

CHAPTER 4

Experiencing the transition to lower secondary school: Parents' voices

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ABSTRACT

This article explores, through semi-structured interviews and observations, how the parents of students in one Norwegian school experience the transition into lower secondary school and how they experience their ability to support their adolescents during this transition. The study shows that the parents primarily have positive experiences with the transition. This is affected by how the secondary school staff organise the initial transition period by meeting and giving the parents consistent information, as well as how they facilitate the establishment of a safe learning environment for the students. The parents perceive that the adolescents adapt to the new school quite quickly and report that the transition makes them grow more mature and independent from the parents. Their adolescents' growing independence, in addition to their experience of getting less insight into and contact with the lower secondary school, contributes to an experienced change in their role as school parents. Many parents struggle to understand what role the school wants them to play, and combined with less insight into the adolescents' schooling, this affects the parents' ability to provide appropriate support. This occurs even though the parents in the present study possessed the social and academic skills necessary to help their adolescents. The article concludes that the school should facilitate a closer collaborative dialogical relationship with the parents and students, so parents develop a better understanding of the new context and how this relates to their role in the lower secondary school.

INTRODUCTION

The transition to lower secondary school is recognised as one of the most difficult in students' educational careers (Zeedyk et al., 2003). Studies show that the transition involves both academic and social challenges for students during a period in which they also move from childhood to adulthood. The majority of students experience some difficulties in coping at the start of secondary school (Coffey, 2013; Rice, Frederickson, Shelton, McManus, & Ng-Knight, 2015; Smyth, 2016; West, Sweeting, & Young, 2010). Students in Norway transfer to lower secondary education at age 13, most commonly to the nearest public Grade 8-10 school. The government aims to make this transition as smooth as possible and states that since the students' challenges increase in lower secondary school, the requirements for good cooperation between school and home also increase (Ministry of Education and Research, 2011).

The literature shows that parents play an important role in ensuring that a smooth transition to lower secondary school takes place (Fielding, 2006; McGee, Ward, Gibbons, & Harlow, 2004; Rice et al., 2015; Smyth, 2016; Topping, 2011; van Rens, Haelermans, Groot, & van den Brink, 2018). Parental support can soothe the students' concerns and affect their school achievement both before and after the transition (Coffey, 2013; Fielding, 2006; McGee et al., 2004; van Rens et al., 2018). Parents' understanding of school procedures, awareness of the issues students encounter, attitudes towards school, and ability to support the students during the transition can prevent possible difficulties and have an impact on how the students adapt to the new context (Coffey, 2013; Hanewald, 2013). In order to provide support, parents must be aware of the changes that take place and how to deal with these. They are therefore in need of preparation for the transition (Bagnall, Skipper, & Fox, 2019; Coffey, 2013; Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; O'Toole, Hayes, & Mhathúna, 2014; Zeedyk et al., 2003).

According to Bagnall et al. (2019), efforts to smooth the transition process can only be superficial if the parents' views of the transition to lower secondary school are not included. Researchers have, however, shown little interest in the parents and their role within the Norwegian school (Nordahl, 2015). The perspectives of parents are also largely missing from the international literature on educational transitions (O'Toole et al., 2014). The aim of this paper is to explore the parents' perspectives in order to strengthen this knowledge. The paper is based on a study framed by the following research question: "How do

the parents experience the transition to lower secondary school, and how do they experience their ability to support their adolescent during this transition?"

