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A case study of the issues for pupils transitioning from primary to post primary in a rural community school

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UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

**A case study of the issues for pupils transitioning from
primary to post primary in a rural community school**

Patrick Moran

**Masters of Arts in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan
Development**

2019



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

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A case study of the issues for pupils transitioning from primary to post primary
in a rural community school

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the reward of Master of Arts in
Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development

Submitted to the University of Limerick, October 2019

Declaration

The author hereby affirms that this dissertation is entirely his own work. No component of the work described in this dissertation has been submitted previously for any reward of degree in the University of Limerick or in any other institution.

Signature

Date

Abstract

The main aim of this research is to explore parents and teachers perceptions of students transition from primary school to post primary school made by students in a rural community school. This research explores the common issues faced by students, with an eye on possible supports that would aid a successful transition to post primary.

From a research perspective, there is much international literature on the topic of student transition or transfer to post primary school (Galton *et al.* 2000, West *et al.* 2008, Rice *et al.* 2011 and Hanewald 2013). In Ireland the main writer in this area is Emer Smyth (2017) with a comprehensive paper on student transition to post primary school.

This dissertation examines students transition to post primary from the perspective on the same cohort of student. However, the teachers have a more longitudinal perspective having worked with incoming first years for a considerable period of time. These teachers are members of the student support team in the school. The data was collected using nine semi-structured interviews, six with staff and three with parents. A number of salient themes emerged from this study which centred on the importance of the social transition as key to the wellbeing of students. The need for change in some practices in the case study school and a more defined role of the Guidance Counsellor, are the main recommendations of this research.

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List of Abbreviations

CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DES	Department of Education
ERSI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
IGC	Institute of Guidance Counsellors
NCGE	National Centre for Guidance in Education
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
OECD	Organisation of Economic Co-Operation and Development
PE	Physical Education
SEN	Special Education Needs
SPHE	Social, Personal and Health Education
SST	Student Support Team
TUI	Teachers Union of Ireland
TY	Transition Year

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

This research explores the transition from primary to post primary school in an Irish context; from the perspectives of teachers who have been involved in aiding students transition to secondary school and parents whose children have recently transitioned to post primary school. The main aim of this research is to gain an understanding of the reoccurring issues students face during the move to post primary and the various interventions secondary schools have in place to ease this educational, emotional and social transition. This chapter will discuss the context of the research, the positionality of the researcher, the proposed methods of research, aims and objectives of the research and outline the structure of this dissertation.

1.1 Context and Justification for the research

This dissertation examines the phenomenon of students transition from primary to post primary school from the perspective of both teachers and parents. The research takes place in a case study school. This case study school is a rural community secondary school of just over four hundred pupils, located in the south west of the Republic of Ireland. The feeder primary schools are all set in a rural area and are small in terms of student numbers. The transition from primary to post primary school is seen as ‘one of the most difficult in pupils' educational career’ (Zeedyk *et al.* 2003, p.67). It takes place in the Irish system for pupils at approximately age twelve or thirteen during a key stage in their lifespan development. Topping (2011) states the transition to post primary school is a change in: location, teachers, curriculum and philosophy with feelings of anxiety pre-transition that can be eased with peer supports. From an Irish viewpoint this transition is also seen as a crucial change. The Economic and Social Research Institute on behalf of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, commissioned a major longitudinal study entitled ‘*Growing up in Ireland*’. A key part of this study looks at the transition from primary school to post primary school and is called ‘*Off to Good Start? Primary School Experiences and the Transition to Second-level Education*’. This document by Emer Smyth finds that ‘the transition to second level education has been identified as a major landmark in young people’s lives, with moving to a new school involving exposure to new teachers and ways of learning, as well as a new peer group’ (Smyth 2017, p.8). This educational and social transition will be the focus of this research study along with the interventions the schools have in place to aid this transition. This is a vital educational, social, cultural, physical and emotional transition for young people and is the justification for this research. This

transition to post primary school is an aspect of school life that guidance counsellors play a key role in. The counsellor promotes a whole school approach to guidance in order to help students adjust: emotionally, socially and educationally to their new school (DES 2009). This research examines teachers and parents' perspectives on the issues faced by students in an effort to improve the transition to post primary and to highlight any issues that are uniquely rural to the case study schools setting.

1.2 Positionality of the Researcher

The researcher has taught in the case study school for the last ten years and has been involved in pastoral care directly, through the anti-bullying committee in the school and various positive mental health events. My interest in this topic was sparked as he had spent a number of years as a class tutor to first years. The range of concerns students presented with was a source of interest and the interventions the school had in place became a source of curiosity. For ethical and practical reasons, I decided not to research my students experiences directly. I decided interviews with staff and parents would gather suitable data to explore the student's experience of the transition into post primary. Thus, I had inside knowledge of the school and the conventions that pertain there to managing the transition to post primary. To ensure validity and reliability, the researcher remained critically aware of their position within the research process and how it might influence the data gathered. I kept a reflective diary which I used to evaluate and ensure a non-biased opinion, on data gathered in the interview process.

1.3 Research Methodology

The researcher's main interest is in gaining an understanding of the transition experience as it occurs in the case study school. This researcher wants to gather student's experiences across a number of year groups, I interviewed a number of staff members whose roll within the school was to facilitate the transition to post primary. These teachers were largely members of the student support team. They were a valuable source of information and shared their experiences with regard to student transition. To broaden the scope of the research, I decided to include the parents of the school's current first years in the research. Their perspective on the transition experience would be fresh in their memories and add another meaningful layer to this research. Semi-structured interviews with guideline questions allowed participants to expand on their answers and offer further opinions (Mertler 2019). The questions were asked in the same order for each interview but time was allowed to give the interviewee scope to expand their views on the transition processes. Follow up questions were posed, where relevant. These interviews

were transcribed by the researcher. Using an interpretivist thematic analyses, (Gibbs 2007) salient themes were identified from the data gathered.

1.4 Research Aims and Objectives

The main aim of this research is to explore the transition from primary school to post primary school in a rural community school setting from both teachers' and parents' perspectives. The objectives of this research are;

1. To examine the literature in relation to the transition from primary to post primary school in a national and international context.
2. To establish the recurring issues for students as they make the transition from primary to post primary school.
3. To gauge the effectiveness of the interventions currently in place that aids transition for students in the case study school.
4. To investigate the student support teams role in aiding the transition for incoming first years.
5. To examine the role of the guidance service in schools in relation to helping students through their transition to post primary.
6. To establish if there are ways of improving the transition process for students in the future.
7. To explore any issues that may arise that are unique to the rural setting in the case study school.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

The structure of the dissertation is as follows;

Chapter 1: Introduction

This opening chapter sets out the context of the study, establishing the importance of the transition to post primary and outlining the justification, aims and objectives of the research. It also briefly speaks about the positionality of the researcher and methods of research used as well as giving a structure of the thesis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review looks at: relevant human development theorists, transition from childhood to adolescence, adolescence itself along with international and national research, policy and practice on the transition to post primary education. This chapter will also examine relevant

literature on the concerns and experiences of students transitioning from primary to post primary school.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter the methods used to gather and analyse the data are outlined. A discussion of various qualitative methods takes place to justify the selection of semi-structured interviews as the most suitable method of research. A data analyses method of thematic analyses is explained in this chapter. Also issues of: validity, reliability, reflexivity and ethical concerns are explored.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

This chapter gives an explanation on the thematic analyses approach, which was used to establish major and minor themes from the data collected. These major and minor themes are presented in this chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings are discussed with reference to relevant literature and the critical issues that arose are presented and discussed.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The final chapter summarises the main findings of this research, it also includes recommendations based on the findings.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter has given an overview, context and justification for this dissertation as well as outlining the positionality of the researcher. It has briefly outlined the methods of research that will be used and given a structure of the thesis. This opening chapter outlines the main objectives of the research. Chapter two will now provide a critical examination of the literature that is relevant to the transition to post primary school in a theoretical and practical sense.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explore the transition from primary to post primary school, made by students, with reference to relevant literature. The literature available, on the phenomenon of transition into post primary education, is vast. The chapter will be divided as follows. Firstly it will examine how life-span development theory can aid our understanding of the transition from childhood to adolescence, which takes place during the move from primary school to post primary, with reference to a number of key theorists. Next there will be a focus on; research, policy and practice on the transition from primary to post primary education, from a national and international perspective. Finally there will be a section on common concerns and experiences that arise for students as they transition from primary into secondary school. The opening section will cover various lifespan development theories and outline how these theories can aid in the understanding of the transition from childhood to adolescence which coincides with the transition from primary school to secondary.

2.1 Lifespan human development and the transition from primary to secondary school.

“Lifespan development is the field of study that examines patterns of growth, change and stability in behaviour that occurs throughout the lifespan” (Feldman 2014, p.5). This lifespan perspective on human development is built around the idea “that important changes occur during every period of development and these changes must be interpreted in terms of culture and context in which they occur” (Boyd and Bee 2015, p.26). Within these definitions the word development is crucial, it can be “defined as systematic changes and continuities in the individual that occur between conception and death” (Sigelman and Rider 2009, p.2). These developments fall into three main categories; (a) physical development, (b) cognitive development, and (c) psychosocial development (Newman and Newman 2007). There are a number of key theorists that examine human development throughout the lifespan that are relevant to the study of transition from primary to post primary school. These theorists are; Freud, Erickson, Marcia, Kohlberg and Piaget. Each look at different perspectives on human development.

2.1.1 Lifespan Human Development theories

Sigmund Freud is seen as the father of psychoanalysis and he developed his theory on psychosexual development. This theory sees human development through five distinct phases. These five psychosexual phases are; oral, anal, phallic, latent and genital, which emphasise the

role of nature over nurture in development as biological instincts drive behaviour (Freud 1905). For example in the oral phase the infant gets satisfaction from his/her own tongue “this is autoerotic” (Freud 1905, p.181-182). However at the end of this phase the infant learns that satisfaction comes from the mother, which lay the foundations for “feelings of security, self-esteem and basic trust as well as the ability to tolerate frustration” (Austrian 2008, p.120). The anal phase centres on the toddler’s holding and releasing of urine or faeces (Freud 1905). If parents make too many or too few demands, conflict about anal control may appear in the form of extreme orderliness or messiness (Freud 1925). Next is the phallic stage which Freud asserts that children experience sexual attraction to the opposite sex parent (Freud 1905). After this stage comes the latency stage where six to twelve year olds’ sexual urges tame and they invest their energy in school work or play (Sigelman and Rider 2009). The final stage is the genital stage. This stage begins in adolescents, but Freud argues continues throughout adulthood. If development has been successful in earlier stages this leads to sexual maturity, the birth and rearing of children (Feldman 2014). Students are beginning adolescences just as they transition from primary to post primary school in the Irish education system. It should be noted that the stages of development outlined by Freud and other theorists mentioned in this chapter are not strictly tied to chronological age, rather developments take place typically at given ages (Papalia *et al.* 2007, Feldman 2014).

Erik Erikson viewed human development as a psychosocial phenomenon. This theory differs from Freud’s theory, which is based on a psychosexual viewpoint (Berk 1999, Austrian 2008). He states that “development is a function of both individual and cultural factors” (Sugarman 1986, p.84). This development theory states that each stage involves a different crisis or conflict in the ‘self’ individual, which can result in either a positive or negative outcome (Erikson 1968). The first stage is trust versus mistrust. “Basic trust indicated by the infant’s capacity to sleep, eat and excrete” (Seifert 2000, p.38) in a relaxed way builds trust with the care giver and successful leads to the stage that follow. The second stage is autonomy versus shame this can be successfully fostered by parents, allowing children to have free choice and not forcing or shaming the child (Erikson 1968). This is followed by initiative versus guilt, at ages three to six, which allows children “to plan and tackle big projects and acquire the sense of industry rather than inferiority” (Sigelman and Rider 2009, p.39). As people move into adolescence they encounter identity versus role confusion (Erikson 1968), which should be resolved by their early twenties when the person is characterised as “having a coherent sense of one’s sexual identity, vocational direction and ideological world view” (Atkinson *et al.* 2000, p.75). Stage

six is intimacy versus isolation, where “one must develop the ability to establish close committed relationship with others and cope with the fear of losing their own identity” (Seifert 2000, p.40). The next stage is generativity versus stagnation, which focuses on occupational achievement where a person feels they are contributing to the next generation (Boyd and Bee 2015). The final stage, which occurs in late adulthood, is integrity versus despair, where a person reviews their life, and come to terms with their basic identity developing self-acceptance (Rayner 1978). This links to transition from primary to post primary school, as students are moving through a developmental stage, while making a key educational transition.

James Marcia built on much of Erickson’s work to develop an identity theory, which has four categories, they are; identity achievement, identity foreclosure, moratorium and identity diffusion. Marcia sees identity status based on crisis and commitment. “Crisis consist of a period of role experimentation and active decision making” (Newman and Newman 2007, p.227). Based on interviews Marcia states that achievement happens to teenagers once they have had a period of crisis over who they are and what they want to do, they commit to a particular identity (Marcia 1966). Another category is moratorium where the teenager has no commitment made to an identity, this can be a period of stress and anxiety for the individual (Seifert 2000). The next category is identity foreclosure, which means the individual has decided on an identity without much exploration. These individuals tend to be authoritarian with a high need for social approval (Marcia 1966). The final category is identity diffusion. Adolescents may or may not have a crisis but do show a lack of commitment. They are “people who have a rather cavalier party attitude to others who are more acutely confused” (Newman and Newman 2007, p.228). Students making the transition from primary school to post primary may experiences this identity crisis as they make the move through a key education milestone.

