

UNIVERSITY OF ZIMBABWE

**THE ZIMBABWE BULLETIN
OF TEACHER EDUCATION**

DEPARTMENT OF TEACHER EDUCATION

THE ZIMBABWE BULLETIN OF TEACHER EDUCATION

ISSN: 1022-3800: Volume 14, Issues 1, September 2007

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The Impending Crisis: The Case of the Transition to the Secondary School.

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ABSTRACT

This study set out to investigate and analyse the perceptions of Seventh Graders towards their transition to the secondary school. Precisely, Grade 7 pupils were asked to appraise the transition from primary to secondary school with a view to assisting these pupils have a smooth transition to the secondary school. Thus, the focus and therefore interest was on understanding what Grade 7 pupils think and feel about moving on to the secondary school. The study involved 120 (N=120) Grade 7 pupils drawn from Harare urban schools. A questionnaire and follow-up interviews were the instruments used to collect data. Results were reported using percentages. The observations in this study were that most Grade 7 pupils perceive the transition to secondary school with fear and anxiety. Many pupils reported feeling sad as the time for the transition to secondary school approached. Thus, Grade 7 pupils' perceptions of the transition was predominantly negative. The uncertainty of what goes on in the new environment and the often much talked about 'difficult subjects' were among the main causes for concern for many of them.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the present study was to examine, from the point of view of Grade 7 pupils themselves, their perceptions of the transition from primary to secondary school. This transition is an important event in pupils' lives yet, little is known about the experiences of children during the transition. To the investigator, this is perhaps one of the most important transitions in the life of the child not only because the child is still young, but also because this is the first such transition and for many of them, perhaps the first separation from home. The child therefore faces psychological, social and

academic challenges which may completely offset his/her if not properly handled.

Despite the significance of this transition, there has been scanty research into the area (Fenzel 2000). This paucity of research and therefore of vital information concerning this transition has resulted in many children going to secondary schools ill-prepared and with a lot of fear because of uncertainty. Research into this area is therefore vital so that these children might be helped in their entry into and subsequent adjustment to the new school. Such adjustment to the new school, it is hoped, would assist children to be socially and academically competent in the new school.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing body of research, for example, Leonard and Elias (1993); Berndt and Mekos (1945), Fenzel (2000); Ward (2000) and Sirsch (2003) indicates that while there is reasonable research documenting the transition of students into tertiary institutions and the world of work, little attention has been paid to the transition of pupils from primary to secondary education. As already pointed out, this is unexpected because as the child's first such transition and for many, the first separation from home (in the case of Boarding Secondary Schools), it should attract the attention of researchers.

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1987), the transition from primary to secondary school causes many challenges and threats to the prospective secondary school pupil. These challenges and threats may be either social or academic. The child has to face a new school, new teachers, new classmates, new school mates as well as new academic and social demands and expectations. Primary school children often hear of 'hostile' school mates at secondary school; especially at the beginning of the year. There is also talk of 'difficult' subjects at secondary school. All this may cause a lot of anxiety in the child. The fact that in many education systems children do not choose to move on to secondary education but are coerced, may add to the development of fear and anxiety.

Extrapolating from the above, perhaps the transition from primary to secondary school involves a lot of changes in the individual child and in his/her life. Marsh (1990) found that this transition necessitated or resulted in a change in the child's self-concept. If the transition is successful, the

child sees himself/herself as independent, competent etc. Such a child may eventually show marked changes in his/her manner of speaking, walking or interacting with others. The child views this transition as a movement towards the accomplishment of his/her academic and career aspirations. This may spur the child to greater achievements in the school.

The above indicates that a higher order self-concept is a crucial aspect of psychological functioning which is directly related to social and academic achievements as well as school adjustment (Harter, 1999). Children with such a high order self-concept find this transition to secondary school non-threatening while those with a low self-concept may experience fear, anxiety, insecurity etc in their new social and academic environments. In fact, emerging research evidence, (for example, Marsh (1990); Deihl, Vicaary and Deike (1997) and Harter (1994) indicates that positive self-perceptions aid an individual's adjustment to new environments.

