

Rethinking early school transitions as social transactions

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to explore the transitions of two individuals within a twinship from Grade R through to Grade 2, and to offer an in-depth description of their transition experiences and perspectives. The transitions were investigated with a focus on variables such as stress, stressors, emotions, coping and life skills. The inquiry was conducted as an interpretive case study. The participants were two monozygotic boys within a twinship, their mother and their Grade R, Grade 1 and Grade 2 teachers. The findings suggest that the transition was predominantly uncomplicated from Grade R through to Grade 2, and that the transition to Grade 2 was more stressful than that to Grade 1. The findings also indicate that although the life skills taught by the researchers helped the boys to cope with negative stressors, their personal support structures were probably the most important factors in easing their transitions from Grade R through to Grade 2. The life skills learned mostly helped the two children to deal effectively with bullies, to contract and maintain satisfying friendships, and to control their personal emotions.

Keywords: Transition, children in a twinship, foundation phase education, stress, adapting, life skills, executive functions

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Introduction

Early school transitions form an integral part of a child's academic adaptation and ultimately school success. These transitions lay the foundation for effective transitions later in life. Dockett and Perry (2011) suggest numerous reasons why it is worthwhile to describe and examine the perspectives and impressions of children at the time when they start school. Firstly, these authors argue, children are the experts on their own lives and they live out their childhood experiences in the present. Secondly, the experiences of children are different from those of adults, and if we form a clear understanding of their experiences, we may be able to respond to what is important to them. Furthermore, it is by listening to children with care, attention and respect that we are able to make their personal interests and concerns a reality. Hirst, Jervis, Visagie, Sojo and Cavanagh (2001) concluded in a study on transitions that many transition support programs focus mainly on the orientation of the child, as well as on the social and emotional factors that are influential in a child's successful transition to and adjustment in school.

Studies in this field focus mainly on a single transition, such as that from Grade R to Grade 1, but a more comprehensive and useful conceptualisation of what is involved in transition can be obtained by working with a multi-step process, such as the transition from Grade R (the year before formal schooling, also known as the kindergarten year in many countries) to Grade 2. In South Africa there seems to be a paucity of studies that focus specifically on individuals within a township. In this study we wanted to understand how the two children perceived themselves, firstly as individuals, and secondly, as individuals in a township during the transitions at school.

Rosemary, Theroux, Josephine and Tingley (1978) observed that individuals within a township continue to grow in independence during their preschool years, something that is common to most children. They also noted that individual preferences with regard to clothing, toys and the need to have more contact with the outside world become more prominent in the lives of these children. Klein (2003) also observed that other children in preschool may relate to the individuals within a township as part of that township, while some may relate to either of them as individuals. According to Rosemary et al (1978), the central challenge of individuals in townships is one of identity formation. These characteristics and the similarities and differences they manifest within a township were examined from the points of view of the two children and the other participants in the study, namely their mother and their Grade R, Grade 1 and Grade 2 teachers. We were mainly concerned with the feelings, thoughts and understanding of the children as they made these transitions, based on their own utterances as well as the observations of close caregivers.

Moos and Schaefer's (1993) coping process framework was used as general conceptual framework for the study, because it emphasises two important factors appropriate to this study. Firstly, it emphasises that enduring both personal as well as more transient situational factors shapes the coping efforts of individuals (Zeidner & Endler 1996). The participants' coping methods, support, and acquired life

skills, together with their transitions to primary school and their ambient stressors at that time, affected and shaped their coping processes. Secondly, this particular framework emphasises the internal mediating role of cognitive appraisal and coping responses in the stress process. It also sets out pathways in the framework which indicate that it is possible for reciprocal feedback to occur at every stage. In the context of this study, the participants were thus able to look back and reflect on the coping process, on what they had learned, on which resources were helpful, and on what they intended to do in future (ibid).

Background: Entry into the first years of schooling

“By preparing your child for school, which involves teaching him the skills that will help him adapt to his new environment [...] you will make these years as stress-free as possible.”

(Berne 2003:2)

While many children experience school as a positive, affirming and challenging place, there are numerous children who do not. Some children, in fact, associate their school years with feelings of unhappiness which vary in intensity from one child to another.

