

Exploring the primary to secondary transition experiences of year seven students

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Abstract

The transition to secondary school from the accustomed environment of primary school was found to have several challenges being met by most of the grade seven students. The study aimed to explore the experiences of the students and sought to identify important issues and challenges they face. Using the descriptive phenomenological design, the researchers uncovered and described the experiences of 17 purposively sampled participants. Data from a semi-structured interview, observation, focus group discussions, and a journal was gathered during the first three weeks as Grade 7 students enter secondary school for the first time. The results from this study obtained 5 major themes: students experience different milieu of relationships; inferiority complex due to bullying and unruly classmates; school location, and other different barriers that are beyond student's control. Study shows that the experience could be enjoyable for some and could be problematic to others if not given enough understanding and support. It is recommended that school administrators look into the experiences of the students and provide programs for a smoother transition process.

Keywords: *Phenomenological research, primary to secondary transition, school programs, transition experiences*

Introduction

Moving from an accustomed elementary environment to a secondary school has been found to have several effects on how students adapt socially, their psychological well-being, and intellectual adjustments (van Rens, 2018). It was also identified as an important milestone in their academic journey, where these students face new teaching approaches, and different and new relationships both with their teachers and peers (Smyth, 2017). The move from the unfamiliar and less demanding environment of primary school to the

unfamiliar and more demanding surroundings of secondary school is complex and challenging (Strand, 2019).

School transition experiences

The transition of the students is accompanied by several experiences, students do not only have to deal with the larger building, the different teachers, and a larger number of peers but also, they have to adapt the ways of thinking and how a student should behave in a secondary school. These experiences can either be positive or negative in which will

affect students differently (van Rens, 2018). According to the study of Lord et al. (1994) as cited by Smyth (2017), one of the primary experiences of the students during the transition are a change in connection to teachers, as they move from one classroom teacher to having many subject teachers, and are less familiar to students personally in secondary schools. Because of new and different teachers for every subject, students in transition experience difficulties in coping with the new subjects as they experience new and various teaching and learning strategies. These are some of the several changes regarding their academic expectations which resulted in a new and more demanding learning culture. Strand (2019), asserted that the majority of the students found it difficult to organize their academic work, especially their assignments.

A vast majority of the students formed new friendships and are dubbed as positive experiences in terms of social issues (Strand, 2019). This factor contributes to the enjoyment of students in school and their academic motivation. Forming peer group relationships and friendships are a more important issue to students rather than in their academic experience (van Rens, 2019). Moreover, Strand (2019) emphasized that students experience such social difficulties that appear in the first few months after the beginning of the school year. Studies of Alspaugh et al., (1998) and Isakson and Jarvis (1999) as cited by Benner (2011), explained that the school transition resulted in a decrease in self-esteem, belongingness, and how the students cope with stressors. Hirsch & DuBois (1992) found that these challenges faced by the students are linked with changes in friendship, changes of teachers, and the parting of friends as they move to different schools.

Successful transition and support

The role of positive relationships to the successful transition of students and implications for transition programs has been considered by previous researches (Coffey, 2013; Strand, 2019; van Rens, 2019; Smyth, 2017). Schools may use several activities,

techniques, and resources to cater to students for a smooth transition from primary to secondary school (Ganeson, 2006). These programs would aid the needs of the students to reduce the emotional, social, intellectual, financial, and physical challenges experienced by students. Transition programs will help the students prepare for their learning and their academic journey. Thus, schools should give careful considerations to support and assist students in dealing with their transition to secondary level (Ashton, 2008; Elias, 2002 as cited by Coffey, 2013).

Previous studies emphasized that the experiences of the students in their transitions from primary to secondary school may differ due to differences between the cultures of the primary and secondary school, the school's category (small school, medium, large, and mega school), and the location (urban or rural) (Coffey, 2019; Ganeson, 2006). Also, recent studies on the transition experiences of the students focused primarily on the before and after experiences of the students, and it was done using quantitative methods (van Rens et al, 2019a and 2019b). Exploring the experiences of such needs an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. To date, few recent phenomenological studies have been conducted on the transition of the students from primary to secondary school (Strand, 2019; Smyth, 2017; Coffey, 2013). To address the gap, it was deemed pertinent to explore the lived experiences of the grade 7 students in their transition from primary to a rural secondary school. Thus, a qualitative approach was adopted to provide an in-depth account of students' experiences.