LITERATURE BACKGROUND

Related research

The Norwegian Education Act (1998) states that compulsory education must take place in a collaboration between home and school. The aim of the collaboration should be the students' academic, social, and personal development (Nordahl, 2015). Norwegian studies show that lower secondary school parents perceive it as important to stay in contact with the school, and many experience the collaboration as good (Bæck, 2007). However, the collaboration is first and foremost characterised by one-way information from the school to the parents (Nordahl, 2015). Many lower secondary school parents experience receiving less information about what is happening at school than at the primary level, especially concerning the students' social development and well-being, and many perceive that the school does not invite parental engagement (Bæck, 2007; Nordahl, 2015). This coincides with international research on the transition to lower secondary school, which shows that parents report concerns about the communication at the secondary level (O'Toole et al., 2014; Zeedyk et al., 2003). Parents also experience the adolescent as less communicative than in primary school, since they are beginning to seek independence. This implies that parents still need access to information given directly from the school (Coffey, 2013). The literature suggests that the parents must be involved in monitoring the student's social life and academic work and progress during the transition. Such support is found to be most effective when the student's home environment is aligned with that of the new school (McGee et al., 2004). According to Bæck (2007) and Nordahl (2015), Norwegian parents wish to be more involved in their adolescents' lower secondary schooling, but many are uncertain about what expectations the school has for them as parents.

Parents generally speak positively about the lower secondary school and how the student settles in, but they also describe their own experience of the transition as intense and emotional (O'Toole et al., 2014; Smyth, 2016). In addition to concerns related to communication with the school, they experience many of the same concerns as the students during the transfer, especially related to personal and social issues (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Rice et al., 2015; Smyth, 2016). However, the school staff tend to be less concerned about these

issues (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Parents furthermore express that their role changes, since the secondary school expects students to be more independent than in primary school (Bagnall et al., 2019; Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008). Previous research on this transition concludes that the school must give more attention to the parents during the transition process, since they are in need of more information to find and understand their role in supporting the students to adjust in the new school setting (Coffey, 2013; Fielding, 2006; Zeedyk et al., 2003). According to Bagnall et al. (2019), the need for greater parent-teacher communication especially applies to first-time transfer parents, because they do not know what to expect.

Theoretical framework

The current study seeks to understand the parents' experiences through the lens of a sociocultural perspective on learning. This perspective is based on a constructivist view of learning, which emphasises that human knowledge and understanding are constructed through interaction in a context (Dysthe, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). To understand human actions, one must take into account how mental functioning is situated in the institutional, cultural, and historical context (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998). By taking this perspective, understanding the role and experience of the parents concerning the transition to lower secondary school is perceived as essential because a student's learning and understanding of the new school context are jointly constructed in the interaction with the parents and their home context.

According to Vygotsky (1978), the individual's understanding of his or her surroundings develops by participating in cultural and social activities, using the language as a tool. Bakhtin further developed Vygotsky's theory about the relationship between language and the development of understanding and meaning (Wertsch, 1991). Bakhtin (1986) claimed that an institution consists of its own social language, which includes culturally and institutionally conditioned values and ways to perceive the world. When entering a new institution, such as the lower secondary school, the participants therefore need to develop their own meaning and understanding of what applies in the new context. This is created in a set of dialogical and collaborative processes that allow the individual to interact with the context (Bakhtin, 1981). Such a dialogical practice is characterised by an "internally persuasive discourse." This discourse belongs to both the sender and the recipient, and it encourages contact and dialogue

between the participants (Bakhtin, 1981; Wertsch, 1998). In line with this, there is a need to encourage a dialogue between all the stakeholders involved in the transition process, such as school-home and parent-adolescent. The opposite of such a dialogue is the authoritative discourse, which does not invite an interaction with the context. The authoritative word presupposes a kind of distance, which demands the recipients to acknowledge what is conveyed without being in dialogue with it in order to make it their own (Bakhtin, 1981; Wertsch, 1998). As an example, such a discourse takes place if the school staff are the ones that own the authority to control the topics and the access to information about the new school context. If this takes place, the newly transferred participants' development of understanding and meaning of the lower secondary school context might be impeded.

METHODOLOGY

A case study approach and the collection of data material

This study utilises a qualitative research design with a single case study as an approach (Creswell, 2013) to investigate how parents experience the transition to lower secondary school. One bounded case study site, a lower secondary school in a Norwegian city, was chosen for an in-depth examination. The school hereafter called Oak School (a pseudonym) was chosen through purposeful selection, since it met the criteria of being a Grade 8-10 school where the staff were interested in gaining research-based knowledge of their transition practice.