Lawrence Kohlberg outlined his levels of moral development in the 1950’s, based on Piaget’s theory. The first of three levels is called the pre conventional level, which has two stages. The punishment and obedience stage sees the child decide on what is wrong based on punishment, they only obey because adults have superior power (Kohlberg 1964). The second stage, at this level, is the instrumental purpose orientation, in which children see right action as flowing from “self-interest and understand reciprocity as equal exchange of favours” (Kohlberg 1964, p.172). The next level is known as conventional, which sees mutual interpersonal expectations take hold. Moral actions are those of the family or social group in that being morally good is important for its own sake (Kohlberg 1977). This is linked to the social system and conscience stage, where individuals agree to uphold laws, except in extraordinary circumstances. The third

level in Kohlberg's theory is the post conventional level, which is a "more advanced form of moral thinking because it was viewed by Kohlberg as a more traditional expression of transcendental or objective moral truths" (Budwig *et al.* 2017, p.318). The social contract stage within this level involves the individual "acting as to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number" (Boyd and Bee 2015, p.327). The final stage in the post conventional level is the universal ethical principal stage. This highest stage in which "right action is defined by self-chosen ethical principles of conscience that are valid for all people, regardless of law" (Berk 2011, p.321).

Jean Piaget devised a complete and systematic development theory of cognitive growth. Piaget believed that cognitive development occurs in four distinct stages. Piaget states that these stages are; pre-operational, concrete operational and formal operational. Piaget believed children acquired a mental structure called schemes that allows them to adapt to the world around them (Boyd and Bee 2015). He further expands, that assimilation takes place when "an infant interprets and responds to a new experience or situation in terms of an existing scheme" (Seifert *et al.* 2000, p.46). These schemes operate within all the stages, the first of which is the sensorimotor, which happens in the first two years of life, where the infant coordinates their sensory and motor skills to achieve object performance (Piaget 1976). The preoperational stage comes next, where "children develop the tools for representing schemes symbolically through language, imitation, imagery" (Newman and Newman 2007, p.93). At around age seven children move into the concrete operational stage. This involves school going children being able to "mentally classify, add and otherwise act on concrete objects in their heads. They can solve practical real world problems" (Sigelman and Rider 2009, p.46). The final stage of cognitive development is the formal operational stage which involves the ability to comprehend abstract concepts and hypothetical possibilities that can be linked to long term consequences (Piaget, 1976). Children are beginning to develop cognitively, as they move from primary school to secondary school, in line with this theory. This chapter will now look at the transition from childhood to adolescence, as this is taking place for students as they move from the primary school system to secondary in the Irish context.

2.1.2 Childhood to Adolescence: A Complex Reality

As one reviews the literature on school transition from primary to post primary it is important to note this process does not take place in a vacuum. From a Lifespan Development perspective, the transition to post primary takes place as students make the transition from childhood to adolescence. Childhood can be divided into early and middle childhood (Berk 1999). There are

numerous understandings of childhood: James *et al.* (1998) states children are to be understood as social actors shaped by their circumstances. “Children are to be seen as a defective form of adult, social only in their future potential but not in their present being” (James *et al.* 1998, p.6). This is also discussed by Hill *et al.* (1997) who argues individual children are “crucially affected by and in turn affect their key peers, teachers and other family members, teachers and other professionals and wider society”(Hill and Tisdall 1997, p.1) The United Nations states childhood “means much more than just the space between birth and the attainment of adulthood. It refers to the state and condition of a child’s life, and the quality of those years” (UNICEF 2005). Lifespan development theory sees early childhood as when children leave infancy and begin to use language to communicate. This is followed by middle childhood, which is the period from entry to school to the onset of adolescence (Papalia *et al.* 2007, Boyd and Bee 2015). “The boundaries between childhood and adulthood are multiple and indeterminate, with teen years constituting a broad period of transition” (Hill and Tisdall 1997, p.2). Elkind (2001) argues that this transition out of childhood is being rushed by pressure from peers, parents, culture and media. “Many adolescents feel betrayed by society that tells them to grow up fast but also remain a child” (Elkind 2001, p.12) and that this pressure begins in early childhood (Elkind 2001).

“Adolescence is a developmental stage of profound transformation that may be stressful for youngsters, representing a great challenge to the use of coping strategies and general coping style” (Barreto Cavalho *et al.* 2015, p.238). The beginning of adolescences is marked by puberty “a flood of biological events leading to an adult sized body and sexual maturity” (Berk 2010, p.283). Adolescence is a combination of biological and psychological forces that influence personal development (Susman and Rogol 2004). It is a period when young people; worry more, watch and judge themselves against peers and also strive to achieve a sense of personal identity (Pinnell 1998). Also adolescence is both biological and social: in cultures where many years of education are needed for “successful participation in the work life of the community, adolescences is greatly extended” (Berk 1999, p.559). There is a huge change around; physical, intellectual, social and ethical development of the individual (Kellough and Kellough 2003) during adolescence. This adolescence period is from the age of eleven to twenty (Berk 1999, Boyd and Bee 2015) and its beginning coincides with the start of secondary school in the Irish system, thus the transition from childhood to adolescence comes at a key educational transition.

2.1.3 Lifespan Human Development at the latter stage of Primary school.

As students come to the end of their time in primary school they are aged eleven or twelve. This is seen by theorists as end of the middle childhood stage or about to start adolescence, depending on the individual. This section looks at the various theoretical perspectives on human development at the middle childhood stage as students start to contemplate the transition from primary to post primary.

Erik Erickson's lifecycle development theory focuses on a stage called industry versus inferiority which he argues typically takes place in middle childhood (Erikson 1965). Erikson believed that the "combination of adult expectations and children's drive toward mastery sets the stage for the psychological conflict: industry versus inferiority" (Berk 1999, p.482). Industry is the development of skills or tasks for the child, "their imagination is tamed and harnessed to the laws of impersonal things, even the three R's" (Erikson 1963, p.232). A failure to do this may lead to inferiority where the child feels inadequate and despairs as he sees himself doomed to mediocrity (Erikson 1963). This has a huge impact on the child's sense of self-concept and self-esteem (Feldman 2014, Bee and Boyd 2015). It is at this stage children start to make social comparison with others (Ruble and Frey 1991). These issues could impact on students making the transition from primary to post primary; academically, emotionally and socially.

In terms of cognitive change, in the middle childhood, Piaget's concrete operational stage occurs gradually between ages seven to twelve (Piaget 1976). At this stage children think more logically and can take multiple perspectives on a situation, yet are still limited in their thinking on the here and now (Papalia *et al.* 2007). It is during this stage the child develops inductive logic, but remain poor at deductive logic (Piaget 1976). A limitation to this theory is that children think in a logical fashion only when dealing with concrete information, they do not perform well when presented with abstract ideas. (Berk 1999). Thus during the transition from primary to post primary some students have yet to move to the higher levels of cognitive development.

Lawerence Kohlberg focused on moral development and he theorised that from the age of ten to thirteen or beyond, individuals operate in the conventional morality level of moral reasoning (Kohlberg 1969). This second level of moral reasoning is when the standards of authority figures, become internalised in children's lives. Much of Kohlberg's work is linked to Paget's theories of cognitive development. This theory states that the child's conformity is to his or her

“own standards in order to avoid self-condemnation” (Wood 1973, p.26). The child at this stage is “concerned with doing their duty, showing respect for higher authority and maintaining the social order” (Papalia *et al.* 2007, p.422). Kohlberg’s theory fails to take into account, parent’s importance in moral development (Walker and Taylor 1991) and there is not a clear relationship between moral reasoning and behaviour (Papalia *et al.* 2007). This theory would have implications for students’ conduct during the transition from primary to post primary and gives us an insight into their reasoning around following school rules and behaviour in general.

Sigmund Freud’s theory of human development would place individuals at the end of their primary education in Ireland in the latency stage of psychosexual development. At this stage of life, approximately aged six to the beginning of adolescence, sexual concerns are largely unimportant (Freud 1905). However sexual drives re-emerge once puberty arrives during the early stage of adolescences (Boyd and Bee 2015). In the latency stage, as the name suggests, there is a pause or lull in infantile sexuality. Freud states that children replace a parent with a ‘superior parent’ as they long for an earlier time when they viewed that parent as the strongest and noblest (Freud 1908). During this period individuals may have fantasises about “having a twin to escape feelings of loneliness as children move away from their families” (Austria 2008, p.99). Thus students making the transition to post primary are according to Freud on the cusp of major developmental stages, which sees a reawakening of the crucial drives of the early years of life for the individual.

2.1.4 Lifespan Human Development of the Adolescent in the early stage of Post Primary School.

As stated previously in this chapter adolescence is a physical, cognitive, emotional and social change that takes place in individuals, this section will look at this phenomenon reference to some theorists.

Within the emotional and social element of adolescence, change is the idea of self-identity and self-esteem. This leads to conflict in the adolescent, between identity versus identity confusion (Erikson 1968). This is positively resolved when the adolescent is able to “attain an identity after a period of exploration and inner soul searching” (Berk 1999, p.602). While Erikson refers to this period as a crisis, current theorists no longer refer to the process as a crisis (Grotevant 1998), rather it is seen as an exploration that leads to identity formation. This can be linked to self-esteem which is the evaluation of self-concept or identity. Self-esteem is how much a person likes, accepts and respects himself overall as a person (Feldman 2014).

James Marcia (1966) states there are four identity statuses adolescence experience when forming their identity; they are identity achievement, moratorium, identity foreclosure and identity diffusion. These have been discussed earlier in this chapter and can be influenced by factors like; personality, family, school, community and society (Berk 1999). Also gender and ethnic factors influence adolescent identity formation, in terms of social and emotional development.

Cognitive development takes place during the adolescence period and is associated with physical growth. Piaget and Kohlberg studied this aspect of adolescent development. Piaget stated that adolescents enter the formal operational stage, the highest level of cognitive development in his framework (Feldman 2014). Individuals develop a capacity for abstract thought, aged approximately eleven, where they can comprehend historical time and use symbols, as well as appreciate metaphors to find meaning in literature (Papalia *et al.* 2007). This allows students to develop emotionally as they “can love freedom or hate exploitation...the possible and the ideal captivate both mind and feeling” (Ginsburg and Opper 1979, p.201). This theory however has cultural variations and also fails to account for the role of metacognition which is the student’s awareness and monitoring of their own mental strategies and processes (Flavell *et al.* 2002). These variations would include; religious, ethnic and gender issues, which are at play in the Irish education system and are important in gaining a complete understanding of the transition to post primary school.

Kohlberg believed that “judgement does not appear to become moral until early adolescence, whereas moral conduct appears earlier” (Kohlberg 1964, p.409). Kohlberg’s moral development theory argues that adolescents move into the social contract (level five) ethical principle (level six) orientations during the adolescent years (Berk 1999). These make up the “post conventional level running from ages thirteen to sixteen” (Kohlberg 1964, p.402). Adolescents accept the rules of society and accept moral principles underlying the rules (Kohlberg 1971). It should be noted that not everyone reaches the final stage of this post conventional level. The social contact level sees adolescents “concerned for the wellbeing of others and of community, they recognise that laws are necessary” (Austria 2008, p.157). While at the ethical principle level “individuals must test these laws against their conscience, which tend to express an inborn sense of those principles” (Austria 2008, p157). A short coming of Kohlberg’s theory is that “women and men do not necessarily think or react the same way in relation to moral questions (Feldman 2014). Also it should be noted that moral development can be influenced by; child rearing practices, schooling, peer interaction and culture” (Berk

1999). It should be noted that Kohlberg's theory is limited to the western world in a cultural sense (Papalia *et al.* 2007).

Physical development takes place in adolescents in the form of puberty. Puberty starts with an increase in production of sex related hormones and happens in two stages: adrenarche which is the maturing of the adrenal glands and gonadarche, the maturing of the sex organs (Papalia *et al.* 2007). This part of physical development varies between boys and girls. Both genders experience growth spurts, for girls at age ten and boys around age twelve (O'Brien 2013). The onset of menstruation, the most obvious sign of puberty in girls varies greatly worldwide (Feldman 2014). Numerous factors can influence the onset of puberty and what is normal and abnormal is a controversy among specialists (Lemonick 2000). In boys primary and secondary characteristics develop around the age of twelve or thirteen, these include; the growth of pubic hair, underarm and facial hair, along with voice deepening (Papalia *et al.* 2007). A surge of hormones takes place in both genders and can manifest itself in boys as anger or frustration while in girls it can be associated with depression or anger (Hyde *et al.* 2008). These physical changes are not linked to any one lifespan developmental theorist, as these physical changes are not specifically studied by any of the main theorists in any great detail. Also the movement between stages in development varies between individuals (Davison and Neale 2001) and ages given in this chapter are general chronological ages that most people move between stages where applicable.

This section has outlined the literature on human development theory as it pertains to the transition from primary to post primary school. It gave an overall view on various human development theories with reference to the work of; Freud, Erickson, Marcia, Kohlberg and Piaget. Also the transition from childhood to adolescence takes place for many students during the move into secondary school. The lifespan human development perspective on individuals in the latter stages of primary school and on adolescents at the start of post primary, was discussed to illustrate the complex development that takes place within individuals as they move into the post primary system. Students are developing; physically, emotionally, cognitively and socially as they make the transition into post primary. The next section will look at how; research, policy and practice seeks to manage these changes, both in Ireland and internationally.

2.2 Transition to Post-Primary Research, Policy and Practice

This section of the literature review will look at; the policy, research and practice of transition from primary to post primary school. It will encompass both international and Irish perspectives on the transition. The information in this section will be drawn from; academic research, OECD reports, ERSI reports, case studies, legislation and policy, relevant to the transition from primary to post primary.

