25 to 30 pupils, aged between 11 and 12 years old from a White British background. Through convenience sampling, a variety of subjects were observed based on availability and class schedules including Geography, Maths, Music, ICT, Physical Education and a PSHE Learn to Learn class which were all 50 minutes in length. In total, the classrooms observed included 120 pupils and seven teachers (male = 3; female = 4). All the practitioners in this study had more than 5 years of teaching experience, had teaching experience in both primary and secondary school contexts and agreed to their classes being observed by the researcher.

**Design of observation schedule and procedure**

To capture natural teacher-pupil interactions, observations were conducted in the classrooms at the school. An open framework recording procedure was used whereby the researcher detailed classroom incidences in written form. A general observation protocol was also designed and adapted as necessary to collect data on as many areas of classroom activities as possible. These incorporated guidelines for note-taking during observations including detailed, low-inference, descriptions of the setting and its physical layout; factual accounts of activities, events and interactions related to social and emotional learning and verbatim recording of dialogue. This was beneficial and vital as the observations were not video recorded at the request of the school. Patton (2005) also recommended noting what did not happen, based on expectations and similar experiences and this was done where possible. Not only did the use of a recording schedule result in a flexible structure of data gathering but was also favoured over more rigid methods, for example, marking down behavioural categories or event sampling; the latter potentially leading to restricting the depiction of the classroom activity to one aspect of the classroom. The use of the same observation schedule by a single researcher while attending different lessons was advantageous to the study in terms of comparing one data set to another but less so in terms of comparing data gathered by different observers in other studies.

Following ethical guidelines (British Educational Research Association, 2011), ethical approval was received for this study from Middlesex University. The Head of Year 7 (who was the researchers' point of access to the school community) proposed that before the observations, the researcher circulate information about the study to the members of staff who were being observed. The staff gave their consent to be observed but did not allow for the observations to be video recorded. The school wrote to the parents giving information about the observations offering them the opportunity to opt their child out from the study. The opt out consent was preferred by the school as they believed the observations did not affect the pupils’ education or safeguarding. No parents chose to opt out. The teachers subsequently informed their pupils about the researcher who would observe their lesson; however, the nature of the study was not fully disclosed to the pupils before the observations as it could have impacted the pupils’ behaviour. The pupils were also given the opportunity to sit out of the lesson and observation and join a different class, however, no pupils chose to leave the class. A full debriefing was provided to the pupils after the observations. The observations in this study took place over 2 days in a typical classroom context and to lower the risk of potential observer effects; special arrangements were avoided apart from the fact that the researcher was present during the lesson. The researcher was placed in an empty seat at the side of the classroom and except for polite interactions did not engage with the participants. All observations were conducted by the researcher, and thus the impact of researcher bias must be acknowledged. Literature expresses how the implicit beliefs of the researcher and expected outcomes of the study could unintentionally impact the participants’ behaviour and observations (Baldwin et al., 2020; Gao, 2020; Hamilton, 2020). Nevertheless, research into the influence of researcher bias implies 'the
 pervasiveness of this influence among different areas of research is not known (and) how observer expectancies exert their influence is unclear’ (Kazdin, 2011, p. 88). Nevertheless, in order to try and minimise the effect of observer bias an informal discussion with the class teachers ensued after each observation and the teachers offered their considerations to the observations. Notes were written up into a narrative account within 24 hours of the observation, and at this stage included impressions, interpretations and reflexive comments.

Data analysis

Data was analysed on a class-to-class basis to identify distinctive pupil experiences. Various themes were ascertained denoting connections between the classes and pupils experience. A thematised account of the way the pupils responded to a range of social and emotional learning experiences was therefore developed, and the three themes that came from the data included: (1) flexibility and diversity in interaction (2) sense of self: self-confidence and self-control (3) resilience and motivation. This approach to the analysis included identifying, coding, and analysis of patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing for contextual information to be taken into account. Acknowledging factors arising from the context is particularly important for this research as it focuses on exploring the experiences of pupils learning within a secondary school context. The themes are not always congruent among the pupils, however, instead of function as a means to examine and understand the diverse aspects of pupils’ social and emotional learning in post-transition secondary school classes.

Findings

The purpose of the observations of the Year 7 classes was to explore the pupils’ engagement in the lesson, their interaction with peers and teachers, their attention and any noticeable behaviour’s directly linked to social and emotional learning. During the analysis, pupils’ social and emotional learning are discussed in turn, depicting specific examples from the data to illustrate and offer readers access to the pupils’ experiences, as well as drawing on academic and practitioner-oriented texts to present evidential basis of claims.