Fabian (2000) is of the opinion that children experience the first year of school as radically different from what they had been accustomed to in their preschool and home environment. The dislocation engendered by such differences may well affect the way in which children adjust to school, and it also suggests to us that the extent of a child’s emotional and social well-being may be an accurate predictor of just how well or badly they may settle into school.

According to Rooth (2000), it is of the utmost importance that primary school children acquire certain life skills. During the primary school years, the life skills that children learn may enable them to ameliorate the impact of the various social-emotional stressors that they encounter in their environment. Life skills may also have benefits for children later in life. We agree with Rooth regarding the importance of furnishing primary school children with a variety of basic life skills that can support their executive functioning. We believe that it is essential not to underestimate the importance of life skills in the lives of preschool children in particular, as life skills form part of a child’s executive functions. These functions regulate behaviour in many ways, through working memory and the processing of information (Fitzpatrick 2014). The way in which the world and its information are perceived and experienced help children to build and use tools for meeting the challenges of everyday life. Solid everyday skills and self-regulation in the early years are necessary precursors to a healthy lifestyle and the management of stress. Studies by Gillbert and Orlick (2002) have also demonstrated that elementary school (or foundation phase) children have the ability to learn certain stress control strategies, which are, in effect, self-regulatory skills. We agree with Gillbert and Orlick that elementary school children have the ability to learn specific stress control strategies, but we also believe that preschool children, who are younger than elementary school children, are able to learn certain control strategies.

The literature study which we undertook for the purpose of this research focused particularly on those factors that influence the transition to school and school readiness. In addition to this, we focused on factors that contribute to school success. In our study of the literature regarding factors that influence the transition to school, we paid particular attention to authors who report on stressors that children experience in their earliest school years (Prozesky 2005); the life skills that they can use as coping mechanisms when dealing with transition-related stressors; and coping itself as a more general theme (Hobfoll 1998).

Our purpose in this study was not to establish whether or not life skills would reduce the levels of stress experienced by Grade 1 and Grade 2 learners. The focus of our investigation was rather on the nature of the overall transition of children from Grade R through to Grade 2 with a view to understanding and describing (and to some extent also explore) aspects of the transition. We therefore included variables such as stress, stressors, emotions, coping and life skills for consideration, because they all contributed significantly to the main theme of this study. The main research question of the study was: ‘How do individuals within a twinship experience the transitions from Grade R to Grade 2?’

Research methods and participants

A case study design was used for this study. Leedy and Ormrod (2001:149) define a case study as the “in-depth study of a particular individual, programme or event for a defined period of time”. According to Yin (2014), a case study investigates a phenomenon in the real world context. He states that a case study is a good method to employ in situations where the research questions are ‘how’ or ‘why’ and the researcher has little or no control over behavioural events. According to Stake (2006), the qualitative case study approach was developed to study the experience of real cases operating in real situations. He views the case study as a dynamic process, where the case researcher needs to generate a picture of the case and then produce a portrayal of the case for others to see.

For this study we conveniently sampled and selected two preschool children as participants and observed them for a period of three years during which they were transitioning from preschool through to Grade 2. The participants were five years old at the time of commencement of the study. They lived with both their married parents and two younger siblings. We studied the participants in their everyday world, their home environment and their school environment by means of informal and formal observations and journals. We also gathered data about their early years, prior to school. We described the physical settings in which the research was done (their home and school environments) in detail. We took into account the participants’ economic and social background, as well as the differences and similarities in their personalities. By focusing on two individuals we sought in-depth understanding of their transition experiences, rather than obtaining surface level information from a larger group of children. We wanted to be able to capture nuances and individual intricacies.

Data collection tools and sources

Data collection techniques included participant observation, the collection of documents, semi-structured interviews, and age-appropriate activities with the individuals involved. In addition to this, we used field notes, transcriptions and audio-visual material in the form of photographs as additional sources of data.

The research sessions included activities such as making pictures of clay, family drawings, role play and card making to illustrate the participants' experiences. Worksheets relating, for instance, to friendship and the effective handling of bullies were also included in the sessions. A variety of media, such as clay, storybooks, bean bags, coloured paper, pens, ice cream sticks, glue, clay and crayons, were used to assist with the various themes covered during this period. The themes of the sessions included, for example, feeling proud; 'who am I?'; and 'what are the differences and similarities between Grade R and Grade 1?' During the period of Grade 1 to Grade 2, activities included, for example, board games, the making of cards to illustrate experiences, and playing with animal and lifelike toys.¹

During the three-year period of the study, the mother and teachers were also interviewed by using semi-structured interviews. We used these interviews to compose a comprehensive picture of the participants' experiences, interests and perceptions. The main reason for spending extensive time with the participants' mother, teachers and at their schools was that it allowed us to obtain an integrated view of the children and their transitions.