2.2.1 International Perspective

International research has shown that social relationships play an important role in supporting young people over the transition from primary to post primary school (Lord *et al.* 1994). Literature points to students having concerns on entering post primary school, which revolve around formal school systems and informal peer systems (West *et al.* 2008). Galton (2010) states that around 30 per cent of pupils had concerns about the number of teachers, strictness and discipline. His research entitled *Moving to secondary school: what do pupils in England say about the experience?* is an amalgam of three transition studies conducted in England. A concern around bullying and aggression from other students was expressed by 31 per cent of students entering post primary in a study conducted by Zeedyk (2003), which looked at the transition from students, parents and teachers perspectives in the United Kingdom. However, despite these concerns, young people feel they have outgrown their primary setting and are ready for the new challenge they face at secondary level (Mellor and Dalamont 2011). Tobbell (2003), in her study based on high schools in the United States, found that post transition students report feeling lost both emotionally and physically. Within the first months of post primary school, almost 40% of pupils experienced regression in their educational progress according Galton *et al.* (2000) *Transfer and Transition in English Schools*. Once again factors that influence students are universal; adjusting to more than one teacher, class sizes, moving to a much larger building, onset of puberty and being separated from established friendship groups. (Zeedyk *et al.* 2003, Boyd 2005).

In the United Kingdom “evidence suggests that primary to secondary transition has a negative impact on educational outcomes and a mixed impact on wellbeing outcomes” (Government of Scotland 2019, p.2). A successful transition often depends on the sort of help that secondary schools provide to their pupils, including; “getting to know their way around the school, relaxing rules in the early weeks, procedures to help pupils to adapt, visit schools, induction and taster days and booklets offering adequate information, encouragement support and assistance with lessons” (Evangelou *et al.* 2008 p.3). These practical steps coupled with a close

relationship between primary and secondary schools are most effective at providing a smooth transition for pupils. (Evangelou *et al.* 2008). Also Boyd (2005) suggest that attention is needed to identify why pupils disengage or underperform at transition to post primary, and identifying when and how different groups of pupils become 'at risk'.

In the United States the research of Grafton and Maunder (2012) understands transition using a sociocultural framework. They argue that there is a strong link with human thought and action to social and cultural situatedness (Zittoun 2006). Transition to post primary is complex and multi-faceted and invariably involved "changes to self-identity born out of uncertainty in the social and cultural worlds of the individual" (Grafton and Maunder 2012, p.4). The transition process involves the individual "becoming someone or something new" (Beach 1999, p.102.) is central to understanding ways for the school as an institution to aid that transition.

In Norway, an Organisation for Economic Co-operation (OECD) study, found that the transition to post primary can have a negative impact on student outcomes. "There is often a decline in academic achievement and engagement in the transition from primary to lower secondary" (OECD 2011, p.2). This paper argues that there is a need to ease the negative impact of transition to prevent students falling behind or dropping out, through reduced class sizes and more personal supports (OECD 2011).

Across the research, there is a contested view on the transition process, where some writers paint a negative picture of the transition process. This negative image of the transition experience is consistent with numerous qualitative studies which highlight the critical nature of change for young people's identity and well-being. (Pointon 2000, Tobbell 2003, Pratt and George 2005) "These researchers draw attention to aspects of the secondary school system (e.g. lack of personal space) and highlight the importance of the informal school system as it shapes peer relations and friendships" (West *et al.* 2008, p.34). While other research sees the students experience through the transition as a less negative experience. Graham and Hill (2003) report that after a month in post primary school, two-thirds of their research sample reported no anxieties, and most stopped feeling worried almost immediately. However the literature is in support of the idea that schools should put in place provisions to aid the transition to post primary. (Evangelou *et al.* 2008, West *et al.* 2008, OECD 2011).

2.2.2 The Irish Perspective.

Within the Irish context there has been some research on transition from primary to secondary school. Smyth (2017) and Darmody (2008) are examples of studies which sought to gauge the adjustment made by pupils into their new educational settings. A major study undertaken by Maeve O'Brien (2004) entitled '*Making the Move*' looked at the transition or transfer to second level from; students, teachers and parent's perspective. Although the study is fifteen years old, many of the findings remain valid today. The study used semi-structured interviews at different stages of students' transition over eleven sample schools. Empirical data was also used in the form of testing to assess the impact of transition on educational performance. (O'Brien 2004). The study noted that, transition is a time of multiple changes, as students negotiate; the move "from childhood to adolescence, the move from one institutional context to another and the journey from established social groups into new social relations" (O'Brien 2004, p.86). It identified need for a good pupil/teacher relationship as vital, along with good peer relations and a knowledge of the impact of transition on pupil life outside of school (O'Brien 2004). There are a number of findings in '*Making the Move*' that have becoming reality in secondary schools in recent years, for example an end to streaming of pupils has been embraced by the majority of schools in the Irish system. Other recommendations in the report include; more supports for families through community based programmes in disadvantaged areas and more cooperation between the two systems around testing and curriculum content. Also an array of in-school supports at second level such; as anti-bullying strategies, more student centred delivery of curriculum to mirror primary school and managed homework given to avoid overload, are all suggested. (O'Brien 2004). This research mirrors the Department of Education and Skills ideas on the transition process, which calls for a "consistency of approach between primary curriculum and junior cycle curricula, and the developmental nature of the learning experience they offer, should help to ease the transition process for students" (DES 1999, p.31). Another detailed study on the transition post primary is *Moving Up* by Smyth *et al.* (2004) published with the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). This study highlighted the student experience and found a problematic variation in learning practices and teaching methodologies between the two systems (Smyth *et al.* 2004). These concerns are further expanded beyond the academic as students express anxiety over other issues "before they enter second level and in the first few weeks after transfer relate to various area of school life: the social, institutional and academic areas" (O'Brien 2004, p.4).

A study from the same era was undertaken by Sheila McArdle on behalf of the Athlone Community Taskforce entitled '*Going to Secondary?*' (2006) which was a child centred action research report looking at supports needed to make a positive transition to post primary school in the Irish context. This qualitative research focused on students and their families making the transition in the Athlone region. The report found "some young people had few sources of resilience to draw upon in their daily lives in comparison to others" (McArdle 2006, p.55). The report proposed to promote resilience at; the individual, family and community level. It also highlighted students experiencing difficulties early in "the post-primary context which will impact negatively upon their general wellbeing and the way they participate in the education system" (McArdle 2006, p.54). These difficulties in making the transition were both social and academic with SEN pupils and English as a different language students being most at risk. (McArdle 2006).

A leading writer in this area is Emer Smyth who has led a number of reports for the ERSI in recent years on the topic of school transition, of these the '*Growing Up in Ireland*' (2017) is most relevant to the transition from primary to post primary. This longitudinal study looks at many aspects of Irish life from a youth perspective, '*Off to a Good Start? Primary School Experience and transition to Second-level Education*', is a particularly relevant section in the context of this discussion. This document has some implications for future policy with the need for a rethink on the teaching of Mathematics at primary level, a continued focus on literacy and numeracy, as well as a need to provide assistance in this area to disadvantaged groups in both DEIS and non- DEIS schools (Smyth 2017). "The findings point to challenges in ensuring the inclusion of young people with special educational needs in mainstream second level schools (Smyth 2017, p.9). The report also reinforces the need for junior cycle reform and emphasises the need for a positive school climate, created by reducing negative sanctions that alienate students. It points to the importance of social relationships in making the transition to second level with ease of transition "found to reflect individual self-confidence and family context"(Smyth 2017, p.12).

School context and structures play a role in the transition process: more work must be done in this area to avoid second year students in post primary experiencing a dip in achievement (Smyth *et al.* 2007). The need for structured programmes in schools to facilitate the transition has been highlighted in the past (Hargreaves and Galton 2002). There are a number of interventions a school can put in place to ease the transition for students. Schools operate in a legislative framework which makes it necessary to try to facilitate this transition. A good

transition programme should focus on “enabling each student to receive an optimum transitional experience; openness to alternative teaching strategies; relationship building between primary and post-primary; pre-transfer initiative and appropriate structures for learning” (Naughton 2003, p.60-61). A well designed and consistent programme is vital for a successful transition or transfer. These programmes hold “a great deal of promise for helping students, particularly those at risk of failing to negotiate the environmental demands associated with systemic transitions” (Anderson *et al.* 2000, p.336). Furthermore, programmes that include pre-transfer visits to feeder primary schools “help reduce levels of anxiety considerably” (Galton *et al.* 2000, p.445). It should be noted programmes best serve the students’ needs where the school creates “an informal structure to care for young people making the transition, this can have a better impact than providing formal supports such as peer mentoring” (Ahern 2017, p. 10-11). The secondary school needs to ensure that the transition experience is as smooth as possible so that the change has a minimal impact.

The Education Act 1998 makes it a legal requirement for all staff to collaborate in the best interests of all children (DES 1998). This is reinforced with other legislation which includes The Children’s Act (1999) and the Education (Welfare) Act (2000). The National Council of Special Education (NCSE) gave specific advice to parents with a document entitled *Changing Schools* (NCSE 2016). This is reinforced by a document for schools called ‘*Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs to make successful transitions*’. These guidelines are designed “to support SEN children and their families to make transitions with greater confidence and ease” (NCSE 2016). The National Council for Assessment and Curriculum (NCCA) has provided parents and teachers with practical advice on the transfer of students from primary to post primary. (NCCA 2014). This is centred on the introduction of the education passport, which aids the sharing of information about a student between the two school systems. The recent developments around the new Junior Certificate are designed to make the transition between the two levels easier, by introducing a new curriculum which is more in line with primary level methodologies, outcomes and terminology. This reformed Junior Certificate also has a Wellbeing Programme (DES 2013) which allows teachers scope to explore the nature of transition into post primary at a social and emotional level. (DES 2013) This is reinforced with the ‘*Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023*’ which states a successful transition to post primary as a measure of success for a school and supporting transition as an example of effective practice (DES 2018). In terms of guidance the National Centre for Guidance in Education (2017) notes that the introduction of the

educational passport between primary and secondary schools is a welcome development and points to Emer Smyth's research as a guide for Guidance Counsellors in aiding students moving to post primary school.

The literature throughout the past decades in the Irish context shows common themes with regard to; the importance of social relationships for students, the need for coherent transition programmes in schools, vulnerability of Special Education Needs students, ethnic minority and socioeconomically deprived groups when it comes to making the complex transition from primary to post primary school. The challenge for policy makers is to keep these factors at the heart of future policy direction, as they seek to bridge the divide between content, teaching methodologies and student experience in post primary education. The next section of this review looks at common concerns and experiences as they transition into secondary school.

2.3 Students concerns and experiences transitioning from primary to post primary school

There are numerous concerns and experiences for students as they make the transition from primary to post primary. This section will divide these topics into pre-transition and post-transition concerns and experiences.

2.3.1 Pre-transition concerns.

Pre-transition concerns tend to peak at the end of primary school, around June of sixth class (Galton and Hargreaves 2002, Measor and Woods 1984). These concerns or anxieties tend to be multifactorial with practical concerns to the fore as students worry about getting lost in their new school (Zeedyk *et al.* 2003). "Anxieties may centre around the size of the school, getting lost, separation from friends, new teachers, new subjects, bullying and homework" (Furlong 1999, p.21). Smyth *et al.* (2004) states that "disciplinary procedures, timetables, more difficult work, increased homework, having several teachers and subjects and changing classroom" (Smyth *et al.* 2004, p.2) all make up pre-transition and post transition concerns as well as increased travel time to and from school (West *et al.* 2008). Students also have academic concerns around falling grades (Mizelle 1995) and apprehensions about Maths (O'Brien 2008, Smyth 2017). Social issues are a concern for students, West *et al.* (2008) reported 21.4 per cent of students worry about making new friends. Many students have concerns about safety within their new social environment (Zeedyk *et al.* 2003, Mizelle 1995). The pre-transition student experiences a mix of anxiety and anticipation (Naughton 1998). Parental support can be helpful here and is found to be a "crucial factor in facilitating young people's successful integration

into secondary school” (Smyth 2017, p.12). The social interaction with teachers also eases concerns of students “the quality of the day to day interaction between teacher and student has been found to be more important than the presences of a formal transition programme” (Smyth 2017, p.12). Overall practical, academic and social concerns dominate the pre-transition to post primary experiences of students (Barnes-Holmes *et al.* 2013) with the majority of students concerns allayed early in the first year of post primary (Evangelou *et al.* 2008). However some research suggests these concerns persists throughout first year of secondary school (Zeedyk *et al.* 2003).

2.3.2 Post-transition concerns and experiences

Despite many concerns before entry to secondary school, only a minority of students have difficulties once they move. (O’Brien 2004, Smyth 2017). A major change for students is having several teachers as opposed to having one teacher. Teachers are less likely to know the students well which results in a decline in social supports over the first year of secondary school (Martinez *et al.* 2011). “The transition also involves new subjects and very often, different approaches to teaching and learning than at primary level” (Smyth 2017, p.12). Students also experience “confusion at having too many teachers, substitute teachers and recurrent timetable changes. They believed the primary school timetable was more flexible and better suited to their needs” (Barnes-Holmes *et al.* 2013, p.14). This timetable change between the two systems “requires that students become organised to a degree that was not necessary in the more student centred primary setting” (Smyth *et al.* 2004, p.11). This change along with varied “subject content and teaching methods may also create difficulties (Naughton 2003, p.41). These difficulties can manifest in educational attainment, however research finds that the dip in attainment is less associated with post-transfer anxiety and more a decrease in motivation and enjoyment of school by pupils (Galton *et al.* 2000, West *et al.* 2008). Some “authors have argued that too much attention is given to the process itself (transition) as a factor in underachievement and too little to discontinuities in education” (West *et al.* 2008, p.29). Others argue that the dip in attainment happens at the transition between primary and post primary and crucially again later in secondary school (Whitby 2006).

Students also experience social concerns of varying degrees prior the transition to secondary school, however the majority make friends quickly and recognise that pupil interaction is more group based in secondary school rather than class based as in primary (Tobbell 2003). There is little integration between older and younger pupils at second level (Barnes-Holmes *et al.* 2013). “The establishment of new friendship groups eases the transition for young people” (Smyth

2017, p.12) even though students continue to miss their old friends up to the end of first year of post primary (Smyth *et al.* 2004). The ease in transition to post primary reflects self-confidence and the family context of the individual student (Smyth 2017). Students who have good self-confidence and positive self-image tend to have fewer difficulties settling into secondary school (Lord *et al.* 1994).