The sample of the study consists of the parents of 17 of the 165 students who transferred from two different primary schools to Oak School in August 2017. These 17 students (eight boys, nine girls) participated in a parallel study that took place during the same period (Strand, 2019), and the sample of the parents was defined by the sample of these students. The students were chosen because they, through two letters written to me before and shortly after the transition, revealed different thoughts about starting at Oak School. Some were looking forward to and enjoyed the transition, some were excited, and others had some worries. In this way, the sample of this study consists of the parents of students with different expectations and experiences regarding the transition to lower secondary school. The sample reflects that Oak School is located in a part of the city populated with families with relatively high socioeconomic status and a homogenous background. The parents had vocational or academic education and were all employed. Six of the parents knew Oak School well from previous

experiences with the students' older siblings, while the rest were experiencing the school for the first time.

The empirical material consists of observations and interviews. I visited the school during school hours several times during the students' first six months at Oak School to get to know the context, and I observed three arranged meetings between the parents and Oak School staff as a non-participating observer (Creswell, 2013). The observations were guided by the research question, and field notes were taken. Such observations can contribute as a context and a preparation for interviews (Angrosino & Pérez, 2000; Postholm, 2010) and are considered an important source of information in case studies (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative in-depth interviews were used to capture the parents' experiences by the use of a semi-structured, open-ended interview guide (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). In the interviews, I asked the parents to describe how they and their adolescent experienced the transition in general, what they expected the school staff to do to ensure a good transitioning process, what they expected of their own adolescent, their perception of the school staff's expectations, and what support their adolescent needed from his or her parents during the transition. The interviews were conducted twice: the first time two months after the students started at Oak School, and the second time about half a year after. I audiotaped and transcribed the interviews using verbatim transcription.

Data analysis and ethics

The transcribed interviews constituted the primary data for the data analysis. Inspired by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and the constant comparative method of analysis, the interaction between data, researcher, and theory was emphasised during the analysis. The unit of analysis was the parents' experiences, and the purpose of using this method was to develop an interpretative understanding of this. I coded the transcriptions, and by consistently comparing these codes, I gradually found connections between them and collected them in categories. The field notes and my own memos supported the analysis. I developed four main categories: Readiness, Social Belonging and Feeling Safe, Less Overview and Control, and Academic Support. I used member-checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to ensure the quality of the work. The participants read a summary of the findings presented in each category and stated that they felt the descriptions were accurate.

The study was conducted with ethical principles in accordance with NESH (2016). The experiences presented are connected to a selection of parents with relation to Oak School, but through thick descriptions, I have aimed at maximising the opportunity for naturalistic generalisation (Postholm, 2010; Stake, 1995). The presented findings may therefore have importance beyond the study context if the readers of this article can get inspiration and adjust the findings to their own context. A description of the Oak School context follows, after which the findings of the study and a discussion are presented.

DESCRIPTION OF THE HOME-SCHOOL CONTEXT

Oak School involved the parents in the transition process for the first time when representatives from the school attended the last parent-school meeting at each of the primary schools about four months before the start of lower secondary school. Through a collaboration between the primary school and Oak School, all 165 students were reorganised into four new classes, and each parent received information about which class their adolescent would belong to at Oak School some weeks after the first meeting. By the end of primary school, all parents were invited to a guided visit and meeting with the management and the new main class teachers at Oak School. Two weeks after the start-up, the school staff arranged a third meeting with all the parents. During these meetings, the parents received information about how Oak School organised the transition, the school, the Grade 8 students, and the teaching. In all meetings, the school staff encouraged the parents to contact them at any time if they had questions.

In addition to the three meetings between the parents and Oak School staff, the parents were invited to an individual conversation with their adolescent's new main teacher about three to four weeks after school began. The aim of this meeting was to get to know each other and to pass on relevant information about the student. A second conversation was conducted about half a year later, after the students had received their first report card. Most of the parents had attended this conversation before the second research interview. Oak School used a digital application that enabled daily and weekly communication between the school and parents.