Eleven sessions were conducted at home and at school during the Grade R year. A total of thirteen sessions were conducted during the Grade 1 year, and nine sessions during the Grade 2 year. The main purpose of the sessions during the Grade R year was to train the children in life skills and to find out what their expectations were for Grade 1.

Data management

For the purposes of data analysis, the analytic activities of *familiarisation* and *immersion* were used (Terre Blanche & Durrheim 1999:141). This meant in effect that we had to immerse ourselves in the material as thoroughly as possible by intensively and repeatedly reviewing all the texts. The data collected was used in conjunction with field notes, photographs and transcripts to immerse the researchers continuously in the sense, meanings and atmosphere of the worlds in which the participants lived, thus to familiarise ourselves with everything that was important to the participants. By reading the transcribed data and examining the photographs numerous times, we were able to use the data and artefacts to brainstorm and thus expand upon our sense of the significance of everything that had taken place (ibid).

During the sessions with the participants, and after every session, we reflected on the data and reviewed it from every possible angle (Mertens 2009). *Coding* was another key strategy that we used in the study. In the first approach to the particular selection of data, we made use of initial coding, which allowed us to code individual

words, lines and incidents. Focused coding was used at a later stage. We used the technique of *elaboration* in order to explore all the identified themes more intimately.

Finally, we made use of the techniques *interpretation* and *checking* to provide a written explanation of our experiences of the processes studied. During the final stage of analysis, we had to check that no parts of the process had been either ignored or over-investigated.

Findings

The conclusions and findings were based on observations, field notes and interviews with all the principal participants. Each interview was described in detail. This enabled the researchers to incorporate characteristics and descriptions that might have been overlooked if only field notes and personal observations had been used. Data analysis (as mentioned before) was used to identify three prominent themes. The first theme was that there were only a few observable complications for the children. The other two themes identified and reflected the increased challenges of the transition to Grade 2 and the children's support structures.

Theme 1:

The transitions of the children from Grade R through to Grade 2 were largely uncomplicated.

We identified various factors during the data analysis process that seemed to indicate the reasons why the children were able to have largely uncomplicated transitions from Grade R through to Grade 2. These factors included their positive attitudes and behaviour, their self-confidence and the pleasure they obtained from new experiences, the support they received from one another as co-children, their individual and mutual friendships, the support, understanding and encouragement of their Grade R, Grade 1 and Grade 2 teachers, the learned life skills that we taught them during our sessions, their largely accurate expectations about Grade 1 and Grade 2 before they arrived there, the ways in which they were able to complete their homework and manage their academic work, and the methods that we taught them for coping with bullies and disobedient children. Examples of the children's comments were:

Grade 1 is so nice! (Participant 1)

We had a good day. We played and worked. (Participant 2)

[...] is so relaxed at school. (Grade 1 teacher)

Theme 2:

The transition of the children to Grade 2 was, to some extent, more stressful than their transition to Grade 1. They nevertheless still experienced Grade 2 as pleasurable.

The two tables that follow summarise the experiences of the children as they were compelled to deal with both the positive and negative stressors – as reported by the teachers participating in the study – that they encountered during their transitions from Grade R through to Grade 2.²

Table 1: Positive (+) stressors experienced by the participants

Grade R	Grade 1	Grade 2
Friends	Homework	Their teacher and friends
Playing	Their teacher	Work (school work)
Their teacher	Friends	Completing homework in class
Gaining knowledge	Helping others	Writing in cursive
Feeling contented at school	Sport	Separate classes
Their expectations of Grade 1	Prefects	Sport
Their excitement regarding Grade 1	Playing	Playing during break
	Gaining new knowledge	Achievements
	The tuck shop	
	Their co-individual within a township	
	Supporting parents	
	Life skills	

Table 2: Negative (-) stressors experienced by the participants

Grade R	Grade 1	Grade 2
Bullies	Disobedient children	Demanding school work
Friends harming them	Prefects	Bathroom rules
Time	Making friends	Bullies
School work	Bullies	Excessive homework
	Social skills	Grade 3s
	Threats in Grade R	Disobedient children
	Not being able to read and write immediately	Being teased
	School work	A new teacher
		Friends being separated in classrooms
		People who are upset

In order to describe the vivid realities of the lived experiences of the children and to enrich the description of the Grade 2 environment enjoyed by the participants, we

organised all the information according to categories. These categories included their physical characteristics during that year, their friends, their work and academics, their teachers, and their overall attitudes to what they experienced.