Practically, this will help increase the awareness and understanding at this important transition period of the Grade 7 students and provide plans that will help the students cope with the new environment, reduce anxiety, and lessen other negative transition experiences. This study will also help inform the parents about the transition experiences of the students. Parents could look into the results of the study on how they will help their children be prepared as they enter a new environment. The findings of the study will also help the school administrators

formulate several programs and activities that will cater to the smooth transition of the students.

Objectives of the study

This research aimed to describe and understand the experiences of the students as they undergo the transition into high school. It is to elucidate a description of their experiences of the phenomenon. It aims to identify primary issues and challenges experienced by the students while it is lived. To discover the meaning of high school transition, the experiences of these students were the focus of the study. The study aimed to present essential abstract meanings from the journals of students while they experience the phenomenon through the process of phenomenological analysis. Specifically, this study aimed to answer the research question,

1. What are the experiences of the grade 7 students in their transition from primary to secondary school?

Methodology

Research design

A qualitative approach to research employing descriptive phenomenological inquiry was used in the study. The phenomenological inquiry aims to describe the experiences of the human as they naturally happen in the course of their daily lives (Converse, 2012). In this study, the researcher documented the experiences of the participants who entered high school for the first time, through observations, semi-structured interviews, journals, and followed by an FGD applying bracketing allowing them to share their experiences without pre-supposing knowledge.

Research setting

The setting of the study was a rural high school in the Eastern Visayas region in the Philippines. It is approximately 9 kilometers away from the center of the town and it is situated along the highway going to the next town (24 kilometers). Some of the students need to catch public transport going to school and others are just walking from their home

going to school especially those less privileged who are living in mountains and remote areas.

Participants of the study

The participants of the study are those students who were experiencing their first year of high school. Purposeful sampling was used to gain insight and understanding of the phenomenon. One of the importance of using purposive sampling is in selecting the information-rich cases for the study (Barglowski, 2018). An information-rich case is a concept in which the researcher can learn the central importance of the issue and select those responses that will contribute much to the purpose of the research. Thus, participants who provided thick data were selected for the study. Others are more appropriate as participants of the study because of how the participant experienced the phenomenon being explored, and being more perceptive as they were able to share their experiences deliberately (Palinkas et al., 2015). Overall, the participants of the study were 17 grade seven students of a rural national high school in the province of Leyte enrolled in the school year 2019 – 2020.

Data collection

Three methods of data collection were employed in the study, a written response from the year seven students, a follow-up semi-structured interview, and classroom observations. The primary data were collected through a written response from the students, and this method has been used by several researchers successfully (Parse et al., 1985; Andre, 1985; & Kraynie, 1985). This particular data collection method was used in the study as it allows the students to write their experiences freely without inhibition. The participants were asked to write in a journal about their experiences of being a high school for the first time. The data gathering through the journal took place in the third week of the grade seven students in the school. This timeframe is important wherein the most transitional experiences of the students are most likely to occur. The writing process was facilitated by the researcher by providing the

writing materials for all of the Grade seven students.

After collecting the journals of the students, the researcher read the contents carefully and selected those journals with substantial responses through the concept of information-rich cases. Only 17 were included in the study as participants. A follow-up interview was conducted with the 17 participants, the interview was conducted to sustain and confirm the responses of the participants from their journals. It only took around 20 to 30 minutes for each of the participants, since most of them can't freely express their thoughts using the face-to-face interview. The classroom observations were intended to gain more insight into how these students behave inside the classroom. These are unstructured observations where the researcher recorded using notes on the details of the interactions between students and teachers to students, the behavior of the students, and actual dialogue as quotes. Several observational situations were made available in three weeks from the start of the class depending on the availability of the researcher and the teacher-adviser of the participants. The observations were also used to substantiate the responses written by the participants and from the interview conducted.