While some authors such as Deihl et al. (1997) and Sirsch (2003) describe the transition from primary to secondary school as stressful for many students, others such as Bronstein et al. (1996) see it as a challenging time. To the investigator's view and knowledge, although little research for example, Lazarus and Folkman (1987) and Mitman and Pacher (1982) has been done to clarify these issues, several theoretical explanations have argued that it all depends on factors such as family/cultural orientations, the child's ability to adapt, the pupil's evaluation of the event, the personal and environmental resources the child can draw upon during the transition (Leonard and Elias, 1993) and the type of the new school. For example, children from families or cultures where they have learned to see themselves as independent, self-contained and autonomous, tend to thrive at new schools while those who tend to depend on group membership tend to be decontextualised in new situations (Larson, 1999).

Studies on this transition conducted elsewhere, for example, Ward (2000), Fenzel (2000) and Sirsch (2003) have reported varying student perceptions concerning their transition to secondary schools. While some, for example, Fenzel (2000), reported negative perceptions, others, for example, Sirsch (2003) reported neutral or positive perceptions. The present study speculated that seventh graders in Zimbabwe in general and in Harare in particular perceive the transition to the secondary school positively, though

they see it as a challenge. It is with this background that the investigator set out to investigate Grade 7 pupils' perceptions towards the transition to secondary school.

METHODOLOGY

Reliability of Instrument

Though the questionnaire developed by Sirsch (2003) was adopted with minor modifications, the investigator felt it necessary to test the instrument for reliability and suitability. An inter-rater reliability coefficient was calculated using ten raters who were considered experts in the area of attitudes and perceptions.

The raters were asked to score the instrument (out of 10) as a measure of pupils' perceptions towards the transition from primary to secondary school. Reliability analysis yielded a sufficiently acceptable coefficient (0,6). This means that all the raters agreed, to a large extent, that the questionnaire was reliable and therefore suitable for measuring the pupils' perceptions.

Pilot Study

After establishing that the questionnaire was reliable and therefore suitable for tapping pupil's perceptions of the transition from primary secondary school, the questionnaire was piloted with a group of 40 Grade 7 pupils, randomly drawn from two primary schools in Harare's high density suburbs. Principally, the first study was meant to test and measure the procedural and instrumental limitations of the study. The first study revealed no procedural and instrumental limitations; hence, the questionnaire was adopted for use in the main study.

MAIN STUDY

Research Design

The nature of the study (descriptive) necessitated the use of the Survey Research Design. The design not only allowed the use of a relatively large sample (N=120), but also allowed the gathering of data in order to assess current practices. It is hoped that this would help in reaching informed decisions about the future and the course of action thereafter.

Sample

One hundred and twenty (N=120) pupils were involved in this study. These pupils were randomly selected from six government schools located in Harare's high density suburbs. The sample were prospective secondary school pupils.

It is important to note that a study of this nature can also be done in retrospect. One can decide to find out from those children already in secondary school what their experiences were like when they moved from primary to secondary school. However, the latter approach has been criticised in that some children might already have forgotten about their transition experiences. For this reason, the present study preferred involving current Grade 7 pupils.

Instruments

A modified form of the questionnaire developed by Sirsch (2003) was used. The questionnaire, which had 5 items relating to academic aspects and another 5 items relating to social aspects, required subjects to tick an answer that went with their views/feelings from two given alternatives in each question.

Follow-up interviews also supplemented the questionnaires. This was seen necessary in order to probe into subtle issues which the investigator felt could not be revealed through the questionnaire. A total of 30 pupils (randomly selected from those who had answered the questionnaire) were interviewed.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Table 1: Responses to the Questionnaire Items (N = 120)