Our data shows that dominant negative stressors were experienced by the children during their Grade 2 year (Table 2). This enabled us to infer that their Grade 2 year had been more stressful than their Grade 1 and Grade R years. We make this inference with some caution, because a mere increase in the number of stressors encountered by an individual does not necessarily indicate an increased amount of stress experienced by that individual during the same time period. However, after an in-depth examination and analysis of the available data, we were able to conclude that these children had indeed experienced a greater amount of stress in Grade 2 than they had in either Grade 1 or Grade R.

Given that in comparison to the negative stressors of their Grade 1 year, the participants experienced the highest amount of negative stress in their Grade 2 year, we were interested to note that they also indicated that they enjoyed the greatest amount of positive stress during their Grade 1 year (refer to Table 1 and Table 2). With regard to their Grade 1 year, we had identified twelve positive stressors in comparison to the eight positive stressors that we were able to identify during their Grade 2 year. The only additional positive stressor that was present in their Grade 2 year and that we could not identify as a stressor in their Grade 1 year was the fact that the children were placed in separate classrooms in Grade 2. The positive stressors that were present in their Grade 1 year, but were not identified during their Grade 2 year, included the establishment of new friendships, the ability to be of assistance to others, the proximity of helpful and kindly prefects, the novel experience of being able to purchase food from the tuck shop, their co-individual within a twinship, the support of loving and nurturing parents, and the life skills they learned.

The fact that the children experienced the transition from Grade 1 to Grade 2 as more stressful than the transition from Grade R to Grade 1 was mainly due to the amount of homework that they were given in their Grade 2 classes. This finding was somewhat unexpected to us. At the commencement of the study, we had read extensive literature regarding the transition from preschool to primary school, yet it had never occurred to us that the stress evoked by the transition from Grade 1 to Grade 2 might well be greater than the stress engendered by the transition from Grade R to Grade 1. We assumed that because parents, teachers and schools often focus strongly on the difficulties inherent in the transition from preschool to Grade 1, the concerns of the Grade 1 children entering primary school for the first time would be addressed and that they would probably receive substantial attention, assistance and care. The assumption was that when they entered Grade 2, they would be responsible, mature and self-efficient. Our findings in this study indicate that these assumptions may need to be revisited and revised.

Within the context of the overall findings of this study it would therefore be necessary to refrain from concluding that the total amount of negative stress experienced by the children translated into a negative experience of Grade 2 as a

whole. The strain caused by what seems to be an excessive workload for children so young should be balanced against the large number of positive experiences and the significant amount of satisfaction they both enjoyed during that grade. Few experiences in life are either wholly positive or wholly negative, and the overall experience of Grade 2 was coloured by the number of predominantly positive experiences that they enjoyed during that year.

It is our opinion that researchers should proceed with caution in terms of how they report positive and negative stressors in research studies. In the case of our study, an elimination or mitigation of the impact of the negative stressors would probably have resulted in a finding that the transitions were more pleasurable and less stressful than they actually were. Conversely, an emphasis on the negative stressors reduces the overall effect of indicating that although learners may experience difficulties in a particular year, they may nevertheless make an effective transition through the grades if they are equipped to deal constructively and consciously with negative stressors before and during their transitions from Grade R through to Grade 2. This view is justified by our conclusion that even though the children experienced a greater number of negative stressors during Grade 2, they still considered their Grade 2 experiences as pleasurable, interesting and challenging. Examples of the children's comments were:

Everything is the same in Grade 2 as in Grade 1 except for the workload. We have much more work. (Participant 1)

I close my eyes and see Grade 2 in front of me, it looks nice. (Participant 2)

I don't like the workload in Grade 2, but it is good for us. (Participant 2)

Theme 3:

Although their learned life skills may have eased their transitions from Grade R through to Grade 2, the children's overall support structures were probably the most important reason why the transitions were largely uncomplicated.