FINDINGS

The defined categories form the structure and the headings for the presentation of the findings.

Readiness

Most parents said that both they and their adolescent had some concerns before the transition. As one parent explained, “It was just all the unknowns. How he would cope academically, how the teachers might be, what class he would be in, whether he would be bullied – yes, all of that.” At the same time, they perceived that their adolescent, despite some concerns, felt “ready” for lower secondary school. One parent stated, “He was ready to start at lower secondary school – he looked forward to it. I think he simply was tired of primary school.”

The parents stated that they got a positive first impression of Oak School from the three arranged parent meetings. One parent stated, “The way Oak School welcomed us as parents, and the teachers too, I think it was very professional.” They experienced the information they received as relevant, consistent, and well-founded. Several felt reassured, since the teachers gave them an impression of being prepared to take care of each student not only academically but also as a whole person. As a result, most of the parents’ initial concerns were calmed, and this made them feel ready for the transition as well. One parent said, “I think people left the meetings without worrying about things, right? You are entrusting the kid to a school that takes responsibility for your child. I feel that very much, and that is very good.”

Social belonging and feeling safe

Most important for the parents was the perception that their adolescent had friends and felt safe at Oak School. One parent said, “Friendship, it’s very important. At that age, not to feel lonely, that it is safe, it’s really important.” They argued that this worked as a foundation for both social and academic development in the new school. The published class lists therefore contributed to concerns ahead of the transition for a few parents who discovered that none of their adolescent’s closest friends belonged to the new class. Still, no students had communicated worries regarding this, and the parents underlined that they had tried to avoid transferring this concern to them. However, the parents emphasised the importance of having friends in the new classes. Six weeks after the transition, one parent said, “I do not think she would have managed it if she had been alone. At least, it would have been a very bad start.” Everyone perceived that the teachers had done a fine job establishing a good and safe learning environment, and all stated that their adolescents had told them that they had friends and felt safe within the new class quite quickly. This included

those parents who, before the transition, had worries related to the composition of the new classes. Nevertheless, a few parents expressed that their adolescent rarely met friends after school anymore and, as it was half a year after the start-up, they felt unsure of how well-established their adolescent actually was in the social setting. They explained that it was difficult for their adolescent to meet friends who belonged to other classes during school hours, and they perceived that this also affected the possibility of meeting these friends during leisure time. Because of this, some parents had arranged social events in order to socialise the adolescent after school. Several said that topics such as social media, puberty, sexuality, and drugs became more visible after beginning at Oak School. This could create concerns, and they tried to talk to their adolescent about these topics in order to keep them safe. It was important for them that the school staff were aware of such issues and informed the parents if something came up in relation to such issues at school. As one mother said, "We are not enlightened enough. We need help with such things, and then I think we can contribute much more than we do today."

It was also important for the parents to perceive that the student experienced a safe relationship with their teachers. As one parent stated, "For me, it is important that they [the teachers] see my kid. Having teachers who know who the students are." It was important for the parents to get to know the teachers, and they appreciated being invited to a conversation with the main teacher shortly after the school year began. As one parent expressed about this conversation, "I think the teacher already had an impression of the child which fitted with how I see him. She had somehow seen him – it was good." Half a year after the transition, the parents stated that they had a good impression of the teachers and the teaching the students received at Oak School. They also stated that their adolescents primarily spoke positively about their teachers.

Less overview and control

By receiving information from the teachers via the digital application, the parents felt well-informed about activities such as out-of-school lessons or events arranged at Oak School. Nevertheless, all experienced having less access to information about their adolescent's academic and social everyday life than they were used to in primary school. One parent said, "The transition to lower secondary school in relation to the information flow is really dramatic." Another said, "I have to admit – I totally lose the overview concerning what is going on

at lower secondary school.” Several parents stated that they perhaps did not pay enough attention themselves, but yet another parent stated, “I think the school has such a system, which makes it more difficult for us parents to pay attention.” This “system” was primarily related to information about the students’ schoolwork and homework. As they were used to such plans being sent directly to the home in primary school, they perceived that much of this information now was only given to the students on their digital learning platform. The parents therefore grew dependent on the adolescents to pass on this information. Not all parents experienced that their adolescent did this. As one parent said, “I do not think he feels the responsibility for informing me.”