Theme 1: Flexibility and diversity in interactions

The first theme highlights the challenges of flexibility and diversity in interactions for the pupils when they interact with others they do not know which is a common occurrence during the transition to secondary school. The pupils had entered into their first food technology class. Some of the pupils were talking amongst each other whilst others were sitting in silent groups. There was a sense of excitement and nervousness in the atmosphere. They were visibly excited which could be understood through their animated facial expressions and high pitched shrieks about being in a new environment surrounded by new equipment such as stoves and cooking utensils; however, apprehensiveness seemed apparent as they sat at the desks surrounded by unknown peers. Across the room from the researcher, four girls sat around a table in silence. The teacher set a task to ‘Get to know your fellow pupils’ whereby the pupils had to find out about the favourite food and drinks of people at their desk. The four girls had never met each other before, and this was evident as they appeared uneasy around each other. Shoulders were tense, and no eye contact was being made as they busied themselves with playing with their hair and pens. This was observed throughout the lesson. The teacher tried to engage them together by firstly asking them the questions directly and then by prompting them to ask each other. The responses the teacher received were short and in a
low tone. On task activity was minimum, and the observer recognised that they were the only group to not finish the tasks set by the teacher in each activity in the whole lesson. The transition consists of meeting and working with new peers, and the inability to adapt and work collegially may impact pupils’ educational experience as well as their attainment. Coplan et al. (2017) who studied peer acceptance and social adjustment found that first impressions have a lasting effect on peer acceptance so this may be a worrying implication for the pupil’s social, psychological and academic adjustment particularly in the transitional Year 7.

Conversely, the researcher noticed pupils trying to retain old friendship groups:

In a sports lesson, the pupils were set a task to complete various activities of basketball shooting around the sports hall. Two friends who were paired together were not engaging in the activity (they could be seen giggling and laughing together). As the teacher tried to separate them and pair them up with another partner, they became reluctant. ‘I swear we’ll work’, one girl said, ‘I don’t wanna work with anyone else’. ‘Please Miss, please!’ they pleaded with their teacher not to separate them to keep hold of their friendship group even though this could have detrimental effects on their educational experience. However, this may be part of normal development as pupils seek stability in their social networks in a transition loaded with change and challenges. Nevertheless, as schools are not always able to group pupils with their friends, it may be necessary to allow the pupils time and space to explore new friendship groups and develop their interpersonal and intrapersonal skills together. This could be done in a structured and safe environment during the transition as, even though expanding friendship networks is beneficial, it could lead to anti-social and disruptive behaviour as adolescents try to establish status and rank amongst their classmates leading to adverse effects on their peers.

**Theme 2: Sense of self: Self-confidence and self-control**

Similarly, there were cases in the observations in which teacher-pupil interaction impacted the pupils’ sense of self. A sense of self is defined as the way a person thinks about and views his or her traits, beliefs, and purpose within the world, including knowing ones’ own goals, values and ideals (Tustin, 2018). During the observation of an ICT lesson, the pupils were set a task to replicate a front-page news article that was modelled by the teacher. The teacher showed them how to formulate the tables and boxes on the electronic document, but the pupils had to come up with an original headline and story. As the pupils were carrying out the activity, a pupil was approached in a friendly manner for copying the example of the teacher and was asked to create an original title. This led to the pupil becoming instantaneously disheartened, shown by a loud groan, pursing of his lips and slumping into his chair with his hands on his cheeks. The teacher continued to probe by asking questions and giving suggestions to things the pupil may be interested in and therefore, may like to make a headline about, however, the pupil continued not to respond. This could be directly linked to the transition as the relationship between the teacher and pupil has yet to be established and the pupils may think that incidences of constructive feedback are a personal attack on their skills and abilities.