To illustrate the conclusions we reached with regard to this theme, we identified four features. These features were the life skills that we taught the participants in anticipation of their transitions, the support they received from their parents in their home environment, the support provided by their school(s), and various factors already present in their personalities which made effective transitions more probable. Examples of the above-mentioned were:

You taught us that we are not allowed to bully a person who bullied us. (Participant 1)

Both my husband and I support one another when it comes to discipline [...] (Mother)

I feel proud to wear my glasses. (Participant 1)

Discussion

Theme 1

The transition of the children from Grade R through to Grade 2 was largely uncomplicated.

When we consider the overall import of the research, it seems to us that the transitions made by the children from Grade R through to Grade 2 were largely uncomplicated. Possible reasons for this included their positive attitudes and behaviour; their self-confidence and pleasurable new experiences; their position as co-children; the friendships they managed to establish; their Grade R, Grade 1 and Grade 2 teachers; learned life skills; their expectations of Grade 1 and Grade 2; their homework and academics; and their success at dealing with bullies and disobedient children.³

White and Sharpe (2007) indicated in their research that most of the participating children in their study also entertained realistic notions and expectations regarding the possible changes that might occur during the transition from Grade R to Grade 1. They also identified the difficulties that children experience with mastering the challenges presented by the more difficult work encountered in Grade 1.

Hirst et al (2011) came to the conclusion that children who were engaged in a smooth and uncomplicated transition displayed the following forms of behaviour and states of mind: feelings of security; relaxed behaviour within the new school environment; enjoyment of the school environment (finding school pleasurable); mastery of academic and social skills; an eagerness to participate in school activities; supportive social relationships with peers and teachers; enthusiastic feelings towards their school; and an eagerness to acquire new knowledge and skills.

The accumulated data from this study show that the participants manifested all of these forms of behaviour and states of mind during their transitions between the grades that were covered within the scope of this study. Hirst et al (2011) use the term 'smooth' to describe the transitions of the children in their sample, but it is our opinion that the terms 'uncomplicated' and 'relatively uncomplicated' represent more precisely the kinds of transitions that the children were able to make between their grades. During their transitions from Grade R through to Grade 2, the children displayed the following forms of behaviour, states of mind, attitudes, skills and predispositions, all of which probably contributed to their relatively uncomplicated transitions:

- An enjoyment of their school environment and activities and the people whom they encountered during the transitions that were investigated in this study.
- Good behaviour on the part of the children (behaviour that was appropriate to their status as individuals and learners in the school and their family context).
- Confidence in their own abilities and in the way in which they were able to apply appropriate coping skills to handle challenging events inside school boundaries, such as the possible physical and emotional pain that bullies tried to inflict upon them (their personal success in this area enabled them to let go of the feelings of overwhelming fear, anxiety and uncertainty that had been engendered by bullies).

- The mutual support the children showed one another and the seemingly significant degree of safety and protection that the bond of the twinship conferred on them both, which further increased their confidence.
- The friendly, supportive, kind and practical attitudes displayed by all their teachers in Grade R through to Grade 2, as well as the seemingly secure and trusting relationships that the children were able to form with their teachers.
- Enhanced friendship skills, skills of emotional control, and problem-solving skills (with particular reference to their ability to cope with bullies in the school environment).
- Feelings of confidence and pride as a result of their academic accomplishments and the opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills during their transitions from Grade R through to Grade 2.
- The largely accurate expectations and predictions on the part of the children in Grade R and Grade 1 about what they could expect to happen in Grade 1 and Grade 2, respectively.

Our general conclusion by the end of this study was that the following factors played a significant role in enabling the largely uncomplicated transition that the children made from Grade R through to Grade 2:

- The positive and helpful attitudes of the children, as well as their naturally cooperative, kind and agreeable behaviour both at home and at school.
- Their self-esteem and self-confidence, and their ability to take pleasure in assimilating new experiences.
- The supportive presence of their co-individual within a twinship, initially in the same class, and later in the same school.
- Their ability to form and maintain successful and healthy friendships.
- The emotional, wise and practical support provided by their Grade R, Grade 1 and Grade 2 teachers.
- The usefulness in practice of the life skills they learned and practised.
- Their ability to accurately predict, before their arrival in those classes, the conditions and environments that they would encounter in Grade 1 and Grade 2.
- Their conscientiousness in completing their homework and in applying themselves to their academic studies.
- Their ability to cope with the challenges presented by bullies and disobedient children without knee-jerk, unconscious reactions.