The majority of the parents experienced a lack of information about school because of this. Consequently, as one mother stated:

I have no control over her anymore, or the schoolwork. I do not know if she has homework or not, so I just have to rely entirely on what she says. I have decided that I will do that. Then, I think that if it turns out that she does not do what she should do, I really expect the teacher to tell me that “now you have to pay more attention.” Because according to the system, we should not pay attention.

Many were uncertain about why the school staff made it more difficult for them to stay informed, but they assumed the reason to be that the teachers expected the students to work independently. The parents who perceived their adolescent as an independent or communicative person did not necessarily experience the lack of information from school as a problem. Nevertheless, several discovered a need for getting more clarifying information after some time at Oak School. As a first-time parent said, “It takes some time before you realise what you are wondering about, yes. So maybe there should have been a little more follow-up, like after half a year, for example.” Some parents also called for a clearer dialogue with the school. One parent suggested, “It could have been okay to have such a, yes, kind of discussion about our expectations with the school as well, or at least to hear about the school’s expectations of the parents.” Some expressed that the teachers might have no time to arrange such meetings, but they suggested that at least getting a monthly information letter from the school would have been helpful.

Academic support

The parents perceived that it took some time for the adolescents to get used to dealing with the academic requirements and assessment criteria used at Oak School. They assumed that getting academic support at home could have a positive impact on the students' outcomes, but many were uncertain about what role the school wanted the parents to play concerning academic support. They stated that they were willing and able to support their adolescent with their homework if the adolescent asked. Some were often asked, and some of these questioned whether they perhaps provided too much support. One said, "It is a bit like *we* are going to write a science report. It becomes such a dilemma – it is not correct that I assist her that much. Because it is not – the teachers should not give *me* the mark." In addition, as another parent said regarding the academic level, "It starts to get a little difficult [laughs]."

Other parents were rarely involved in the homework. The ones who perceived their student as able to organise and do the homework independently in order to get satisfying results did not problematise this. Others expressed that their adolescent would benefit from more support at home than he or she might understand, but as one explained, "He doesn't think he needs it [support], no. He only sees it as noise." These parents found it very difficult to intervene because of the lack of information and overview. As another parent explained:

What should I talk to him about when he answers, "no, I have done it [the homework]" or "I have done it at school" or "I'll do it at school tomorrow because then I have this and that"? It sounds trustworthy. I have nothing I can say; I do not have the knowledge.

During the second interview, one parent was at the limit of their patience and had decided to claim more control over the homework. Others stated that as long as they lacked information, they just had to wait for the adolescent to realise by himself or herself what was required at Oak School.

The parents underlined that it was more important to them that the student did their best and mastered being a lower secondary school student than that they earned high marks. They appreciated that the teachers also signalled this attitude. Yet several perceived that a strong pressure to earn high marks existed among some students, and they worried that this could wear out their adolescent. They tried to alleviate the pressure, but as one parent said, "I have thought

a little about that, what we can do to get rid of it, but I don't know. Maybe if one, yes, got an early collaboration with the school to ease the pressure."

When asked if they had become accustomed to the new context half a year after the start-up, several said yes, but not all. One first-time parent answered, "No, I have not. No, it is just as exciting what is waiting around the next turn." Nevertheless, they all summed up the experience of the transition with phrases such as "surprisingly good" and "better than expected," and they perceived that the students experienced the transition as positive. None of the parents thought it would have been better for their adolescent to start the secondary level at the same school, as students in Grade 1-10 schools do. As one parent said, "Actually, I think it can be healthy to change schools like that. Because it kind of – it makes a difference, right? You get to feel a little more grown up, and I think that is just fine." The parents also stated that they perceived their adolescent as a youth rather than a child.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The aim of the present study was to investigate parents' experiences of the transition to lower secondary school and their ability to support their adolescents during this transition.