Stem: When I think of my going to the secondary school next year, I			
Statement		Responses	
		A	B
Academic Aspects			
1	(A) become happy because I will show what I have learned. (B) worry because I may not be able to follow the lessons	25 (21%)	95 (79%)
2	(A) look forward to it because I am curious about new subjects. (B) worry since I may not know enough.	53 (44,5%)	67 (5,5%)
3	(A) look forward to it because I will learn things that I don't know now. (B) worry since the school may demand too much from me.	62 (52%)	58 (48%)
4	(A) look forward to it because I can't truly show what I can do. (B) worry since I may do worse than I am doing now.	40 (33%)	80 (67%)
5	(A) look forward to it because it is a step towards achieving my career aspirations. (B) worry because it may be too difficult for me such that I will not achieve my career aspirations.	59 (49%)	61 (51%)
Social Aspects			
6	(A) look forward to it because I will be able to play with new friends. (B) worry because I may get class-mates who do not like me.	22 (18,5%)	98 (81,5%)
7	(A) look forward to it because I will be among new classmates (B) worry because I will be among new classmates.	43 (36%)	77 (64%)
8	Look forward to it because I will get to know many nice children. (B) worry because I may not get somebody to talk to.	56 (47%)	64 (53%)
9	(A) look forward to it because I may find better friends than I have now. (B) worry because I may not be able to find any friends.	47 (39,55)	73 (60,55)
10	(A) look forward to it because I will be able to meet new teachers. (B) worry because I will meet new teachers.	66 (55%)	54 (45%)

DISCUSSION

Academic Aspects: Drawing from Table 1 above, item 1 indicates that only 21% of the respondents report being happy to go to the secondary school to show what they have learned.

The rest (79%) are worried that they may not be able to cope with their new lessons. This shows that failure to achieve academic success, which is a central task for school-going children, may cause a lot of psychological damage to the child. Fear, worry and anxiety may result.

It would appear that many primary school pupils are not sure as to whether their present abilities, skills and knowledge will stand the challenge of secondary school work. In fact, some of the interviewees expressed the belief that there was a big gap between primary and secondary education. Such children are not likely to do well, at least initially in secondary schools because many studies for example, Jerusalem, (1993) have demonstrated that negative perceptions of one's abilities and competence result not only in poor achievement but also in high threat in the individual.

Item 2 indicates that 44,5% of the respondents look forward to the secondary school because they are curious about the new subjects. On the other hand, the majority (55,2%) are worried that their abilities may be no match to the demands of secondary school work. Given the emphasis on academic achievement in our schools, children approach secondary education with a lot of fear and anxiety.

Because of the pressure to achieve, children's fears become even more acute as the time of the transition draws nearer. One interviewee commented, "I wish I terminated my education here. It seems I only go to the secondary school to be proved an academic failure. Surely this is worse than not going there." Such sentiments serve to show that new secondary schools may be particularly menacing, both academically and socially, to many primary school children.

An analysis of item 3 shows that unlike the 48% of respondents who worry that they may not be able to meet the academic demands of secondary school education, 52% of the respondents are eager to go to secondary school in order to learn things that they do not know at the moment. Such a desire is intrinsic; the child wants to gain knowledge for its own sake.

There is research evidence, for example Jerusalem, (1993) to the effect that such determined children feel little or no threat in new academic environments and are therefore likely to do well.

Item 4 indicates that 33% of the subjects look forward to the transition to the new school in order to show what they can do while 67% worry that they may do worse than they are doing now. In fact, interviews yielded comments such as, "I have always been top of the class. If I go to secondary school, I may lose this position because of challenge from pupils from other schools." Such sentiments are understandable given that academic achievement is highly valued by both schools and society. These fears which may be psychological initially, can turn real and become devastating to the child's learning efforts. Once the child feels insecure about his/her competence, social and academic failures follow (Harter, 1999).

On item 5, 49% of the subjects look forward to the transition to secondary school because they see it as a step towards achieving their career aspirations while 51% worry about this transition because secondary school education may be too difficult for them, resulting in them failing to realise their career aspirations. One interviewee, clearly disturbed by this transition, said, "The more I think about this transition, the more depressed I become." While this feeling may be unique to this particular pupil, it is perhaps sensible to infer that many Grade 7 pupils frequently feel unhappy, worried, threatened and stressed when they think about this transition. One respondent extended the fears to include those relating to whether he/she would get a place at a school of his/her choice since admission to prestigious secondary schools has become very competitive in Zimbabwe.