All of these factors probably enabled the children to make largely uncomplicated transitions from Grade R through to Grade 2.

Theme 2:

The transition of the children to Grade 2 was, to some extent, more stressful than their transition to Grade 1. They nevertheless still experienced Grade 2 as pleasurable.

Even though the transition of the children to Grade 2 was more stressful than their transition to Grade 1 had been, and although this was one of the most important findings in this study, we were unable to locate any academic research on this theme that confirmed our specific findings in this regard.

Interestingly, the children's extramural schedule was more demanding in Grade 1 than in Grade 2. Even though they enjoyed the challenges presented by their school work and their recreational activities, both of them were placed under a certain degree of stress by the amount of homework that they were given in Grade 2. Their mother explained that the increase in the amount of homework they were given in Grade 2, together with a time-consuming extramural schedule, frequently exhausted the participants, resulting in emotional outbursts and crying.

The data from this study shows that there were more positive stressors in Grade R and Grade 1, while the number of negative stressors increased significantly in the Grade 2 year. In spite of this, as we have already observed above, the children found their Grade 2 experiences pleasurable – regardless of the fact that Grade 2 appeared to be the most stressful of the three years covered by this study, they still maintained that it was a pleasurable and exciting year.

A study undertaken by August and Akos (2009) identifies two critical transition periods for school-going children: the transition from preschool to Grade 1, and the transition from Grade 2 to Grade 3. They are of the opinion that the transition from Grade 2 to Grade 3 encompasses the first dramatic academic and developmental shift in primary school because of the standardized tests that children must take in that year and the more demanding academic expectations, referring to Grade 2 as the year in which children 'learn to read', and to Grade 3 as the year in which they 'read to learn'. Incidentally, they also note that a very limited amount of research has been undertaken in this particular field. August and Akos did not examine the transition between Grade 1 and Grade 2, which were seemingly stressful for the participants in this study. Our data shows that the academic demands made on the participants were particularly demanding in Grade 2, mainly because of the vast amounts of homework they were given. This is a finding not yet been mentioned in the transition literature we explored.

Because of the seemingly limited literature regarding the experiences of children in Grade 2, it is challenging to relate the finding connected with Theme 2 to research in this field. Caldarella, Christensen, Kramer and Kronmiller (2009) have also noted the absence of research into the experience of Grade 2 children.

Theme 3

Although their learned life skills may have eased their transitions from Grade R through to Grade 2, the children's overall support structures were probably the most important reason why the transitions were largely uncomplicated.

The life skills they learned, the support they received from their parents in their home environment, the support they received at school, and special advantages inherent in their personalities were possibly fundamental in the children effecting successful transitions.

The data showed that the life skills they learned were decisive in their ability to cope successfully with bullies, to make and sustain new friendships, and to control their emotions. Their supportive, stable and safe home environment, characterised by sustaining and nourishing relationships with their parents and siblings, was a central feature of their lives. The support, comfort, safety, stimulation and acceptance offered by their Grade R, Grade 1 and Grade 2 teachers confirmed the soundness of their social support structure. Throughout this study, the children revealed certain desirable and helpful personality traits. These characteristics included confidence, being willing and eager to try new things, being sensitive to others, being kind and helpful, and their self-portrayal as gentle and helpful individuals. It is our opinion that these characteristics helped to ease their transitions from Grade R through to Grade 2.

Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) found data to indicate that supportive relationships between children and their families, teachers and peers were reliable indicators of desirable transition outcomes. Their research offers conclusions that are similar to those of this study. Hirst et al (2011) agree that successful transitions in school depend on various identifiable personal, background and environmental factors, such as the support of parents and teachers during transition periods. Giovanna, Schneider, De Domini, Greenman and Fonza (2005) also confirm that supportive interpersonal relationships ease the stress associated with such transitions, while Bowes, Maughan, Caspi, Moffitt and Arseneault (2010) concluded that warm family relationships in a happy home environment might protect children from the unhappiness and misery associated with being victims of bullying in schools. The children in our study seemingly enjoyed strong and supportive relationships with one another, their family, their teachers, and their peers. All the data point to the fact that they were the beneficiaries of warm and caring family relationships and a happy home environment, as well as supportive social relationships outside their family environment.