School context and structure can influence the students' experience of transition and there has been a growth in structured programmes across schools to aid transition (Hargraves and Galton 2002). Naughton (2008) argues that more needs to be done to recognise the importance of transition while noting intervention programmes are present at school where educational failure or early school leaving is a risk (Naughton 2003). Transition programmes "hold a great deal of promise for helping students particularly those at risk of failing to negotiate the environmental demands associated with systemic transitions" (Anderson *et al.* 2000, p.336). Also these programmes help "to reduce levels of anxiety considerably" (Galton *et al.* 2000, p.445). The structure of these transition programmes vary between schools (Smyth 2017).

While the transition to post primary offers some challenge to students, some groups find it more difficult. The transition affects girls more than boys on an emotional level and points to at risk groups like those from poor households or ethnic minorities (Topping 2011). Students of a younger age have been identified as making poor transitions to post primary (West *et al.* 2008). In the Irish context children from a traveller background have found the transition more problematic (McArdle 2006) and students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more reluctant to transfer to second level (O'Brien 2004). Across the research there is consensus that aiding the transition is a worthwhile endeavour and important as students who experience "a poorer school transition predicted higher levels of depression and lower attainment, a poor peer transition and lower self-esteem" (West *et al.* 2008, p.34).

2.4 Conclusion

In conclusion this literature review has outlined the complex and multifaceted nature of the transition from primary to post primary school. It is a time of great challenge for young people as they make the adjustment to a new curriculum, educational institution and often social group. This literature review highlighted some of the theoretical perspectives on adolescent change and human development theorists that deepen our understanding of the transition process for individuals. Also this review gave an international and Irish perspective on the transition from

primary to post primary, from a policy, research and practice stand point. The transition can be daunting for many: this review reflects its complex nature for young people and its challenges for professionals to help students in a milestone on their educational journey. The next chapter will outline the methodology used to research the transition process in a bid to gain further understanding on this issue.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 Introduction

The main aim of this chapter is to discuss the various methods used in educational research to outline the rationale behind the use of qualitative research methods in this dissertation. This chapter will also outline the main focus of the research, using both the primary and secondary research questions. Furthermore, the strengths and limitations of the chosen methodology will be outlined as well as ways of analysing the data gathered. Finally the research study design will be explored along with validity, reliability, reflexivity and the ethical considerations that arose throughout the course of this research.

3.1 Identification of Research Aim and Questions

In order to explore the phenomenon of school transition or transfer from primary to post primary, one must identify key research questions. “Research questions force you to consider the issue of what it is you want to find out about more precisely and rigorously” (Bryman 2012, p.10). These questions narrow down the study on the exact issues the researcher is seeking to investigate. Good research should have a clear set of precise questions which will avoid the research becoming unfocused or meandering. The research questions must be chosen carefully so that coherent answers will emerge from the study, only then can methodologies be selected (De Vaus 2001). After considering the literature discussed in the previous chapter, a number of primary research questions can be posed.

3.1.1 Primary Research Questions

The transition from primary to post primary school is a time of huge change for young people and schools “are now more aware of the need to ease the transition between the two systems” (O’Brien 2008, p.47). Work still remains to be done in terms of making the transition successful for all students (Smyth 2017). The transition from primary to secondary school is complex and multifaceted which presents many challenges for individual students, as well as educational professionals. This dissertation seeks to gauge up to date attitudes on transition to post primary school in a rural setting by means of a case study from teachers’ and parents’ perspectives. This leads to specific primary research questions which guide the overall architecture of the study. This requires a narrowing of the study to salient queries or to just two primary questions which are the following; (a) What are the reoccurring issues for students as they make the transition from primary to post primary school? (b) How effective are the interventions currently in place

to aid the transitioning process. These two precise questions will provide insights and suggestions for the area being studied (Merriam, 2009).

3.1.2 Secondary Research Questions

The transition from primary school to post primary school has “been recognised as a crucial stage in young peoples’ school years” (Smyth *et al.* 2004, p.1). Thus, this topic is canvassed along with others in the following secondary research questions:

1. What is the role of the student support team in aiding transition?
2. What role does the guidance service play in aiding transition?
3. How can the transition to post primary be improved in the future?
4. Are there any issues that arise which are unique to a rural setting?

3.2 Selection of Appropriate Research Paradigm

This section will seek to define the meaning of a research paradigm with reference to competing models of research. A paradigm is a set of basic belief systems or framework representing the worldview of a researcher (Thomas 2017). There are two major schools of thought in this regard, namely the positivist and interpretive paradigms. The positivist paradigm is akin to quantitative research which focuses on gathering empirical data (often numerical) which the researcher can analyse across large groups to establish trends to set questions (Mertler 2019) While interpretive or qualitative research is more focused on the quality of a particular activity, rather than how often it occurs (Fraenkel *et al.* 2012). In respect of the research topic present in this paper, the latter paradigm is more suited to gain the more subtle nuanced experiences of teachers and parents on the phenomenon of school transition or transfer.

3.2.1 Qualitative Research

Within qualitative research there are number of different perspectives one could pursue. These will be briefly outlined in this section with the aim of providing a rationale for choosing semi-structured interviews as the method of research for this dissertation. I considered ethnographic research, narrative research and action research as possible methodologies for this dissertation.

3.2.2 Ethnographic Research

Ethnographic research “involves in-depth description and interpretation of their shared or common practices and beliefs of a culture, social group or other community” (Mertler 2016, p.80). This form of research requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the setting they are studying over a period of time. “Immersion in the site as a participant observer is the primary method of data collection” (Merriam 2009, p.28). The culture of the participant group

from the researcher's interaction with them, is central to the research. Culture "describes the way things are and prescribes the way people should act" (Rossman and Rallis 2012, p.93). It is the contention of ethnographic research that through prolonged exposure and established rapport with individuals, that researchers can understand an educational phenomenon" (McMillan 2012). Thus using this method for the phenomenon of school transition or transfer from primary to post primary school, would require the researcher to spend prolonged period of time with incoming first years in the case study school. This time would have been spent before, during and post transition, in order to establish the culture of the group to assess their interaction with the transition to post primary process. In ethnographic study the "lens of culture must be used to understand a phenomenon" (Merriam 2009, p.29). Spending such time understanding the culture of the study group would not have been practical in terms of excessive amount of time and logistics. Also the fact that the researcher was a teacher in the school students were enrolling in, would have altered the relationship between participants and researcher. While ethnographic research is not without its merits, it would not be suitable for this research topic. Therefore, I also considered narrative research as a methodology for the study.

3.2.3 Narrative Research

A perspective that was considered in the interpretivist paradigm was narrative research. Narrative research is designed to convey experiences that are expressed in the told stories of individuals (Creswell 2015). This is the "oldest and most natural form of sense making" (Jonassen and Hernandez-Serrano 2002, p.66) which involves narratives or stories. Narrative research focuses much attention on one or two individual stories or experiences on a phenomenon or event. In this case it would look at individual experiences of transition from primary to post primary education. A clear advantage of narrative research is "its ability to focus in great detail on the events of an individual's life" (Mertler 2019, p.89) in order to offer explanations into that event within its context. However narrative research requires the researcher to spend a huge amount of time collecting data from the participant. Also the individual's narrative is highly influenced by the context of their life, which the researcher must be acutely aware of. Having weighed up the positives and negatives of this approach it was decided by this researcher not to pursue narrative research in the interpretivist paradigm.

3.2.4 Action Research

Action Research as its name suggests, involves the researcher being involved in some form of change or action. It seeks collaborative inquiry by all participants and engages in sustained change in organisations or institutions (Stringer 2007). Action research blurs the line “between researcher and participant, creating a democratic inquiry process” (Marshall and Rossman 2016, p.26). This form of research often seeks to improve practice and would suit the transition from primary to post primary school, as it would seek improvements in this process in the case study school. However this is not without its pitfalls for the researcher as it could be seen to be critical of colleagues who are directly involved as teachers in the transition process. Also many “researchers seem fairly divided as to whether generalisation of the results of an action research project is either feasible or indeed worthwhile” (Gray 2014, p.345). Action research usually takes longer than other approaches, time constraints would count against this approach for this research. Therefore I did not selected this approach for this dissertation.

3.2.5 Semi-Structured Interviews

After much consideration, I decided that semi-structured interviews would be the best way forward within the interpretivist paradigm. This form of qualitative research suited the research aims and would gather relevant data for my primary and secondary research questions. Semi-structured interviews are often used in qualitative research. The interviewer prepares a list of questions that will cover the scope of the interview topic, in this case student transition from primary to post primary school. Sometimes “additional questions may be asked, including some which were not anticipated at the start of the interview” (Gray 2014, p.384). This was the case in this research as follow up questions were asked of some of the interviewees to seek further explanations on their answers. If responses lacked detail “the interviewer should probe further” (Flick 2015, p.140).

3.2.6 The Strengths of Semi-Structured Interviews

This form of interview allows the participant to speak freely and openly on their perspective on the topic. It also allows for dialogue in some cases between participant and researcher, where the participant can expand on their ideas on the transition from primary to post primary school. It allows the interviewer to lead the discussion into greater depth (Flick 2015). Also this format is flexible as it allows the interviewer to omit questions or change the running order. This flexibility allows for a deeper understanding of the topic and allows for probing by the interviewer. This can open up “new pathways, which while not originally considered as part of the interview, help towards meeting the research objectives” (Gray 2014, p.386).

3.2.7 The Limitations of Semi-Structured Interviews

A major limitation of semi-structured interviews is that the participants may have a desire to please the interviewer with their answers (Patton 2002). Also there is the possibility that the interviewee's perception of the researcher might alter responses in some fashion, thus influencing responses in various ways. However this did not occur in any noticeable way during the course of the interviews and if it did arise, the interviewer would remind the interviewee of the role and nature of the research. It should be noted that a well-constructed interview will gather more salient data, thus the construction of an interview should be linked to the aims of the research (Flick 2015). However, it must also be noted that semi-structured interviews are time consuming in the interviewing, transcribing and analysing.

3.3 Gathering and Analysing of the Data

3.3.1 Data Collection

The researcher had access to the case study school by gaining approval of the gatekeeper, who was the school principal. The fundamental question for data collection with the research aims in mind was 'Who would know about the transition from primary to post primary school?' An obvious answer here was the students who had made the transition into the case study school. However for ethical reasons, these young people did not form part of the study. After consultation with my supervisor we decided that young students who had experienced a negative transition to post primary school may become unduly upset if they were involved in this study. It is the intention of this research to avoid such discomfort to young students in the case study school. I decided instead to focus on teachers who had experience of dealing with students making the transition into post primary school and parents of students who had just gone through the process. I felt these participants' perspective would be of value to the research.

The first concern here was how to sample participants for the face to face semi structured interviews. In terms of sampling teachers, this research wanted the view of teachers involved directly with the transition to post primary school, not general teachers who may have limited knowledge or insight on the process. Thus an inclusion and exclusion criteria based this rationale for deciding which staff members would be part of the study was used. I decided that members of the student support team in the school would be most suitable as they deal with the transition into post primary on an annual basis. This is called purposeful sampling and

involves the intentional selection of individuals and sites to learn about or understand the topic at hand (Creswell 2005). Crucial to this method of sampling is the researchers “judgement of the degree to which potential participants possess the information needed to address the topic” (Mertler 2016, p.197). This method of sampling was just used for the teacher participants as it would gather rich data on their perspective on school transition to post primary.

The parents were sampled also using a nonprobability or non-random technique called snowball sampling. In this case, the research was seeking parents of students who had made the transfer to post primary school recently. The researcher used the parents’ council of the school to find participants. Snowball sampling identified these parents who were then “used as informants to identify or put the researcher in touch with others who qualify for inclusion” (Cohen *et al.* 2006, p.104). This was done to get participants whose children had recently started secondary school and to get their perspective while it was still recent to their memory. “The task for the researcher is to establish who are the critical or key informants, with whom initial contact must be made” (Cohen *et al.* 2006, p.104).

Once the sample has been established, information sheets and consent forms were given to participants, these were returned and the collection of data began. Dates were arranged with teachers and the recording of interviews began. These interviews took place with both teachers and parents throughout the month of May 2019. The first interview took place on the 9th of May and the final interview took place 29th May 2019. In total nine interviews took place, six with teachers and three with parents. The interviews took place in the Guidance Counsellor’s office of the school. The researcher made available, the supports of the school’s pastoral care team should any participant become upset, this did not arise.

3.3.2 Data Analysis

The data was audio recorded and the semi-structured interviews were transcribed by the researcher. The nine interviews were individually analysed using a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis means the data is examined “to extract core themes that could be distinguished both between and within transcripts” (Bryman, 2012, p.13). The words theme and code are used interchangeably in this dissertation. Code or theme defines what the data the researcher is analysing, is about. It involves identifying passages of text “that exemplify the same theoretical or descriptive idea” (Gibbs 2007, p.38). Strauss and Corbin (1990) divide coding into three stages. The first being open coding, where the text is read reflectively to identify categories. Then axial coding, where the categories are refined and related and finally selective coding, “where a central category that ties all other categories in the theory into a story” (Gibbs 2007,

p.50). This form of analyses took place for all interview transcripts and allows to “cluster key issues in your data and allows to take the steps towards drawing conclusions” (Bell 2010, p.222). The first step in this approach involved reading the transcripts numerous times, then placing an initial identification of themes in the margin of the transcripts, this open coding. Bearing in mind the secondary research questions, these codes were rewritten on a separate page. This separate page was read a number of times to find themes and was colour coded accordingly. This means the researcher identified themes by taking notes and cross checking each interview. These themes or codes were compared across the range of interviews. They were then placed in a hierarchy “this involves thinking about what kinds of things are being coded and what questions are being answered” (Gibbs 2007, p.73). This involved the identification of major and minor themes that emerged across the nine interviews. The analytical “process relies heavily on narrative summary and rich description” (Mertler 2019, p.79). This process was paused as the research reread the transcripts to verify the themes were faithful to the original transcripts. As this process took place, a number of themes emerged across all of the interviews, these included the participant’s perspective on the (a) formal transition to post primary (b) the informal transition to post primary school (c) the role of the mentoring programme in the school (d) Improvements that could made to the transition process. Another strong theme centred on the role of the guidance counsellor and staff in the transition to post primary process, but it did not feature in every interview. Likewise the role of parents featured in some but not all of the interviews and the need to give special education needs students extra attention during the transition featured in only three of the interviews.