Pupils will be approached by teachers to evaluate and re-evaluate their progress as this is a fundamental aspect of learning, and thus it is key for the pupils to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses and understand contextual feelings. The response and recognition of this are imperative in having a successful educational experience. The researcher believes that the behaviour of the pupil was a physiological ‘Flight or Fight’ reaction as the pupil may have identified the teachers’ involvement as an attack or criticism and consequently withdrew. It might be helpful for pupils if they perceived such occurrences, not as acts of condemnation by the teacher but rather as an attempt for development and improvement. A similar fight or flight reaction was observed in a
Math lesson. During an activity, two girls were jovially talking and working simultaneously. It must be noted that the researcher felt that it was not with excessive noise or to the detriment of others as the remainder of the classmates were similarly working together and communicating in groups. Suddenly, a boy sat in front of the girls turned around and began yelling and shouting at them ‘Shut Up’, ‘You’re so stupid’, ‘Your work is rubbish’. He began attacking their papers whilst the girls seemed to nonchalantly not take any notice. The researcher was left to question what this meant to the boy. Did he feel attacked? Prevented? Or even left out by the girls in some way? Thus, pupils must be aware of triggers that may affect them to behave in certain situations. Zimmerman (2013) in his analysis of self-regulated learning found that pupils had lower self-awareness during the transition due to the myriad changes that were happening and as a result displayed such strained interactions with their teachers and peers, and academically did not have good working habits. Conversely, pupils with better self-awareness during the transition displayed positive attitudes towards their teachers, school tasks and displayed consistent achievement.

Self-confidence or the lack of was also observed during a basketball sports lesson. The pupils were spread out across a large sports hall and were given an activity to practice free throws in pairs. A petite, shy girl, smaller than her peers, during the exercise, seemed wary of her size, and as a result, was reluctant to throw the ball. As she stood underneath the basket, she seemed conscious of the fact that she could not throw the ball high enough to reach the hoop. Naturally, this affected her confidence, shown by her head dropping and shoulders being slumped, with no attempt to try to shoot but rather holding the ball close to her chest. When asked by her teacher to show her attempt she seemed apprehensive to the point of embarrassment. She seemed to be cautiously looking over her shoulders to see if anyone of her peers were watching her, and upset that she could not carry out the task. The teacher numerous asked her to try, explaining various techniques that could enable her to succeed in the task but she refused all endeavour. This lack of self-confidence may have hindered the pupils’ progress during the sports lesson, and thus, it can be seen that a lack of self-confidence can have detrimental effects on academic performance. This is particularly pertinent during the secondary school transition as previous research has shown that self-confidence decreases immediately after the transition (Cantin & Boivin, 2004; Coelho & Romão, 2017). This could be due to various reasons including self-comparisons to preadolescent self as well as the opportunity to compare oneself to a larger number of peers in secondary school compared to smaller class sizes in primary school.

Throughout the observation of Year 7 pupils, it was noticed by the observer that many of the pupils could not control their negative impulses. For example, at the end of the class, a pupil had noticed that some pupils from other classes had been dismissed from their lessons and had entered into the playground which could be seen through the window. This led the pupil to become extremely angry and combative. He began shouting ‘This isn’t fair, why you (teacher) being so slow’. This is particularly common during the secondary school transition as pupils are still navigating the different rules and customs of the new school and new teachers. This can lead to losing self-control by some pupils in inconsequential situations, thus leading to confrontational and off-task behaviour. Moreover, this could lead to potential disruption to the whole class and have detrimental academic effects for other peers as the teachers’ attention would be diverted from the task at hand. If such instances occur, the teachers may be obliged to disciplinary action. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy to add here an instance when the researcher observed a pupil exercising positive self-control. During one of the lessons, the pupils were asked to complete an exercise in pairs. Two girls were working studiously on the task. A lone pupil in front of them tried to turn around to engage the girls in conversation. He asked about a topic off task, which occurred during the previous break time. One of the girls gave a short response ‘I didn’t see it’ and tried to continue with their work. The boy turned to his desk and started to work. The girls were visibly not impressed understood by
the rolling of the eyes and shaking of their heads to each other. The boy once again turned back to them. He this time tried to converse regarding the work at hand.

Boy: What do you have for question 4?
Girl: We haven’t done it yet.
Boy: Can I have a look at your answers?

The girls did not answer and continued to work together. ‘Oi, let me see what you have’, he snarled. The girls patiently tried to continue with their work. By then, the boy had had enough of being ignored and began to physically disrupt their work. He started hitting their pen with his pen as they wrote and drawing on their paper. The girls did not respond to the provocation but merely raised their hand to gain the attention of the teacher. The boy did not heed their warning of getting the teacher and continued to pester them. The girls waited patiently until the teacher came over and relocated the boy to the other side of the classroom. This example suggests how the girls maintained their self-control and did not retaliate to the boys pestering. They tried to sustain academic focus and refrained from an impulsive reaction. This example is similar to the findings of Tsukayama et al. (2013) who studied middle school children in the USA and reported verbatim examples of everyday self-control successes and failures. The successes mentioned in their study included ‘being patient with others’ and ‘seeking help in times of adversity’ as can be seen in the above observation.