It can be concluded from the study that many parents experienced something new and unknown with lower secondary school, and it is evident that the students' transition was experienced as a significant change for the parents. By using sociocultural theory and the ideas of Bakhtin (1986), I argue that parents, in experiencing their child's transition into lower secondary school, are subjected to socially and culturally conditioned practices that are unfamiliar to them. This confirms that parents need preparation (Coffey, 2013; Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008), since they need to develop their own meaning and understanding of the new context (Bakhtin, 1986). According to Bæck (2007), Norwegian parents receive less knowledge about school at the lower secondary level, but the findings show that this does not apply during the initial period of the transition. The parents receive clear and consistent information from the lower secondary school staff during the first meetings, which is important for them to feel prepared, calm their initial worries, and gain a positive impression of the new school. In contrast, the findings show that concerns arise when parents perceive the information as unclear or do not feel involved. This shows that they not only need clear information but also to feel involved. The parents'

initial concerns primarily relate to personal and social issues, which coincides with previous research (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Rice et al., 2015; Smyth, 2016). This concern strongly relates to the composition of new classes and indicates that parents have a special need to get information and feel involved concerning social issues.

As found by Smyth (2016), the parents in general speak positively about how the students settle in at the new school. This occurs as the parents feel reassured that the teachers are aware of the importance of knowing the adolescent and establishing a safe learning environment in relation to both peers and teachers. In contrast to previous findings (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008), this shows that the parents perceive the school to be as concerned about social issues as they are themselves. Arranging home-school meetings before and shortly after school begins is important for the parents to get a perception of this. The findings also show that the parents consider their own role to be important in relation to social and personal support. This comes about through talking to their adolescents about social and age-related issues, in their awareness of not transferring their own concerns to them, and in alleviating the pressure regarding marks. Several statements show that they both want and need to collaborate with the school on such issues, not only during the initial transfer period but also after the adolescents have settled into lower secondary school. As expressed by one parent, this can help the parents assist their adolescent with social and age-related issues. This confirms that parents want to stay in a collaborative relationship with the school (Bæck, 2007). The findings show, however, that despite experiencing a preparatory and informative contact with school during the initial period, the contact weakens when the students are established in the new context. In that way, the findings coincide with previous research showing that the contact with the school weakens compared with primary school (Bæck, 2007; Nordahl, 2015; O'Toole et al., 2014; Zeedyk et al., 2003). This seems to come as a surprise for many, since they lack knowledge about why the school provides less everyday information. This shows that the parents are not well-prepared for this specific change, and it may be the reason why getting less insight into the daily schooling seems to represent the biggest change for them. It furthermore implies that parents not only need to be prepared for the changes that affect their adolescent but also the changes that primarily apply to themselves.

The findings show that the experience of getting less insight and everyday information directly from the school is understood by several parents as an

unspoken signal that the parents should not pay as much attention. This “unspoken” aspect, however, makes the parents uncertain about what role the lower secondary school wants the parents to play. This uncertainty was still present for several parents more than half a year after school had begun. This relates to research by Bæck (2007) and (Nordahl, 2015) showing that many lower secondary school parents are uncertain about what the school expects of them. Furthermore, as also found by Bagnall et al. (2019) and Jindal-Snape and Foggie (2008), many parents experience a change in their role in relation to academic support, since they perceive that the school expects the adolescents to work more independently. The parents report that the academic level has increased, and it is more demanding and time-consuming for them to provide academic support. Nevertheless, they find that they possess the necessary academic skills to provide support at this level. However, several seem to be stuck in a limbo between their own need to have control over and support their student’s schoolwork, and conversely, the perception of the adolescent’s desire and the school’s expectation for more independent work. This indicates that many parents have not developed an understanding about what is going on in the lower secondary school and, further, how this affects their role as supportive parents. In reality, this leads to different practices concerning how much academic support is given.