The conclusions that we reached in this study agree with the findings of a study undertaken by Hallinan (2008). Hallinan examined the ways in which a teacher's social and emotional support influenced whether or not a child was able to develop a positive attachment to school. Throughout our own study, the Grade R, Grade 1 and Grade 2 teachers appeared to give strong social and emotional support to the children. This fact alone may account for their fondness for their school, as well as other desirable attitudes they displayed during their relatively uncomplicated transitions from Grade R through to Grade 2.

Samanci (2010) and Rosier and McDonald (2011) also found data to support the view that the characteristics and attitudes of children's parents and teachers, as well as the children's personal characteristics, play a decisive role in the development of their social skills and their positive adaptation to school. These characteristics include children's communication skills and ability to use appropriate language, self-confidence, and their ability as individuals to deal with teasing and bullying in primary school. The accumulated data from this study indicate that both the children were able to use appropriate language and communication skills with confidence and aplomb, and that both of them possessed the necessary self-confidence. One of the children was particularly successful in dealing with teasing. This indicates that the children had been successful in developing some of the necessary social skills with the support and assistance of their parents, teachers and the researchers.

Booyesen and Grosser (2008) assert that the development of appropriate social skills requires intensive social involvement, therefore parents, teachers and peers are all indispensable for the success of this process. A valuable catalyst for developing social skills is cooperative learning.⁴ Our own involvement with the children in our study confirms the findings of Booyesen and Grosser (ibid) in this regard. It is however probable that the life skills they learned might have had a more favourable impact on their transitions had they been able to engage in more intense and continuous social involvement. It is also our opinion that life skills that are learned in a class environment, with larger focus groups and the involvement of the entire class (teacher and children), may create more favourable conditions for transitions from Grade R through to Grade 2. Separate and additional research is however needed to prove this point.

Conclusion

This study set out to answer the following research question: How do individuals within a township experience the transitions from Grade R to Grade 2? We have already mentioned that the experiences of school-going children in Grade 2 have been neglected in research and that the transitions of children between Grade 1 and Grade 2 have been equally neglected in terms of scientific investigation. This study therefore contributes to seemingly needed knowledge about children's experiences in Grade 2, and it also specifically highlights the fact that the transition from Grade 1 to Grade 2 may be more stressful and demanding than that from Grade R to Grade 1. There appears to be a limited amount of research about the reasons why the transition from Grade 1 to Grade 2 may be more stressful than the transition from Grade R to Grade 1. It is therefore clear that the possible positive and negative stressors that children experience during their transition to Grade 2 require more research.

In addition, the study describes how the children experienced more negative stressors in Grade 2 than they did in Grade 1, although they still characterised their overall experience of Grade 2 as pleasurable and enjoyable. Despite the fact that in Grade 2 the number of negative stressors they experienced were almost equal to the number of positive stressors (compared to the number of negative stressors they

experienced in Grade 1), the children still described their transition from Grade 1 to Grade 2 as enjoyable and pleasurable. The contribution of this study can therefore be located in the finding that despite the high number of negative stressors experienced by children in Grade 2, the transition of children from Grade 1 to Grade the 2 may, on the whole, still be pleasurable and enjoyable.

Against the background of the many challenges, variables, and sometimes restricted knowledge that children, their parents and their teachers face during the transitions from Grade R through to Grade 2, this study attempted to demonstrate a new understanding of coping strategies that role-players might usefully employ. The study also generated new knowledge about non-focal transitions. And finally, it made the value of appropriate, broad-based social support structures and the significance and value of inner fulfilment in generating positive attitudes during challenging life experiences more than evident.

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Endnotes

1. The online link (<http://upetd.up.ac.za/thesis/available/etd-04202013-113549/unrestricted/03chapter3.pdf>) may be consulted to view the full spectrum of activities used during the study.
2. These are general stressors mentioned by the participating teachers, but not necessarily experienced by the children we studied.
3. For the purpose of this study, the mentioned 'disobedient children' reflects the perceptions of both the individuals within the township. We did not focus on disobedient children during this study, but rather on the perceptions of the participants.
4. A teaching and learning strategy where learners work in small groups on structured tasks to achieve a certain goal (Booyesen & Grosser 2008).