**Theme 3: Resilience and motivation**

The next theme illustrates how pupils who lack resilience may hastily relinquish tasks that appear to be overly difficult which will undoubtedly affect their academic performance. The class was set a task that a certain pupil could not understand or complete. The task that was set was linked to the previous day’s work. However, the said pupil was absent the day before, and therefore, he had missed some of the content which impacted his comprehension of the task and he automatically felt that he could not complete the task. The teacher came and sat with him for the duration of the task trying to explain that at the beginning of the lesson they had revised yesterday’s information and that he had ‘caught-up’ with the information. He refused to acknowledge what the teacher was saying and as the teacher began to go through the exercises together with him, he merely resigned the task and waited for the answers from his teacher. The teacher noticed the lack of effort and resilience to the task and subsequently left the pupil. Given the recognition that some young people will find the transition significantly difficult particularly with regards to the strains, changes, and adjustment it involves, the consideration of resilience within the context of transition is valid. Support initiatives could allow pupils to recognise the importance of challenges and failures, as an opportunity for growth and equip the pupils with strategies to deal with for example constructive feedback and poor grades.

Furthermore, during the observations, it was noticed that in the Learn to Learn lesson some of the pupils only studied and showed on-task behaviour when probed by their teacher or teaching assistant. During a task to devise innovative ways to deal with stress, a group of three male pupils completed the task with the help of the teaching assistant. They seemed engaged and held productive dialogue related to the task, however, as soon as the teaching assistant focused on another group, they became distracted and boisterous leading to play fighting and drawing on each other’s work. This relates to Taylor et al. (2014) findings that motivated pupils are autonomous in their learning. Furthermore, the same group during a later activity of grammar work felt disinterested in the task and refused to continue. ‘I hate grammar’ one pupil was heard saying, as all three of the
boys slumped in their chairs and put their heads in their hand. They refused to carry out the task, and this caused much of the teacher’s monitoring time to be spent trying to get them on task. This shows a lack of motivation and how a lack of motivation can disrupt learning. The teacher’s attention became diverted, and they could not utilise their skills to benefit the class as a whole. Moreover, lack of motivation and boredom with work set by teachers was a noticeable characteristic of academically able underachievers (Furlong et al., 2021). Boredom can also lead to extremely short periods spent on the task. This suggests how a lack of motivation can hinder academic performance as vital information could be neglected throughout the term. Thus, it may be in the best interest of the school and practitioners alike to try and develop intrinsic motivation (to learn out of interest and enjoyment for its own sake) in pupils from the forefront of the transition to secondary school. This is because developing internal motivation during the turbulent transition could motivate the pupils to take on more rigorous learning experiences and to persist when encountering difficulties (Yeager et al., 2019). If this mindset and behaviour become habitual from the beginning of secondary school, it could put the pupils in good stead throughout their educational journey and particularly during difficult times. Furthermore, the onus could also be shifted to the teachers to try and diversify their teaching practices and foster an environment to try and keep the pupils more engaged.

Conclusion

The subsequent concluding remarks centre on the findings of this study which offer a new outlook to the secondary school transition field. This study focused on gaining a snapshot observation of pupils’ transition to secondary school and the role of social and emotional learning within the secondary school context. Seven classroom observations were undertaken to explore the pupils’ engagement in the lessons, their interaction with peers and teachers, their attention and any noticeable behaviour’s directly linked to social and emotional learning.

Even though researchers and practitioners are hypothesising and scrutinising claims about what secondary school transition should look like, what objectives they should target and how to address these goals, young people in the classroom are busy every day in actually living these secondary school learning experiences with regards to their own answers to or viewpoints on these matters. Deliberations between teachers and academics are fundamental in the continuous development of the secondary school transition as an academic and pedagogical arena, however, it is imprudent to disregard and overlook the findings related to the way adolescents’ value and experience secondary school education.

Adolescents may understand the secondary school learning experiences with regards to their individual schemas and agendas, giving precedence to matters that they feel most significant. Pupils will undoubtedly have different distinctive social and emotional experiences of the secondary school transition and how that translates to actions and behaviours. That two pupils from the same class will react to teacher instruction and approaches in different ways highlights that dogmas of work, curriculum, policy documents and pedagogical style cannot fully describe and explain how pupils’ experience secondary school transition. If we are to holistically appreciate and comprehend how secondary school transition transpires, the role of social and emotional learning within it, and what the consequences are, greater attention must be given to the pupils as active agents in secondary school transition and education.