3.4 Validity, Reliability, Reflexivity and Ethics in Research

The next section will discuss the various ethical issues that arose during the course of the research and will also look at validity, reliability of the research and how the researcher’s reflexivity influenced various research decisions.

3.4.1 Validity

Validity in research can be summarised in the question “does the method measure what it is supposed to measure?” (Flick 2015, p.233). The term validity is concerned with the design and methods of the research. There are two forms of validity, internal and external validity. Internal validity revolves around the “question of how far the constructions of the researcher are grounded in the constructions of those being researched” (Gray 2014, p.182) Thus there is

a danger that the research could be influenced by the subjective interpretations of the researcher. External validity is concerned with generalisations that can be gathered from the research. A generalisation is a set of assertions of enduring value that are context-free (Lincoln and Guba 1994). However, in case study research it allows “us to build working hypotheses that can be tested in subsequent cases” (Gray 2014, p.183). In the design of this research, there was an awareness by the researcher of the risks to internal validity as I had worked in the case study school and was aware of the transition from primary to post primary in that school. This is known as conformation bias. However, by expanding the search for participants beyond solely the staff of the school to include parents and by using semi-structured interviews the validity of the research was enhanced by allowing a freedom to participants to expand on their views on the transition to post primary school in an open and honest fashion. In order to handle any validity issues that arose in the interview process I kept a reflective diary and noted any instances where generalisations were made by me or the participants in the course of the semi structured interviews.

3.4.2 Reliability

Reliability in research is the “dependability, consistency and reliability over time, over instruments and over groups of respondents” (Cohen *et al.* 2011, p.199). It is centred on “the question of whether the results of a study are repeatable” (Bryman 2012, p.46). For the results of research to be considered reliable, they must be consistent and stable. In qualitative inquiry where the researcher is the interpretative instrument, calling himself or herself reliable is not enough, we must ensure our interpretations of data are trustworthy (Marshall and Rossman 2016, p.44). The use of semi-structured interviews was key to limiting any inference of biases on behalf of the interviewer. Also further steps were taken to limit bias, such as discussions with my supervisor and keeping a reflective diary, yet some bias is simply inevitable. These interviews were conducted in an ethical manner with separate sets of questions for the separate groups; teachers and parents. The questions were asked in the same order and in the design phase, much care was taken to avoid leading questions. These questions were “brief, clear and worded in simple language” (Mertler 2019, p.172). This was to avoid confusion and over clarification by the interviewer which might influence the answers and impinge the reliability of the data. To avoid personal bias, the researcher avoided deviating from the order of the questions. The researcher was very aware of their positionality in the research and noted this in his reflective diary.

3.4.3 Reflexivity

The positionality of the researcher is also known as reflexivity, this is “the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the human as instrument” (Lincoln and Guba 2000, p.183). As researchers, we must be aware that our own biases and assumptions are informed by our own world view, and must clarify these for the reader so they can understand our interpretations of the data. The “researcher’s values and expectations influence the conduct and conclusions of the study” (Maxwell 2005, p.108). Etherington (2004) understands “reflexivity as the capacity of the researcher to acknowledge how their own experience and context (which might be fluid and changing) inform the process and outcomes of the inquiry” (Etherington 2004, p.32). The researcher has always been interested in life transitions, having made a very successful transition from primary to post primary school many years ago. However the researcher had a rather unsuccessful transition to third level education, these experiences shaped much of the researcher’s world view on the topic of the transition process. Also the researcher is an education practitioner and has worked in the case study school for ten years. The researcher was acutely aware of his position within the staff and school community, thus a separation of role had to be made clear at the semi-structured interview phase with both staff and parents. Each participant was reminded before the interview that they could speak openly about their experience and that the data would be used solely for the purpose of the research project. They were reminded that I was acting as a researcher and not a teacher for the time of the interview. Also their confidentiality was assured within the process. It was made very clear that the researcher was interested in their perspective on school transition into post primary and it was not a test of what they did or did not know about the process. It should be noted that having done this at the start of each interview, my role within the school still impacted on the research. The researcher was aware of their role as a teacher but resisted the temptation to offer advice or comments during the interview so as to avoid confusion and influencing the validity of the data. This temptation to give advice or comment was featured in the reflective diary I kept on the research.

3.4.4 Ethical Considerations

When conducting research, there are many ethical issues that require consideration. The researcher can “anticipate those ethical issues and employ appropriate strategies to resolve them” (Gall *et al.* 2007, p.69). Much thought was given over to conduct research that was ethically sound. Prior to beginning the research, I was required to submit a research ethics application to the University of Limerick’s Faculty of Education and Health Science Research

Ethics Committee. This was a comprehensive process and required careful consideration of research methods. My supervisor and I decided at an early stage to avoid interviewing students under the age of eighteen, on ethical grounds. As a researcher there was a duty of care to ensure vulnerable students did not have to relive the stress of the transition to post primary school, if that was their experience. After an initial application was made for Ethical approval was queried by the Ethics Committee due to proposed use of an external service to transcribe the audio taped interviews. As a result, I decided to transcribe the interviews. This avoided any potential breaches of confidentiality and adhered to the General Data Protection Regulation, as well as ensuring a higher level of trust between the researcher and participants. This was met with Ethical approval and the data gathering could begin.

Approval was sought and granted by the case study school principal which allowed the interviewing process to start. All participants were given an information sheet (See Appendix A) which outlined that the interview would be audio recorded for data analysis purposes. The interviews were conducted and transcribed, all data was stored in line with the General Data Protection Regulation and relevant data handling legislation. The researcher is satisfied that the research was conducted in an ethical manner and “the potential for harm is outweighed by potential good of the study, or benefit to participants or society (Savin-Baden and Major 2013, p.323). Throughout the process ethical considerations were foremost by the researcher and his supervisor, in terms of design and carrying out of the research.

3.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has outlined the primary and secondary questions that underpin the study. In order to gain a fuller understanding of the transition from primary to post primary school, the researcher has decided to use semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents in the case study school. The interpretivist paradigm or qualitative form of research will be used to find answers to the primary and secondary research questions. This chapter has outlined the strengths and weaknesses of the interpretivist paradigm, while also pointing out its suitability for this research. This method will gain valuable data and look at both teachers’ and parents’ perspectives on student transition to post primary school. Also, the gathering of data and methods of analysis were discussed. This chapter also considered the important aspects of validity, reliability, reflexivity and the many ethical considerations encountered throughout the research process. This paper will now move towards presenting the findings of the research in chapter four of this dissertation.

Chapter 4: Data Findings

4.0 Introduction

The main purpose of this chapter is to present the main findings from the data gathered through qualitative semi-structured interviews with teachers who are members of the student support team and parents of current first years in the case study school. A range of major and minor themes emerged from the nine interviews conducted. The data gathered from the participants gave their perspective on the transition from primary to post-primary school in a rural setting. The data gives a unique insight into the complex nature of transition to post primary and the various interventions the schools have in place to aid the transition process. The following are the major themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts:

- a) Perspectives on the formal transition to post primary
- b) Perspectives on the informal transition to post primary
- c) The role of the Guidance Counsellor and staff in the transition to post primary
- d) The mentoring programme

Also, minor themes emerged, these included the school's rural setting and improvements to the transition process to post primary.

4.1 Establishing the themes

Before this chapter discusses the various themes gathered from the data, a brief outlining of how the themes were established will be discussed with specific examples. These themes were established using coding. The interviews were analysed individually by firstly being read reflectively a number of times, and the researcher then placed a phrase in the margin of the text to indicate what the section or line is about. For example, an interview with staff member five produced this raw text from the transcript. *“So over the years, I felt that they've, they seem a bit swamped. So I hold back a bit until usually day three of their first week”*. As a researcher I read this sentence numerous times and decided to place the phrase 'swamped' into the margin as this reflects what these sentences are about. The phrase, words or sentences that were placed in the margin were all written out onto a larger A3 page. Another example of this would be the following from parent three; *“It was surprisingly positive, to be honest. And I expected, you know, obviously, there were teething problems, whatever, but he seemed to really enjoy it. Now, he was fortunate in that.”* This received a code in the margin of 'relieved at a positive transition', which is a reflective code, paraphrasing what the parent was saying.

Once I had listed all these phrases, I returned to the original transcripts to verify I had remained loyal to the origins as I paraphrased in some of the codes I placed in the margin. A reading of these codes then took place and I decided on the major themes and minor themes. I then used a highlighter pen to colour the different codes on the A3 sheet (See Figure 4.1) I then returned to the original transcripts and highlighted the quotations that related to that theme. This process started in mid-June and was finished by mid-August, thus taking about eight weeks to complete.

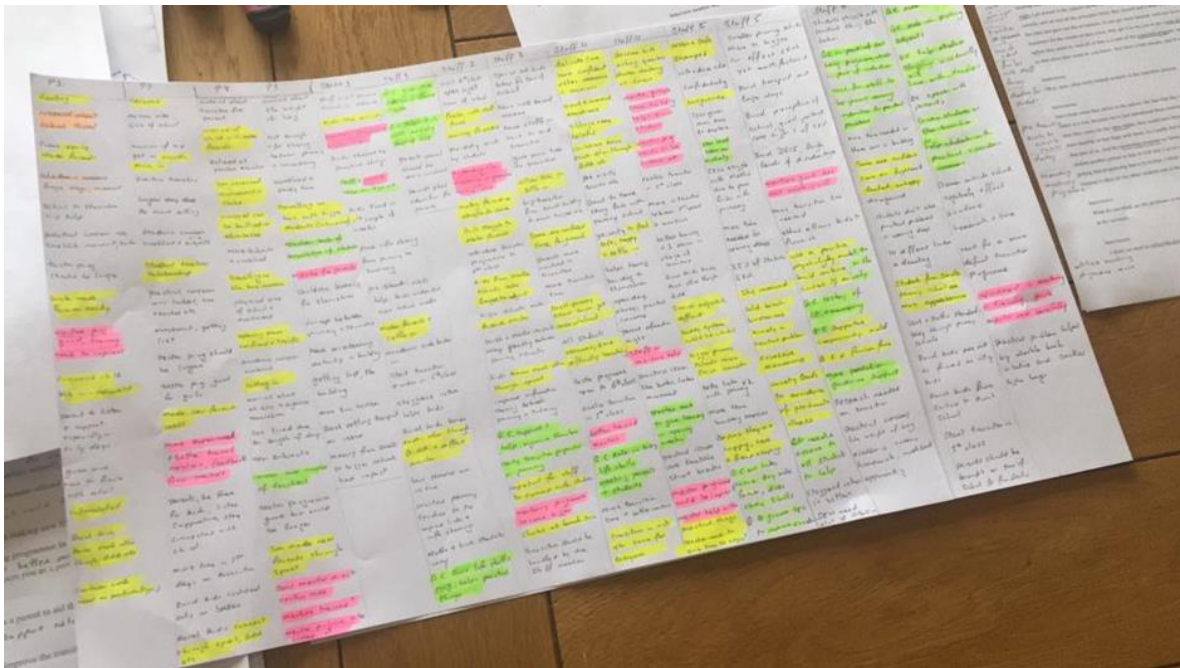


Figure 4.1 Colour code of selected themes.

4.2 Theme 1: The formal transition programme for incoming students is important and requires time and resources.

The formal transition to post primary refers to the formal structures the school has in place to aid transition and can be divided into practical concerns and academic issues.

4.2.1 The practicality of the first few weeks in school can be challenging for some incoming students to post primary.

All participants mention students having practical concerns in the run-up to and during the opening days at the start of post primary school. These practical concerns included things like; getting lost, moving classrooms numerous times a day, longer days, weight of school bags, following the timetable and ability to organise themselves in the secondary systems. While this was a strong theme across the interviews, parents spoke more about this aspect of the formal transition. Both parents and students reflected that practical concerns need much

attention and can cause much stress to some students. Parent number one stated *“my child found most challenging was the change of classrooms. The mastering of the timetable and bringing in the correct books”*. This is echoed by parent number two who cited the movement between classrooms as challenging. While parent number three reported similar concerns *“the whole movement of a 40-minute period and going from place to place, and that in itself can be very difficult.”* This parent was also worried about their son’s ability to organise themselves, saying *“it took a couple of weeks”* for this to be solved. The staff also reported these organisational issues with staff member number six saying it surprised him *“how difficult it was for some of the first years to organise themselves around lockers, the school itself, even timetables”* he goes on to say later in the interview *“first years don’t get time to get to know the building properly or to get to know their lockers, they have to read timetables, they’re coming from a situation of one teacher to a situation where they will be dealing with maybe ten different teachers.”* Staff member one finds students are stressed by *“small things like lockers, lunch queues, books, timetable”*. Staff member number four reports students are *“anxious about their surroundings in the opening days”*.