Ethical considerations

Since the participants of the study are grade seven students with the age ranging from 12 – 13, the researcher followed a systematic procedure of conducting the research. A communication letter was given to the parents of the students informing them that their children will be part of a study. Also, a letter was sent to the school principal asking permission to conduct such a study. Moreover, the participants signed a consent form and were informed that participating in the study is voluntary and they can withdraw their participation in the study anytime. They were also informed of the purpose of the study. The participants were told not to write their names in the writing journal to remain the anonymity of their experiences.

Data analysis

Colaizzi's method of data analysis was employed in the present study (Morrow, Rodriguez, and King, 2015). This method is composed of seven phases. The analysis entailed reading first the transcription from the responses of the participants several times to get a general sense of the whole statement. After, the researchers went back to the beginning by reading again the transcription and outlines those statements that were significant to the phenomenon focused on the study. The researchers next removed statements with no bearing and grouped those remaining statements and created clarity to the meaning units by relating them to each other. Once the statements or the meaning units have been outlined, the researchers then clustered the identified meanings into themes that were common across all accounts. These transformed meaning units were then organized to develop a consistent statement/structure of the transition experiences of the Grade seven students. Finally, to generate the general description of the experiences, the statements were again synthesized into a broader sense of the experience being studied making it a dense statement that captures just those essential to the structure of the phenomenon.

After the data analysis, the last step of Colaizzi's method was applied by returning to the subjects of the study by asking the subjects to check the general description if it was similar to their experiences. To facilitate the validation process, the researchers scheduled a focus group discussion where the participants were divided into two groups where the first group is composed of 8 students randomly selected and 9 students, respectively. The researchers read out all the general descriptions to verify if it was reflected by the participants' actual experiences. The participants agreed with the results of the analysis, thus serving as the final validators of the analysis process.

Research reflexivity

During the conduct of the study, the researchers bracketed themselves on the presumptions about transition, as a method

for phenomenological inquiry. It is important that suspending the knowledge on the phenomenon would warrant that the data collection and analysis process did not influence the procedure. This was attained by removing first his biases and theoretical frame of reference. Through the process of bracketing, it should be acknowledged that the data was interpreted by the researcher and therefore the last step of Colaizzi's method of data analysis is important or the member-checking to ensure the validity of the results.

Findings

The study came up with five major themes regarding the experiences of grade seven schoolchildren in their transition from primary to high school. The following major themes are derived from the subthemes and represented with sample significant statements (SS) taken from the 17 participants (P). The sample significant statements were translated into the English language.

Theme 1: Various milieu of relationships

Three subthemes were identified and grouped under the theme "various milieu of relationship", these are (a) adversities of the parting of ways from elementary friends, (b) positive inclination to teachers, and (c) getting acquainted by establishing bridges. These students experience different milieu of relationships, one of the transition experiences they encountered was parting from their elementary friends. Since their elementary friends enrolled in other secondary schools, they do not usually go together and it also caused them to misunderstand.

We do not usually go together with my friends in elementary anymore. [SS23-P6].

We have already some misunderstandings with my elementary friends [SS62-P7].

However, while a smaller number of students lost friends and parted ways from their elementary friends, the present study found that secondary school gave them more opportunities to have new friends.

The best thing I experienced on my first day is that I was excited about having friends. [SS34-P11]

The good thing that happened is that I gained a new group of friends. [SS25-P7]

I was so excited because I already have new friends where I can talk and share laughter. [SS20-P6].

Having a positive relationship between teachers was found to be one of the primary reasons the students stay and continue going to school as stated by previous studies (Veldman, van Tartwijk, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2013; O'Connor, 2008). Most of the participants in the study reported that they feel happy because their teachers are kind.

I like it because the teachers are kind. [SS47-P13]

..... I learned a lot because the teachers are kind even my classmates are noisy during discussions, and they keep on talking to each other. [SS2-P1]

Yes, I am already in high school and have lots of kind teachers. [SS7-P2]

The experiences of these students were mainly bounded by several adjustment issues that we're concerned about within these contexts of relationships within the new school.

Theme 2: Inferiority complex

Related to the issue of transitioning from primary to secondary is bullying. Bullying is a problem in a child's relationships with other children. This activity cannot be ignored, since the victims of the bully are at increased risk of poor health, wealth, and especially in social relationship outcomes (Wolke et al., 2013). Bullying is not a new issue in every school, bullying behavior in school is widespread in the Philippines and other countries as reported by recent studies. In fact, in this study, several students (P5, P10, P12, P16) have reported that they experienced bullying from their classmates.