Mahmud (2020b) emphasises the significance of understanding the individualised context that the transition occurs. The observations in this study expound that it is not only the physical, logistical and curricular challenges that constitute the secondary school transition experience, but that the pupils themselves can permeate social and emotional learning experiences with a transitional
significance where it was not considered or anticipated. As only a small body of research has focused on the emotional aspects of the transition and few schools focus on enhancing such skills and abilities during the move (Mahmud, 2020b), practitioners and researchers should place more value on the impact of the transitional learning experiences on pupils’ social and emotional wellbeing.

Consequently, numerous implications arise from this study. National and international educational institutions should explore and evaluate the impact their transitional support have on their learners. As strategies of secondary school transition (pre- and post-transition) remain unclear and ambivalent, it is of paramount importance to investigate how to best integrate adolescents into a new school. This can be accomplished, for example, by engaging and listening to the voices of incoming (Year 6), current (Year 7) and already transitioned (Year 8) pupils about their thoughts and suggestions about what should be maintained and improved for other pupils.

Early detection of adolescents who maybe be struggling with the transition into secondary school (e.g. socially, emotionally or academically) is key to deploy supplementary support to those who need it the most during and after the transition to an unfamiliar social and academic content. The strategic support must be personalised to pupils’ specific requirements, to develop their belonging to the new school context to minimalise the possibility of lasting repercussions of inadequate school transition leading to poor academic achievement and school drop-out. Furthermore, school support services should be completely incorporated into the transition programme so that pupils can identify and access support throughout the transitional phase. Support services can be utilised to inspire teachers to build stronger relationships with incoming pupils to foster a sense of belonging with the school personnel immediately after the transition.

This study contributes to the growing literature examining the role of social and emotional skills on pupils’ transition from primary to secondary school. Its strengths lie in the real-time observational investigation of the impact of transition on ‘healthy’ adolescent development. The size of the study sample and the quality of the measures used in this study help to provide valuable descriptive data about transition and social and emotional learning (Waters et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, there are some limitations in this present study. Data was derived from one school in the South Coast of England with pupils from a predominantly White background and therefore, the findings may not be representative of other pupils undertaking the transition across the country. Thus, a recommendation for future research would be to use a larger cluster of schools to understand the different perceptions and contexts of social and emotional learning in various schools and utilise a larger number of transitioning pupils. This would give a more comprehensive picture of the issues around developing pupils’ social and emotional abilities and could also highlight how each individual school has different needs and requirements respectively. Secondly, only a few social and emotional variables that can influence the pupils’ transition experience were explored. Further research should explore a wider range of social and emotional learning factors, in addition to the school and family effects at the micro and macro level of education.

With regards to the limitation of the methodology, as observational data is susceptible to researcher bias (Walter, 2019), the observations could have been strengthened by an independent observer. Nonetheless, while an independent observer may have been able to offer information of various behaviours and emotional aspects of the pupils from a different perspective, the individual observer may not have been able to make references to attitudinal features, and the observation would remain subjective. Linked to this is the missed opportunity of video recording the observations. The observations in this study were not audio or video recorded because of the reluctance of the teachers as well as the ethical and legal implications of recording young people. However, video methods could have strengthened the findings and analysis further. Video methods limit the Hawthorne effect – which is the possibility of altering the behaviour of participants – since video
cameras have been shown to influence participant behaviour far less than a human observer (Asan & Montague, 2014). In addition, video recordings provide more complete (and visual) information about the real environment rather than traditional observers’ observation notes, and could have been observed by multiple people over time to support and reinforce the findings (Kumarapeli & de Lusignan, 2013). A further recommendation for the observations could be to specifically observe a selected group of pupils longitudinally during the transition. This could provide a more robust and detailed ethnographic perspective of the pupils’ transition, however, this could impede the possible generalisations of the findings to a whole cohort of Year 7 pupils.

To conclude, this study was exploratory in nature. The issues presented in this study will initiate enhanced discussion and deliberation. Transition researchers and practitioners should explore the practical and political implications in greater depth and ways to integrate them into a more enriched understanding of the social and emotional process and consequences of the secondary school transition.

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