4.2.2. Students struggle to manage the new experience of so many subjects for the first time.

Another aspect of the formal transition to post primary was the challenging academic issues presented for students. This was raised by both staff and parents as concerns for incoming students. All parents interviewed mentioned that the increased workload was a concern for their children. The number of subjects and workload was major concern of parents, while staff felt more work was needed to help students to adjust academically. The amount of subjects was an issue *“you know, ten or eleven subjects ... it seems to be endless and it’s an awful lot of juggling in terms of even the homework, trying to work out what homework he has with all the subject, like”* (Parent number three). While parent number one mentions *“keeping up with new courses and study and understanding the new curriculum”* as a concern for their child starting secondary school. While parent number two cites the amount of subjects as one of their top concerns in what she describes as a *“big, big transition from primary to secondary.”* The staff members interviewed say academic adjustment as a big challenge for incoming first years with staff member one insists that once first years have settled in the academic side kicks in and very quickly. Staff members two, four, five and six all cite the variation in the standards of the subjects Irish and Mathematics as a concern for the school. Indeed, staff member five tells an interesting anecdote about a student suffering anxiety over Mathematics as she struggled in the

class. It was later revealed that this student had only covered fifth class Maths in primary school and was completely lost in secondary. This led to school refusal for a time. Staff member number two states, Maths and Irish are at different levels within the first-year group *“because different primary schools would do it to above and beyond the curriculum and then some of them don’t. The school has introduced a Maths club on Thursday lunchtime in reaction to this”* she stated. Staff member six says *“Irish and Maths can be a problem, whether it’s a small school or a big school, it seems they’re seen to be the two subjects, particularly Irish that they are apprehensive about.”* Staff members one, three, four and five all mention Special Educational Needs students require extra attention in terms of academically making the transition to post primary. This chapter now turn to look at the participant’s perspectives on the informal transition.

4.3 Theme 2: The informal transition, especially social and emotional aspects are a concern for parents and some teachers.

The informal transition refers to elements of the transition that staff and school have little control over managing. It focuses on how the students adjust emotionally and socially to the move to post primary. The school can try to introduce mentoring systems or a buddy system to ease this element, yet for the most part, it is done by the students themselves. This section will look at the informal transition by focusing on the emotions of the students as they settled in and making friends as a key part of the social transition.

4.3.1 Parents and teachers are concerned about students emotionally settling into school at a social level.

All participants reflected a range of emotions experienced by students as they made the transition to post primary school. The three parents all expressed their own personal worry about how their child would settle in. Their main concern was about their child making friends, which is a part of the informal transition. Parent number one said their child found the opening days daunting and were intimidated by their new school. They were concerned their child *“would be to defend oneself and not feel intimidated.”* Parent number two reported being *“apprehensive at the start and nervous”* about the move to a bigger school. While parent number three was *“very worried”* citing the transition as a *“huge jump to come from a small rural school and being very anxious.”* However, all three parents reported a positive experience in terms of their children making a successful transition to post primary. Yet, parent number three recounts the opening days as difficult for their child, *“Initially, in the first week or so, he was very confused, and I mean being honest he was a bit tearful.”* This parent reports

his child as being “*very, very tired, the first couple of weeks, getting used to it.*” This was echoed by staff member number one who noted incoming first years “*get very tired for the first couple of weeks.*” The majority of the staff reported that first years in the opening weeks of post primary present with higher levels of anxiety. The opening days and weeks can be stressful as students feel ‘*swamped*’ by the initial transition into their new school (Staff member five).

Parent number three reported their child feeling intimidated and anxious, when travelling on the bus to school and mentioned the lack of supervision. Staff member number five expands on the issue of anxiety. “*Anxiety is increased a lot, in my experience over the last few years, certain things wax and wane, like self-harm for example, but anxiety has been on a continual incline upwards.*” This anxiety manifests itself in “*avoidance*” or “*seeking excessive reassurance*”. Also, it can present as “*psychosomatic illnesses*” and problems with attendance. This staff member also reports some first years feel “*a bit bewildered, disorientated*” and some can be rather shy in the opening weeks. There are a number of emotions mentioned by staff as they reflected on the emotional transition as students start secondary school. Nervous or apprehensive is mentioned by staff members one, two, three, five and six. This will lead in some cases for the minority of students to feel unhappy, this reveals itself as students are “*late, they’re confused, they’re disorganised, they’re stressed, they’re unhappy, not focused on what they should be doing.*” (Staff member six). However, the transition to post primary proves to be an emotionally positive one for many students. Staff member four notes, “*it’s normal to be really nervous and all these emotions are real because it’s such a massive transition for them.*” While staff member six says, “*every student is different, some students are very confident.*” This could be a reaction to the new school as some are “*overcompensating, so they can be kind of brash, bold and boisterous*” (Staff member five).

4.3.2 The informal transition is aided by extra-curricular activities, which help children to network socially.

The informal transition is very important to the participants in this research, parents saw making friends as foundational to the transition to post primary. Staff felt this was crucial for students to make connections through sport and other community activities. These connections make the social transition much easier for pupils. For the parents interviewed, they all cited the importance of their children making friends and “*mixing in*” as a main concern for them in making the transition to secondary school. Parent three expressed being worried about his son making new friends in secondary school. He was relieved when his son made new friends

through sport and joined a number of lunchtime clubs in the school. *“He’s not the most sporty but he has got involved in things like lunchtime clubs, he’s got involved in things he hadn’t in primary school, he’s taking risks and chances.”* This parent recalled this social transition as a positive experience. Both parents one and two mentioned the importance that their children would *“get on”* with the teachers in the school. They both stated that contact through the Gaelic Athletic Association and community organisation was helpful in building a social network both inside and outside the school. Parent number one expanded *“Lots of students would have met each other already prior to attending secondary school through sport and leisure activities, debating, quizzes and extra-curricular activities”* which eased the transition. This point is also made by staff member one as *“The meeting of the people from different parishes as they grew up in primary school with, especially the GAA”* eases the social transition. Staff member two focuses much of her intentions on the social transition, *“The first maybe two months I’ve got people coming in here crying that their friends are not talking to them and they don’t have friends.”* This interview goes on to say this is *“very, very important”* to the incoming first years and points out girls seem to find difficulty in adjusting to new friends or friendship groups. This staff member mentions sport and lunchtime clubs as a way for first years to make new friends.

It should be noted that making friends and the social transition is not mentioned by staff member three and only briefly touched on by staff member five and six. This would suggest that the social transition as part of the informal transition might require more attention by some of the staff. In contrast, the parents placed much emphasis on this aspect of the transition and placed it as a main concern by the parents interviewed for this research.

4.4 Theme 3: All staff have a role to play in supporting the transition, but the Guidance Counsellor and Student Support Team have a particular role in supporting the formal and informal transition.

4.4.1 The Student support team has a special role in aiding individuals to ‘settle in’ to post primary school.

In line with the DES policy (DES 2012), the school has a whole-school approach to guidance, thus the whole school and staff have a role to play in ensuring the transition to post primary is a successful one for students. Only a few of the respondents mentioned the staff’s role in this process, but nonetheless it was pointed out by some participants that staff have a part to play

in the process. Both staff members two and three mention a role for staff in helping students once they arrive in secondary school. Staff member two says students meeting a “*friendly or familiar face*” helps the transition process. While staff member three says “*to have the staff available when the students come in initially, when they’re on their own, to give them as much assistance as possible and to organise them*” would help the transition process, this was supported by staff member six. All staff members outlined their own role in the transition of students from primary to secondary. These roles varied across the interviews as some visited primary schools in advance of the students’ entry, others focused on their role in the opening few days while others spoke about how the Student Support Team aided the transition throughout the year. The parents expressed concern over the number of staff their children would encounter and how they would get on with different teachers.

4.4.2 The Guidance Counsellor has skills around well-being which underpin their assistance to students settling in.

All the staff members interviewed stated the Guidance Counsellor had an important role to play in the transition from primary to post primary for students. Participants saw varying roles for the guidance counsellor, while parents didn’t mention any role for the Guidance Counsellor in the transition programme. Staff member six saw the Guidance Counsellor role as “*part of the wellbeing programme which has an induction element*”. They also saw the Guidance Counsellor having a role in testing to establish academic ability of first years, “*to put supports in place for the weaker ones and put challenges and tests for the better ones.*” The Guidance Counsellor will also liaise with parents and teachers throughout the transition according to this interviewee. They go on to point out a role for the Guidance Counsellor in picking subjects for incoming first years and post the transition “*would carry out surveys across the student body, which would indicate what would inform difficulties they are experiencing.*”

Staff member five sees a role for the Guidance Counsellor in testing the pupils on literacy and numeracy but also to make themselves known to the incoming first years in a supportive companionship model. This would happen both through visits to the primary school and in the opening weeks of the new academic year for first years. Staff member four sees a key role for the Guidance Counsellor in aiding the social transition “*to talk to them (first years) about the fact that you are entitled to make new friends, it’s good for you to broaden your horizons and things aren’t always going to stay the same*”, also this interview states the Guidance Counsellor should give “*study skills to first years to aid their academic transition*” Staff member three sees testing as a key part of the Guidance Counsellor’s role along with meeting with parents

and students. Also, *“the Guidance Counsellor would have a lot to do with wellbeing and with life skills programmes”* (Staff member three) which are run for Junior Cycle students in the case study school. Staff member two thinks the Guidance Counsellor is there to *“offer support and a listening ear”* and *“to discuss problems”* with the students. While staff member one states the Guidance Counsellor role is *“one to one meetings that may have in relation to stress, anxiety, that kind of stuff”* as well as getting students to *“think about their own careers at an early stage”* while also being a key part of the wellbeing and life skills programmes in the school. The parents interviewed did not reference the role of the Guidance Counsellor in their interviews.

4.5 Theme 4: A mentoring programme could be a significant resource for the transition, provided mentors are correctly selected and trained.

A strong theme that emerged in the interviews was the participant’s views on the mentoring programme. The mentoring programme is a system in the school that pairs transition year pupils (fourth years) with incoming first years to help them make the transition to their new school. All participants spoke about the mentoring programme, its value and how it could be improved in the future.

4.5.1 Parents’ perspectives on the mentoring programme

Parent number one’s perception of the mentoring programme *“is one of value to the new student coming into first year, they make a new friend in the senior side of the school and they have somebody to ask questions freely during the school day.”* This parent goes on to say, *“see the value in it as mentors are trained and there to support incoming first years”* and also references how mentors who are in Transition Year understand the first years’ culture. Parent number two agrees that the mentoring programme is positive to helping students transition to post primary but has some suggestions for the programmes improvement. This parent stated the mentors *“need more training, and then more feedback from mentors to the first years and make sure they’re ok, just keeping checking in”* This parent repeats the need for better training of mentors and for them to give feedback to the new first years. Parent number three describes the mentoring programme as *“an excellent programme”* but then reveals their son’s experience was not ideal. While this parent had heard positive reports from other parents about mentors, he says, *“my son’s mentor, I don’t know that he really cared”*. Parent number three goes on to say the programme *“could have been a little bit better, bit tighter.”* This parent also suggests an expansion of the mentoring programme to help parents, *“I’d love to see where parents could*

have a mentor, have someone kind of a mentor themselves, even if the parents spoke at induction to say these are the pitfalls, to bring home the reality of it.”

4.5.2 Staff's perspective on the mentoring programme

Much like the parents interviewed, the staff found the mentoring programme of value but had suggestions for improvement. Staff members one and two mention the mentoring programme as a help in the opening weeks for first years, yet staff member two wants to “*expand*” the programme. They state, “*I think we need to utilize the mentoring programme more, I think it needs to not be something that’s just another start to the year, it needs to be something that continues on.*” It is this staff member’s view that the programme only lasts until October while it should be used throughout the year for new first years. Staff member three echoes the concerns of the parents, “*I think it would be good if the mentors were better trained, so that they would be able to help the students in a better way.*” While staff member five is very positive about the mentoring programme, naming it as one of the best ways to aid the transition into post primary.

This is in contrast with staff member six, who is critical of the current mentoring programme, “*The attempt to train mentors is poor, the mentors don’t help the students in ways that would be necessary, they’re poorly trained, poorly motivated, their role is not well defined*”. This staff member says mentors should be not just picked from Transition Year only and “*people to do the mentoring should be identified early on and should have pride in being a mentor.*” The staff member goes on to explain, “*the problem last year as to who was in charge of the whole process*”. Thus, there is a worry that no staff member is co-ordinating the mentoring programme. This staff member also states that first years “*need more time with the mentors, we need to have more contact time*” and “*mentors need to be well trained so that they can spot things straight away*”.

4.6 Minor themes

A number of minor themes emerged during the analysis of the data. These themes were not as strong as the major themes and are the following a) improvements to the transition process, b) the rural setting of the school. Due to constraints in word count I will now briefly outline the findings of these minor themes.

4.6.1 Improvements to the transition to post primary

Through the course of the interview various participants offered suggestions to improve the transition to post primary school. One of the most common suggestions was to allow a longer

time for first years to have the building to themselves at the start of the new academic year. This means staggering the return of older pupils to the school. Parent number one said “*maybe more time could be given to students when getting familiar with this process*” in reference to lockers and the school building. Likewise, parent number two said “*they only get a half a day from going from primary to secondary, maybe they could do a full day in there*” Parent number three did not suggest any extra time was needed in the opening day, nor did staff members one, two and four. Staff member three said “*more time should be allocated for the actual period of transitioning for the first couple of days*” this is mirrored by staff members five and six who feel the new first years should have more time on their own in the building without other year groups present.

Another suggested improvement was that links between primary and secondary school could be improved to increase efficiency in information sharing. Both staff members one and two mentioned information sharing as an issue. “*We don’t get an education plan that is sent from primary school and resources exemptions, education reports haven’t come in time which is very frustrating*” (Staff member one). However, this did not present as an issue with the other staff members’ interview or the parents except for parent number three. This parent stated, “*I don’t think there’s enough information given from secondary school into primary school and I think it’s an absolute massive jump*”. This parent thinks co-operation between the two systems would aid the transition for the students. Both staff and parents stated that the tasters programme was a positive in the transition, yet some question its length and that it should be extended. The taster programme is a six-week period at the start of secondary where students rotate between option subjects before choosing their subjects for the Junior Certificate.

4.6.2 The rural setting of the school

The final minor theme this chapter will present is the rural setting of the case study school. This theme emerged in parents and some of the staff interviews, however, it should be noted that some of the staff found the fact the school was based in a rural area had no impact on the transition to post primary. Staff member two and three were of the view the rural setting had no material impact. Staff member one cited the bus service as a potential problem in getting geographically isolated students to the school and also felt this impacted on the length of the day experienced by new students.