They bully me. [SS33-P10]

It is difficult for me to adjust to the new school because I experience bullying. [SS20-P5]

..... and most of all, my classmates keep on bullying me. I cannot concentrate on my lessons. [SS44-P12]

..... my classmates keep on teasing me and making unnecessary things that irritate me. [SS59-P16]

Participants both shared that for them to adapt to the new environment, they need to deal with their disrespectful and unruly classmates. This is based on the experiences of P13, P14, and P16.

Our teachers are always calling our attention and reprimanding us because of my unruly classmates, and it made my transition difficult. [SS49-P13]

My problem is my folly classmates. They are misbehaving inside the classroom. They keep on running and making unnecessary noise. [SS52-P14]

I have to tell my classmates to behave, but they are hard-headed and unruly. [SS58-P16]

Based on the journal of participant 16, they are frequently reprimanding their classmate's naughtiness as it caused them disruptions.

I keep on telling my classmates to behave inside the classroom especially if the teachers are there. They are misbehaving inside the classroom that it already caused disruption and it is disturbing. [SS60-P16]

Students also expressed that they experienced first-day-jitters because of moving to a bigger school. The present study found out that students appeared to be worried about making new friends and reported that they are intimidated by older students as they are new in the school. They also said that they are nervous and shy on their first day of the class.

It was the first day of school, I was shy because I was new here and there are lots of students. [SS63-P17]

I was nervous on the first day of the class because I don't have friends yet. [SS64-P11]

Theme 3: Academic struggles

Three subthemes were found to be recurring in the journal of the participants, (a) drowning in content, (b) subject difficulty, and (c) overwhelming requirements leading to despair. The students revealed that they have difficulties adapting from elementary to high school since they have to memorize long contents of the lesson and they have to study more than one subject and lesson as they compare from their elementary years.

I need to study lots of lessons since I started high school. [SS42-P12]

It is difficult for me to cope with lessons because there are already many lessons that need to memorize. [SS65-P7]

From the responses and journals of the students, the majority said that they have difficulties in the subjects since lessons are far way different from primary school.

High school is already different compared to elementary because the subjects in high school are already difficult. [SS54-P15]

It is difficult for me sometimes, because I have difficulties coping with the lessons and the requirements given by the teachers. [SS38-P11]

Being in high school is difficult because I can't understand the lessons anymore. [SS61-P17]

These students also shared difficulties as they have to cope with overwhelming requirements that lead them to hopelessness. This was common in the responses of the students.

..... plenty of assignments, they gave us four assignments per day. [SS18-P4]

I have difficulties doing my assignments especially those that need to search on the internet. Since I can't able to complete my homework at home, I need to copy the answers of my classmates in the morning before the class will start because I am living in a mountain, we

don't have access to cellular signals. [SS56-P15]

It is difficult because of plenty of projects, tests, and group activities. [SS37-P11]

.... plenty of projects, that is why I cannot submit them on time. [SS11-P3]

Theme 4: School location and vicinity

Two subthemes emerged from the responses of the students, (a) inconvenience of traveling to school, and (b) favorable school surroundings. These students have to adapt to the new location of the school. Since the school is far from their homes compared to their elementary, they need to ride in public transport going to their new school. However, only a few public modes of transport pass by from their houses, which caused them to be late for the class. According to participant 1:

Sometimes it caused me of coming late for school because of the limited public transport that passes by. [SS3-P1]

Participants 4 and 16 shared that it is already different from their elementary because sometimes they have difficulties with finances and caused them to make absences in school since they need to ride in public transport going to school.

It is already different in high school compared to when I was still in elementary. I just have to walk from home going to school, but now, I need to ride public transport because our house is already far from the school. We have financial difficulties, and if we don't have money for the fare, I will just be absent from school. [SS17-P4]

I always make some absences, what can we do? Because our house is too far from the school. My family sometimes cannot afford my fare going to school. Sometimes I will just walk and it will take me more than an hour to arrive. [SS66-P16]

Though some of the students feel an inconvenience going to school, they still enjoy going to school because of the favorable school surroundings. Participant 4 said that the school has a big place where they can play,

the classroom is way bigger, and the flagpole is nice.