Social Aspects

Item 6, which related to social aspects, reveals that 18,5% of the subjects look forward to the new secondary school because they will be able to play with new friends while 81,5% worry because they may get classmates who do not like them. Research evidence, for example, Forgan and Vaughn, (2000) has consistently shown that friendships are important since they work as social support when children are faced with stressful circumstances. Since pointers in the present study are that transiting to the secondary school is a stressful event for many children, the ameliorative effect of finding friends or being accepted by others cannot be over-emphasised here.

Responses to item 7 indicate that 36% of the subjects look forward to the secondary school because they want to be among new classmates while 64% of them worry about being among classmates who are strangers. Thus, while a few pupils (36%) showed excitement, eagerness, happiness and joy about joining new classmates, the majority (64%) showed worry, fear and anxiety about joining new classmates. One of the interviewed children commented, "It would make more sense if Grade 7 classes moved to secondary schools as they are. I know I will be affected in my studies because I find it difficult to get along with unfamiliar people." Such sentiments buttress some previous research findings (e.g. Wentzel and Asher, 1995) which indicate that some children who find it difficult to form friendships get affected in their studies, even to the point of dropping out of school (Parker and Asher, 1987).

The idea of moving on to the secondary school with Grade 7 classmates was thus seen as presenting less threat. Berndt et al. (1999) found that good friendships among students which continue after changing school support integration at the new school. Mitman and Packer (1982) also found that children who report a good start in secondary school were those who reported maintaining old friendships and being successful in establishing new ones.

Items 8 and 9 also indicate that children who go to the secondary school have problems in getting new friends. In item 8, 53% of the respondents show that they worry about failing to get somebody to talk to while in item 9, 60,5% of the respondents worry because they may fail to get friends. This worry is justified given that friends play an important role not only in the social and academic development of the child but also in the child's adjustment efforts.

Research evidence, for example, Wentzel, (1999) and Parker and Asher (1987) suggests that rejection by peers or reduced number of familiar children tends to increase the new child's worries, threats and anxieties. Thus, peers are of singular importance in a child's school career. The child's social functioning with others is robustly related to academic achievement; good associations reinforce good school performance.

The last item, (item 10) portrays that a number of Grade 7 pupils (55%) look forward to the new school for the reason of meeting new teachers.

Forty-five percent (45%) of the pupils are the ones who seem to worry about meeting new teachers. From the interviews, many pupils appreciate the fact that in secondary school, they are taught different subjects by different teachers. Pupils view this as an advantage in that not only are some teachers more effective than others but also that some are more friendly than others. This is important because teacher support has been found to result in school-oriented interests, good academic achievement and meaningful school adaptation (Jerusalem, 1993; Parker and Asher, 1987). This can only be said to be what the prospective secondary school pupil yearns for.

Overall, in the present study, Grade 7 pupils' perceptions of the transition to the secondary school have been found to be largely negative due to worries, fears, threats and anxieties caused by social and academic uncertainties in the new school. These findings are not surprising given that studies of this nature elsewhere for example, Ward, (2000) and Berndt and Mekos (1995) have reported varying perceptions; some reporting negative perceptions, neutral perceptions or positive perceptions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The results of this study underscore the need to make the transition to secondary school stress-free for children. Emerging evidence suggests that many children experience marked difficulties during this transition. The theme of worry permeates the majority of the subjects' responses. If this worry is not properly handled, it may hamper or totally cripple the pupils' social and academic adjustment and development at the new school. To this effect, children need a lot of support from parents, the previous school and the new school if they are to transit smoothly to the new school. Such support may act as a buffer against the fears, threats, worries and anxieties that many children have. It may be necessary for the parents to familiarise the child with the new school by visiting it together with the child before schools open. After opening, parents should frequently visit the child at school during Visiting Weekends.
2. Primary schools may also see the need to teach these Grade 7 pupils coping strategies. These strategies may include effective study strategies, how to maintain old relationships and how to establish new ones. Pupils may also be familiarised with the secondary school curriculum.

In the investigator's view, this could best be done after the Grade 7 examinations.

3. Of particular significance and relevance to the interpretation of the present results is the fact that the study was conducted among urban pupils only. Perhaps future research could focus not only on both urban and rural children but also on children from different types of schools in order to compare their perceptions of this transition, using multivariate statistics.

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