Both parents two and three feel this is an issue for their children with parent three saying, “*it’s a longer day, not just being in school, because my son had to travel on a bus, which meant an*

extra hour between going and coming back.” However, some saw the rural location of the school as positive in the transition to post primary, from a social point of view. Parent number one says that in rural areas students will know one another through parish based sport events, making it easier for them to make friends once they have started secondary school, which is repeated by staff member one as students are “*parish orientated*” and know each other through the GAA. Other staff and parents interviewed don’t make this observation and add very little to the rural theme. Except for staff member five, who says “*we serve a lot of villages in what is perceived as the catchment area traditionally and there’s certain perceptions around that we have a good Pastoral Care system*”. Thus perceptions of the school is important in a rural area according to this staff member.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has presented an analysis of the findings from the data collected using an interpretivist thematic analysis. The nine semi-structured interviews gave much data which has been presented in major themes and minor themes. These themes emerged after much reflection and were common across both teachers and parent interviews. In Chapter 5 these finding will be discussed in relation to previous literature on the topic of student’s transition from primary school to secondary school.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.0 Introduction

This chapter will present a critical interpretation of the data findings in chapter four with linkages to key issues that emerged in the literature review. It is the aim of the chapter to compare, contrast and critically evaluate the data findings with relevant literature of the topic of student's transition from primary school to post-primary school. The primary research questions of 'what are the problems for students as they transition from primary to post primary school?' and 'how effective are the interventions currently in place to aid the transition process?' will underpin this chapter, and will be divided into the following headings;

1. The multi- faceted nature of the transition to post-primary especially the, social and emotional transition.
2. The importance of culture and context to the transition from primary to post primary school.
3. Students concerns about institutional and academic dimensions of the transition to post primary school.

5.1. The multi- faceted nature of the transition to post-primary, especially the social and emotional transition.

The literature review in chapter two notes the work of Maeve O'Brien (2004) entitled, '*Making the Move*'. That paper states that the transition from primary school to post-primary school is a time of multiple transitions, as students move, from childhood to adolescence, from one school system to another and from groups of friends into new social groups. O'Brien (2004) argues that this transition has an impact in pupil's lives outside of school and affects the social and emotional lives of the pupils. This section will look at this aspect of the transition to post primary which is linked to the theme in the data findings that concerns itself with the informal transition experienced by students who are moving from primary school to post-primary school.

The social aspect of transitioning to post-primary is featured in the data findings and the literature. Gerner and Wilson (2005) point to the early adolescence life stage as when individuals value being socially accepted. The staff respondents in this research also reflected the importance of the social transition. Parents interviewed reported this aspect of the transition as important for them and their children. It is the interpretation of this researcher that the social

transition was seen by the parents as the most important aspect of the transition to post primary. All three parents interviewed were keen that their children would make new friends and have a wide circle of friends. All the parents interviewed were concerned or worried about the social aspect of the transition to post primary.

The transition to post primary school can cause students to fear the loss of their own friendship groups and have apprehensions about the formation of new friendship groups (Rice *et al.* 2011). The staff interviewed agreed that the social transition is important for students in terms of settling into their new school and at times can be problematic for some students. The staff in general pointed to the fact that a minority of students struggle with losing friends they made in primary school and find it hard to adjust to new friendship groups. Staff member one states the focus should be in the opening weeks on that “*they settle in well and you can see they are making friends*”. This is echoed by staff member two who finds this social transition can be problematic for some students. This issue around social transition comes across very strongly in the interviews with parents, yet it is only discussed by half the staff members interviewed. Hargreaves and Galton’s (2002) study pointed out that girls fear the social transition more so than boys. This is corroborated by staff member two, who points out that the change in friendships groups is much more a problem for girls rather than boys. However, other aspects of the transition are more challenging for boys such as the academic and practical aspects. Smyth *et al.* (2004) found males settle into secondary school more quickly and adapt well socially.

In terms of making the social transition and settling in, the staff interviewed reflected that students with older siblings or friends in the school made this transition with greater ease, with a minority struggled in the opening weeks. Staff member four suggested improvements in the mentoring system within the school, or even a buddy system for new first year students. This seeks to address the issue around new friendships groups and losing old friends found in literature (Smyth 2017, O’ Brien 2004). Staff member four notes the importance of social connections, by saying students coming from a bigger primary school have a larger pool of peers and have more opportunities to know more people, in contrast to those coming from smaller rural schools who struggle socially. The idea of students having opportunities to make friends is part of the informal transition and it shapes peer relationships and friendships (West *et al.* 2008)

Darmody (2008) points to extra-curricular events in school as an opportunity for students to interact socially and improve their social development which is of benefit to making a successful transition to post primary school. Langenkamp (2009) finds extra-curricular participation as having a positive impact on wellbeing outcomes. The case study school has a rich array of extra-curricular activities and has introduced lunchtime clubs. All interviewees mentioned the importance of extra-curricular activities for incoming first year students in making social connections in their new school. The interviewees also stressed the importance of the local clubs outside of the school in establishing friendships before the students start in their new secondary school. Some parents pointed to the Gaelic Athletic Association as a way for students to establish social connections and ease the transition for some in a rural area. The parents interviewed mentioned the G.A.A., community games and church groups as organisations that build a sense of community for the students, before they join their new (post-primary) school. Parent number three states sport was helpful in the social transition for their child and eventually the child spent all of the lunchtime with the friends established through sport. Parent two also mentions sport and community links as helpful for the social development of their child but also for parents to connect with other parents.

The staff respondents to this research were in concurrence that extra-curricular activities outside of school were a huge aid to the social transition for incoming first years. They found the connections made by students through these organisations outside the school meant students had more friends and could make friends more easily as they had common interests and links to each other. Also, extra-curricular events organised by the school were helpful, such as school sports teams and lunch time clubs and were all part of aiding the informal transition. However, with the introduction of new curriculums and time constraints on staff and resources these extra-curricular activities of school teams rely on the good will of staff to ensure they continue to aid this aspect of the social transition. Ford *et al.* (2017) states that this volunteerism has its limits in schools and communities. This key part of the social and emotional transition is centred on extra-curricular activities organised by teachers. Yet this work is very rarely paid and often receives little or no recognition. It is done by the teachers on a voluntary basis and the good will of the teachers. This researcher argues that this vital work of organising extra-curricular activities should be more valued by schools and appropriately resourced in the future. If not, issues like staff burn-out and a lack of volunteerism will have a negative impact on the transition to post primary school for students.

The emotional transition while being problematic for some is usually managed well by the majority of students. Research reveals the students feel ready for post-primary school by the time they reach sixth class in primary school (O'Brien 2004, Smyth 2017). Despite the worry of the parents interviewed, all reported a successful transition to post-primary school. Smyth (2017) found students showed a mixture of excitement and anxiety in the opening period of the transition to post-primary school. This research was mirrored by the staff interviewed as they all stated the vast majority of students settled in well in the opening weeks while a minority struggled to adjust to their new school. Symonds and Hargreaves (2016) link this successful settling in, to the good peer relationships of students, which results in better emotional engagement with teachers and lessons

Anxiety can be a problem for many students, with literature pointing to a lack of connectedness or belonging to their new secondary school as a main driver of this anxiety (Lester *et al.* 2013, Vaz *et al.* 2014). However, others argue sources of anxiety are complex and multifactorial (Zeedyk *et al.* 2003, Furlong 1999). The data findings point to a recurring problem of anxiety for some students. This researcher surmises that anxiety among students over the transition is a constant problem. All staff involved in this research mentioned students being worried, concerned or anxious in the lead up and during opening weeks of their first year in their new post primary school. Staff member five feels this is manifesting itself in a pattern of avoidance and even leading to school refusal. It also emerges as psychosomatic illness as students presenting “*up at the office (school reception) saying that there is a pain in their tummy or their head, when they are checked medically, they seem fine*”. Staff reported students settle in well but some appear worried, or show signs of anxiety about starting secondary school. Staff member six echoes this sentiment, but expands by explaining a minority of student’s emotional transitions manifest itself in obvious ways in some cases. He states some students are late, confused, disorganised, stressed, unhappy and not focused in the opening months.

In terms of both social and emotional transition there was much focus by both parents and staff on issues that might arise around this aspect of the transition. However, in line with the literature the data points to the idea that most pupils adjust well emotionally and socially to their new post primary school. This links to a debate within lifespan human development, which argues that this early adolescence is a time of identity crisis or identity exploration. Within adolescence the social and emotional development is linked to self-identity. Erick Erikson (1968) and others would argue that students starting post primary school, aged between twelve and thirteen encounter a period of identity crisis. This identity crisis is “a temporary

period of distress as they experiment with alternatives before settling on values and goals” (Beck, 2014 p.318). However current theorists have moved away from Erickson’s term of crisis to refer to this process as an exploration as adolescents form their identity (Grotevant 1998). Thus students achieved self-identity which leads to self-esteem without crisis or conflict. Likewise many students transition from primary school to post primary exploring the opportunities that their new school holds for them and adjust without any emotional issues like anxiety and nervousness.

The emotional transition to post-primary is problematic for a small number of students in the case study school. Graham and Hill (2003) reported that a month into post primary education two thirds of students report no anxieties and most state they stopped being worried almost immediately. It is the interpretation of this researcher that staff noted some students were anxious in the opening weeks, but this worried or concerned feeling is a normal part of the transition process to post primary school. Also, staff felt that while some students struggled with the emotional transition, the majority adjusted to their new school quickly and with relative ease. This is corroborated by literature, as young people share emotions like anxiety during the transition (Smyth 2017, West *et al.* 2008). Staff member three finds that there are a range of emotions experienced by first year students, in the opening weeks in their new post primary school. *“Some of them are very confident and they’re very happy and they settled in very fast, but others can be very frightened”* (Staff member three). While staff member two believes some pupils find the transition to post-primary as daunting for some pupils. All parents are worried for their children with two parents expressing a worry about their children being intimidated by older students in the school. Parent three says students in fifth or sixth year would not deliberately intimidate, but their size alone can be intimidating. This was a concern for parents along with fears over bullying and that their children would settle in well, with parent one and two expressing the need for work to be done continuously on the issue of bullying.

5.2 The importance of culture and context to the transition from primary to post primary school.

This section of the discussion will look at the importance of culture and context within the case study school. It will examine how the school community aids the transition for incoming first year students. This section is linked to the theme in the findings chapter that focused on the role of guidance counsellor and staff in aiding students through the transition to post primary. In terms of human development the transition to post primary school is seen as a change in the adolescent’s life. Boyd and Bee (2015) argue that “important changes occur during every

period of development and these changes must be interpreted in terms of culture and context in which they occur” (Boyd and Bee 2015, p.26). Thus the culture and context within the case study school directly influences the transition to post primary school for the students. This culture and context is built up over many years within a school by staff, students, leadership and the community in general. The interventions put in place by the school influence the culture and context. It is this researcher’s argument that the case study school has a strong pastoral care structure, through its student support team and that the transition to post primary is carefully managed by relevant school staff. Despite this strong pastoral care culture in the school, there is much focus by some staff on the academic transition and curriculum delivery. The literature suggests that this excessive focus on the academic aspect of the transition can have a negative effect on student’s transition in the opening months. This can lead students to have negative attitudes towards teachers and secondary school in general. (Smyth 2017).

The school staff in general and teachers on the student support team play a key part in the culture of the school and the context in which the transition to post primary school takes place. These staff members are part of the whole school approach to guidance (DES 2012). In relation to teachers, Booth and Sheehan (2008) in their study based in the United States and the United Kingdom found that students place relationships with teachers and peers as most influential in maintaining their happiness through the transition to post primary. However, some students point to the loss of attachment with their old primary school teacher and their perception of strictness of their new post primary teacher as challenges in the transition to post primary process (Ashton 2008). In the data, some of the parents interviewed mentioned the staff in relation to the transition to post primary in a negative light; they felt it was a huge adjustment for students of a young age to move from one teacher to such a large number of teachers in a single day. The parents in general were concerned about the interaction between students and teachers, but overall were satisfied their children could transition to having multiple teachers in the one day. Research by West *et al.* (2008) found students have greater difficulty forming attachments with their teachers in post primary school in comparison to primary school due to the larger numbers of teachers and students. Staff interviewed felt there was a role for both general teachers and student support teachers in aiding the transition to post primary for pupils. Staff member one felt general subject teachers and especially pastoral care teachers would keep an eye out for students struggling with the transition, in reference to the practical concerns faced by first year students in the opening week. Staff member two stressed the importance of building relationships between students and staff during the transition program, ‘*to get them*

familiar with our faces so that when they come in, they have a link already and it's not daunting for them'.

All staff felt having as many staff members present on the opening days to meet the first years would be helpful as it would build a welcoming culture in the school and provide an inclusive context to the transition to post primary for the new students of the school. The staff interviewed felt that subject teachers should be more patient with the new first years and give them leeway in the opening weeks of first year in their new school. This would allow students more time to adjust to the organisational change they are experiencing. There is so much variation in the teacher student relationship with students having many different teachers in one day, with different expectations by each teacher, this can lead to stress for the student (Zeedyk *et al.* 2003). Staff member five references the role of the year head as pivotal in building a pastoral care culture within the school. The person in the role of first year head is *'described to me by students as motherly and firm, so they would approach her even if they were in trouble. I think that helps the transition'* (Staff member five). This is in line with literature, as year heads provide social and personal guidance through their role as part of a whole school approach to guidance (Hearne *et al.* 2016).