I'm used to small classrooms, small chairs in my elementary, but here, the classrooms are big, the plaza is big and the blackboard as well. [SS16-P4]

Theme 5: Barriers seemingly beyond students' control

Students shared the challenges they encounter in their academics as they are new to the environment. They experienced barriers that are beyond their control, two themes were developed, (a) scarcity of internet resources, and (b) financial challenges. Some of the participants shared common problems encountered in their academic journey. Teachers give assignments where students need to search for the information needed on the internet. Another student said that he cannot answer his homework since they do not have access to cellular signals for their mobile phones.

I can't study for my lessons at home because it needs to search on the internet. I don't have access to the internet. [SS66-P9]

I cannot answer my home works because we don't have access to the internet at home. [SS26-P7]

The sad reality is that some of the students need to copy answers from their classmates since they can't access the internet at home to search for answers. Participant 15 opt to copy the work of her classmates during the morning before the class starts.

Since we don't have access to the internet at home because we don't have access also to cellular signals, I will copy the work of my classmates when we arrive at school in the morning. [SS67-P15]

Part of their transition, is to comply with the requirements given by their teachers that need some financial undertakings and it is a challenge to these students as shared by participant 11:

.... It is difficult also when the teacher will ask us to prepare a bond paper or other materials for the activity because I don't have that, I don't have money to buy those school materials, my family can't afford that, we have financial difficulties. [SS33-P11]

I can't do anything but cry because I can't afford to buy the material for my project. [SS68-P13]

Discussion

The present study explored the experiences of the grade seven students in their transition from the primary grade to secondary school to elucidate descriptive experiences of the phenomenon and identify important issues and challenges encountered. The grade 7 students experience different milieu of relationships, from parting with elementary friends to meeting new friends. An essential part of growing up as a child is making friends and an important part of their emotional and social development. Green (1997) found that majority of the students who are entering a new school are concerned about making new friends and maintaining them. Students in Green's (1997) study asserted that friendship provides the security of walking into different rooms within the school, going to the canteen, and someone with whom they can sit and talk. Theobald (1998) as cited by Ganeson (2006) stressed that the best thing about being in a high school for the first time was having new friends and socializing with them. According to Hinebauch (2002) from the study of Ganeson (2006) that peer acceptance is no longer unconditional and students should work hard at having and maintaining friendship and acceptance among peers. Students feel anxious and this adds up to the stress of being in a new environment.

However, while a smaller number of the students lost friends and parted ways from their elementary friends, the current study found that going into high school with a new environment provided many opportunities for them to make and form new friendships. The study of Letrello and Miles (2003) noted that students found it easy to make friends in their high school. This was evident in the experiences of P11, P7, and P6. As grade 7

students, they are grateful and excited about meeting new friends as they move to a new environment.

Positive relationships of teachers to students are considered to be one of the prime reasons these new students are smoothly adapting to their new environment, this was also supported by previous studies (O'Connor, 2008; Veldman et al., 2013). Having a good relationship and positive inclinations to teachers will make them stay and continue going to school. Teachers should be cheerful and should be creative in dealing with their students (Salceda, 2020). Most of the participants in the study reported that they feel happy because their teachers are kind. The teachers play an important role in fostering a new relationship between students and even students and teachers. We should not underestimate it as it will create a safe and supportive learning environment (Prosser, 2008; Tobbell, 2003; Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994). For the new grade 7 students, they must adjust to no longer being the seniors in their school to young freshmen in high school. They may also feel as being treated by the teacher as the younger and less independent.

One of the issues students shared in their transition was bullying it as evidenced in the experiences of P10, P 5, P12, and P16. Despite the chance for a discussion on the issue, either from the interview or in their journal, it was not raised as their main concern by the students in this study. Although bullying is not a new phenomenon for students who are new to an environment, we should still consider this as an issue where bullying is still evident. According to the study of Gabiana (2017), bullying needs special attention, and schools need to have action from trained personnel because the majority of the teachers have limited skills in handling this psychological issue. As reported by previous studies bullied students may affect their performance in school and may be the cause of not coming to school regularly to avoid being bullied (Gabiana, 2017; Celeste, 2019; Kim, 2019).