The use of sociocultural theory can be useful to explore why this uncertainty and lack of understanding occurs among many parents. According to Bakhtin (1981), the parents’ understanding and meaning of the lower secondary school need to be developed in a dialogical and collaborative process that allows the parents to interact with the school. Because several parents in this study called for an opportunity to discuss and be in a closer dialogue with the school at some time after school had begun, this indicates that the parents first and foremost experience receiving one-way information and not being in a dialogue with school, which coincides with studies by Nordahl (2015). A dialogue presupposes an equitable relationship between the school and the parents (Bakhtin, 1981; Wertsch, 1998). But even though the Oak School staff invited the parents to contact them any time they had questions, the findings indicate that the parents perceived that the school had the main responsibility to maintain the contact. As stated by Wertsch (1998), this provides a reason to believe the parents experienced that the authority to control what information should be shared and when this should take place – and, thus, to define what role the parents should play – was owned by the school. This contributes to a disruption of the

dialogue and, consequently, the impairment of the parents' opportunity to learn to understand the new context and their own role in it.

The experience of lacking information and dialogue with the school made the parents more dependent on getting information from the student, something that worked well for several parents. Research shows, however, that many parents experience the students to be less communicative in lower secondary school, most likely because they seek independence at this age (Coffey, 2013). This coincides with the findings of the present study. The findings also indicate that when information from school is lacking, some parents become uncertain as to whether they can trust what their adolescent tells them, and they experience a loss of control. Statements like "I have nothing I can say; I do not have the knowledge" further show that when parents lack information, they get fewer clues that can help them start a conversation with the student. In other words, the lack of parental insight and understanding of lower secondary school may prevent the dialogue between adolescent and parent (Bakhtin, 1981; Wertsch, 1998). Consequently, since a collaborative dialogue must take place between parent and student for the parents to support their development of meaning and understanding of the new context (Bakhtin, 1981), the lack of parental insight and understanding limited several parents' ability to support their adolescents during the transition. Considering that the literature unambiguously shows that parents play an important role during the primary-secondary transition, during which time parental support is most effective when it is aligned with the school environment (McGee et al., 2004), this implies that schools must provide more information, as they cannot rely on the students to offer this information (Coffey, 2013). Further, the school must facilitate a closer dialogical collaboration with the parents characterised by an "internally persuasive discourse" (Bakhtin, 1981; Wertsch, 1998). If this takes place, not only does the parents' understanding of the new context develop, but the parents' ability to support their student is strengthened. The findings support that such a practice is especially important regarding first-time parents (Bagnall et al., 2019). As many parents' state that their adolescent has a different perception of the need for academic support at home than they do as parents, I also argue that the students' voice must be included in the dialogue regarding how the parents' role in lower secondary school is defined.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In sum, the parents primarily experienced the transition to lower secondary school as positive. Getting consistent and relevant information during the start-up and perceiving that the students were welcomed into a safe learning environment contributed to this experience. They further experienced that the adolescents grew more mature and independent because of the transition, but still needed social and academic support from the home to adjust to the new context. Nevertheless, many parents experienced their ability to act as limited, because after some time with the lower secondary school, they experienced missing information and a lack of understanding about what was going on at school. This provides a reason to believe that the school staff need to be aware that parents are subjected to somewhat unfamiliar practices when entering lower secondary school.

Using sociocultural theory, I conclude that parents need more than additional information to understand the new context. The school must increase its awareness concerning the importance of establishing a dialogical collaboration with the parents to help them better develop their understanding of the school (Bakhtin, 1981; Wertsch, 1998). Furthermore, the students must also be included in a dialogue concerning what role the parents should take regarding support. If this is established, the parents are better equipped to stay in a supportive dialogue with the student at home, in line with each adolescent's own needs.

The sample size, including parents with relatively homogeneous backgrounds, is a limitation of this study, and further studies including more parents and schools are needed. A second area of interest might be to initiate an R&D project which seeks to develop and strengthen the dialogue in the school-home relationship during the primary-to-secondary transition.

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