The majority of the students find that they are not prepared to meet the academic

demands of secondary school. The content of the lessons overwhelmed them and is more difficult and the volume of work given to them is already exceeding their expectations compared to what they experienced in their primary school. The changes in the school context do not only include having new friends and dealing with unruly classmates, but also, they have to deal with multiple teachers who have different expectations to students and diverse delivery of the lessons and academic requirements as raised by the majority of the participants (P2, P8, P9, P12, P13, P14, P17). Vines (2000) encourages schools to have fewer teachers for this group of students as this will reduce the stress of adjusting from one main teacher in their primary years. Currently, these students are experiencing up to five teachers for each subject and these teachers have their teaching styles and give separate requirements to the students. Chadbourne (2001) also suggested that schools can give fewer teachers first during the transition period to help students familiarize and it could gradually increase as time goes by to the usual number of teachers that are required. Interestingly, few students (P4, P11) shared that they enjoyed having a variety of teachers rather than having only one in their primary school.

Concerning the enjoyment that the students experience is the favorable school surroundings as not seen in previous studies (Deieso, 2019; van Rens, 2019a; van Rens, 2019b; Jindal-Snape, 2019; West, 2010; Ganeson, 2006; Pareira, 2005). In contrast to the claims of Pareira (2005), Ganeson (2006), van Rens (2019), and Deieso (2019) that most of the students in the transition of primary to secondary school are worried and having difficulties adjusting to a larger school population, school's location, the noisiness of the environment, bigger classrooms and surroundings. The students in this study shared that they enjoy the new surroundings, bigger classrooms, larger school population, and the school's landscapes. However, despite all these, some of the students voiced their concern because they are traveling from a distant location, some are by public transportation and by walking to access their

new secondary school. As shared by the students in the current study, most of them do not have enough experience in using public transport. In addition to their burden is that the public transport of this area does not operate regularly so students need to wait for few more minutes before another transport pass by, this sometimes caused them on the issue of punctuality.

The current education system is promoting the learning concept of independent learning, many teachers are trying to instill this learning concept to their students to allow them to pursue lifelong learning (Sam et al., 2012). Teachers gave homework where students need to search for information on the internet, however, some of the students do not have access to the internet and resulting in the inability to complete the homework, a concern voiced out by students (P7, P9, and P15). This issue leads to the copying of homework from their classmates as revealed by participant 15. This issue needs to be addressed as it contributes to the academic performance of the student and it is vital for education development (Morilla et al., 2020). Most of the students use the internet for academic purposes (Treceñe & Abides, 2020).

Therefore, students need support in their transition period, especially children having social and learning difficulties and children from disadvantaged economic backgrounds, as the study of van Rens (2019) confirmed that these students are found to be at risk of poor transition. As discovered in the current study, students shared that they have difficulties in coping and learning the lessons, financial difficulties have also been reported as a contributory factor. Teachers can help these students to have a smooth transition by giving them effective support and not rushing them as they need time to adjust to their new environment. The teacher's role is to support students and help them figure out the needs of the students (Treceñe, 2019).

Conclusion, recommendation, limitations, and future works

The main objective of the study was to explore the experiences of grade 7 students as

they undergo the transition into high school. It aimed to identify important issues and challenges experienced by the students while it is lived. It gives understanding and awareness on this important transition period for these students and provide plans that will help the students cope with the new environment.

In this study, it is evident from the findings that year 7 students experienced a transition in various ways. Study shows that the experience could be enjoyable for some and could be problematic to others if not given enough understanding and support. The sense of belonging and academic struggles showed to be the most experienced by the students. Support can also be provided like school activities and programs designed to minimize students' academic challenges and improve students' feel of belongingness and decrease the anxiety of entering a new setting. Therefore, the whole school community such as peers, teachers, administrators, and parents play a vital role in making the high school transition a smooth transitional experience for new high school students.

The findings of this study could be specific to its context, the transferability of the findings could be limited to its geographical location as this study was conducted in a rural high school. The issues may not be significantly similar to another context. Although, the students in the current study voiced out various issues and concerns, future research could still examine issues of transitioning pertinent to students from a rural primary school to an urban national high school.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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