The staff in the school works closely with the guidance counsellor and student support team to aid the transition for students to post primary, but the guidance counsellor plays a key role in the process. This work of the staff provides the context of the transition for students starting secondary school. The role of the guidance counsellor is *'clearly of central importance'* (DES 2009, p.10) in aiding students making the transition to post primary school. The guidance counsellor has a role in ensuring *'a smooth transition of students to second level'* (DES 2009, p.14) school. However, none of the parents interviewed mentioned the guidance counsellor as a person involved in the transition process. This lack of clarity among parents links to the research of McCoy *et al.* (2006) who suggested due to the varied role of guidance counsellor within school, not all are centrally involved in the transition programme to post primary school. Conversely, Smyth (2017) suggests that the transition to post primary should have involvement from the guidance counsellor and the school's wellbeing programme.

The staff interviewed did see a role of the guidance counsellor in helping to make the transition to their new school. This varied role of the guidance counsellor in the case study school is part of the culture and context of that particular school. Staff member one saw the guidance counsellor role as helping with practical things and giving early career advice and being part

of the student support team in relation to emotional or personal guidance. This is echoed by staff member two who saw the Guidance Counsellor role to help with organisational issues for incoming first years. Staff member three saw the guidance counsellor role as central to the delivery of the life skills course to first years. These responses reflect the ‘social, emotional, vocational and educational’ (DES 2005, p.4) aspects of the role guidance counsellor are in line with DES policy. This is reiterated by staff member four who sees the guidance role as both pastoral and academic, by stating how vital the guidance service is in giving study skills to incoming first years. This will provide context for the student of what acceptable homework is and sets a culture of academic improvement. Staff member four says “*students coming from primary school know absolutely nothing about studying*”. Thus academic guidance is seen as important by this interviewee. Staff member five sees a pivotal role in the academic area with testing of literacy and numeracy skills of the students by the guidance counsellor.

However, this interviewee places emphasis on the emotional aspect of the guidance service in the school, suggesting a supportive companionship model. This interviewee goes on to state it is very beneficial to have two trained counsellors in the school. Having two counsellors on the staff and a very active student support teams ingrains the pastoral care culture within the school. While staff member six sees the guidance counsellor as more of an educational and vocational role. The guidance counsellor is intrinsically involved in choosing and helping students choose their subjects, staff member six acknowledges the emotional and social aspects of guidance services during the transition but places the emphasis on liaising with parents and teachers in relation to academic progress. This also plays a role in the established culture and context of the school in seeking academic advancement. This is a context and culture that informs the transition process for the incoming first years and plays a part in their development as students in the case study school.

5.3 Students concerns about institutional and academic dimension of transition to post primary school.

This section of the discussion will focus on academic and institutional areas of the transition to post primary school. In the findings chapter this was dealt with, the section that focused on the formal transition such as practical and academic concerns was a strong theme that emerged from the data. The academic transition refers to how students adjust to secondary school in relation to new curriculums, new subjects and new teaching styles. The institutional transition denotes how students react to their new school as an institution; this refers to new rules, the new school building and various practical concerns such as timetables, lockers and navigating

their way around the building. In the literature these aspects of the transition were referred to by O' Brien (2004) who indicated that students expressed worry and anxiety, 'before they enter second level and in the first few weeks after transfer relate to various areas of school life' (O' Brien 2004, p.4). This is a view shared by other writers on the topic of transition or transfer from primary to post primary school (Galton *et al.* 2000, Smyth 2017, Naughton 2003). During the transition from primary to post primary school 'young people move from small self-contained classroom to a large, more heterogeneous school with increased expectation of independent academic performance' (Hanewald 2013, p.64). Thus the move to post primary represents practical concerns in relation to the new institution and academic concerns for students. This is echoed in much of the data as practical concerns featured heavily, parent number one found her child struggled with the layout of the new building and noted the moving from class to class as very daunting. Parent number two likewise felt the institutional transition was challenging, stating the size of the institution as a source of apprehension "*I was apprehensive at the start and nervous for her because you're going from a school that has eighty children into five hundred children*". Also parents were concerned about their children getting lost in their new institution or school. It is the interpretation of this researcher that parents worried that their children would adjust to various new aspects of the institution they had joined, such as school rules and practical concerns of the building itself. These concerns tie with the literature (Hanewald 2013, Smyth 2017) which find students struggling to adjust to having numerous teachers in the one school day.

These issues around institutional or organisational transition to post primary school are also noted by many of the staff interviewed. Staff member three found "*it's a big transition for all primary school students to second level in the sense it's a bigger school*". Staff member four suggests having more time with just new first years in the building without other year groups would be beneficial in easing the concerns around the institutional transition. "*So at least when they're alone in the school, they have time to get to know the place*" (Staff member four). Also staff member six points to the common problem of students finding numerous different teachers as a daunting prospect. This staff member agrees in relation to time in the school building without other year groups. The staff interviewed for this research all felt that students should be given more time to adjust to their new institution. They all reported that incoming first years should be given more time alone in the building, (without other years groups present) to organise themselves and to find their way around the building. Staff member one and two note, that these practical transitions to a new institution can be a source of stress for students. These

practical concerns are mentioned by all those interviewed, both staff and parents. These concerns hinder the institutional transition and require attention to help students make the transition for post primary school.

The academic transition is also an issue for pupils, West *et al.* (2008) states the increase in subjects at post primary school hinders the settling process of first year students. The current reform of the Junior Certificate seeks to reduce the number of subjects in the Junior Cycle and the introduction of wellbeing (DES 2018) seeks to ease the transition for incoming first years. However many students experienced most subjects in the opening weeks through taster programmes. As a result, students have many subjects during the transition period in the opening weeks. This can impact on the academic transition being made by new first year pupils in the secondary school. Students find difficulties with new subject content and teaching methods (Naughton 2003). Also students are confused over the timetable which they find inflexible in comparison to primary school. (Barnes-Holmes *et al.* 2013) In the case study school the students try all subjects for the first six weeks and then pick their junior cert subjects. This varies from school to school across the Irish system. This researcher points to work of West *et al.* (2008) who infer the number of subjects encountered by new students in post primary hinders the transition to a new school system. The new Junior Certificate reforms actually frontload extra subjects thus exacerbating the sense of students being flooded, that is inherit in the move from primary to post primary. This would seem to be a defect in the design of the new Junior Certificate which seeks to reduce the workload on pupils yet allows the workload and subject numbers to peak during the crucial opening weeks of the transition to secondary school.

The main concern for parents in terms of the academic transition was the increased workload. This increased workload meant more homework for students. The increase in the amount of subjects put pressure on student's ability to organise themselves with nine different subjects in a school day. Parent number three cites their son's academic transition. *"I would have grave concerns for the jump from primary school to post primary academically"*. A number of staff mentioned the subjects of Maths and Irish as being problematic for students. Smyth (2017) reported that students found these subjects as not interesting, difficult and fuelled negative attitudes towards school. International research also points to Maths as a problematic subject for students after the transition to post primary, Burchinal *et al.* (2008) points to decline in Maths scores for students in the United States in middle school. Staff interviewed said the academic transition required more attention from staff and the guidance counsellor in the

school. Staff member six states the guidance counsellor should aid students in relation to study skills and time management. Also this staff member notes that events out of school like involvement in games is good for a student's wellbeing but can cause students to fall further behind academically.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the main topics that emerged from the findings as points for discussion. The first section was centred on the informal transition and linked with literature through the emotional and social aspects of the transition to the post primary school. While this social and emotional aspect is the cornerstone of the entire transition it is somewhat neglected in terms of resources and relies on volunteerism of teachers to ensure a successful social transition to post primary for students. This volunteerism needs to be recognised and resourced appropriately to ensure it continues to help students make the social transition to post primary level. The second part of this discussion focused on the culture of the case study school and how that culture informs the context of the transition to post primary school for the students. This culture was a mix of a strong emphasis on pastoral care and academic achievement. This researcher argues that this 'mix in priorities' within the culture of the school can hinder the transition to post primary school. Some staff focus on just curriculum delivery and have little regard for the complex nature of the transition to post primary. This can lead to long term negative attitudes to secondary school. The next section of this discussion looked at the institutional and academic aspect of the transition. This can be a complex part of the transition exacerbated by the front loading of academic content in the form of numerous subjects in the opening months of the new Junior Certificate. This paper argues this flooding of students with 'tasters' of numerous subjects can negatively impact on students making the transition to post primary level. Also, the findings chapter featured a theme in relation to mentoring of new first years in secondary school. Much of the data gathered is concerned with changes in personnel and the unstructured nature of the mentoring programme in the case study school, as a result this theme is not strongly featured in literature. This researcher decided after consultation with their supervisor not to feature it in this discussion chapter. The next chapter will be the conclusion chapter which will outline the strengths and limitations of the study. It will give the recommendations and outline the researcher's personal learning over the course of researching and writing this dissertation.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a summary of the findings based on the initial research questions that were outlined in the introduction chapter. Also this chapter will present the strengths and limitations that emerged during the course of the research. Recommendations for policy, practice and research will also be outlined. Finally this conclusion chapter will provide a brief reflection on the researchers learning throughout the process of researching and writing this dissertation.

6.1 Summary of this study.

The main aim of this study was to gain an understanding of teachers and parents perceptions of the salient issues that students face during their move to post primary. The information in relation to this research was obtained by conducting nine semi-structured interviews with staff and parents in a case study school based in the south west of Ireland. This qualitative approach allowed data to be gathered in a flexible fashion which was analysed using a thematic analysis (Gibbs 2007) to establish common themes with the research questions in mind. These themes featured heavily in the finding and discussion chapters of the dissertation.

The transition to post primary school in terms of students experience is a complex and multifaceted one. Students experience a social, educational, emotional, institutional and organisational change. All students experience initial worry or anxiety about this significant change (Rice *et al.* 2011) but the vast majority of students manage this transition successfully (Galton *et al.* 2000). After much engagement with literature, this researcher decided to use two optics on the student's transition to post primary: the formal and informal transition.

The formal transition refers to how new post primary students adjust to the academic and organisational aspects of their new school. A common concern for the students transitioning to post primary is about organisational issues like getting lost in the new building and adjusting to new timetables, lockers, rules and routines.

O'Brien (2004) and Smyth (2017) state these issues are common for many students and this is reinforced by the findings in the research. Parents interviewed spoke of their worry about their children's lack of maturity and inability to follow their timetable or keep pace with the demands of organising their lockers, class supplies, break times and finding their way around their new school building. The move from a small self-contained classroom in the primary school to a

much larger building with constant movement to different classrooms throughout the day can be problematic for some students in the initial transition (Hanewald 2013). Thus organisational or practical concerns of students need much attention and are salient issues for pupils making the transition to post primary.

The increase in the number of subjects at post primary is problematic in regard to the academic transition and can have longer term effects as some students develop negative attitudes towards secondary school as a result (West *et al.* 2008, Smyth 2017). The increase in the number of subjects comes at the same time as students struggle with different teaching styles that they would not be accustomed to and increased academic content (Naughton 2003). This can make the academic transition concerning for many students. Indeed this research points to students feeling flooded by academic content, which is exacerbated by taster programmes in the opening weeks, as student decided on which subjects to do for the new Junior Certificate. This results in students having exposure to as many as fourteen subjects during the opening month of post primary school. Teachers interviewed for this research agree that students are ill prepared for the academic transition and more must be done to help students adjust to the new reality of post primary school.

The informal transition refers to how students adjust socially and emotionally to their new post primary schools. In the interviews conducted with parents the main and pressing concern was around the social aspect of the transition to post primary. This successful social transition would then aid a successful emotional transition. This social transition is seen by parents and teachers as foundational to a successful transition to post primary. In terms of human development early adolescence is a time when individuals highly value being socially accepted (Gerner and Wilson 2005) which coincides with the transition to post primary school. The staff members interviewed all state that the social transition is crucial to students feeling well, settling in and being part of the school community. This research points to the importance of extracurricular activity in helping students socially. The volunteerism of school staff is crucial to this vital part of the social and emotional transition of students.

6.2 Strengths and Limitations of the study

A significant strength of this research was to have access to parents of current first years in the school for interview. These parents had a fresh memory of a lived experience, as their children had recently experienced the transition to post primary school. Also, having access to the student support team of teachers in the school was a strength. These teachers were deeply

involved in the transition programme in the school for incoming first year pupils. They have a depth of knowledge of the transition phenomenon over a number of years and have a valuable perspective on the issues, concerns and interventions that students experience during the transition to post primary school. Another strength of this research is the use of semi structured interviews which allowed participants to speak freely and openly about their perspective on the transition to post primary school. It allowed the researcher to lead a discussion on the topic into greater depth (Flick 2015) and allowed for clarification and expansion by the interviewee on salient points (Merriam 2009).

There are some limitations to this study. The size of the sample of teachers interviewed is six, which could be argued is a rather small sample. Also, all the teachers interviewed are part of a student support team. Thus their perspective on student's transition to post primary is strong on pastoral care aspects of that transition. Perhaps non-members of the student support team could have been interviewed to get a more rounded perspective from staff on the transition process. Also, only three parents were interviewed, which is a very small sample. These are all parents of the current first years, which limits the perspective to just one year. If parents of older students were interviewed it would have given a longitudinal perspective on the transition process in the school. A final limitation of the study was the use of semi-structured interviews. In some cases the answers given were influenced by the positionality of the researcher. There can be an element of the participant having a desire to please the interviewer with their answers (Patton 2002) which can impact on the data gathered.

6.3 Recommendations

The following are the recommendations for research, policy and practice:

- I. The role of the guidance counsellor in relation to the transition to post primary school needs to be more clearly defined. The parents interviewed for this research did not see any role for the guidance counsellor in the transition for students, while staff members hold varying views on the exact role of the guidance counsellor. With some seeing the guidance counsellor as an academic advisor while others focused on pastoral care.
- II. There is a need for continuous professional development (CPD) by all teachers on the various elements of the transition from primary to post primary school. The role played by the student support team and all staff in easing the transition for students should be highlighted. The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) could develop a policy on the role of the Guidance Counsellor in the student's transition to post primary.

This policy would inform any in-service to staff and practice in secondary schools in the future. The whole school approach to guidance and pastoral care should be emphasised through specific CPD available to all staff including the student support team and the Guidance Counsellor.

- III. Research could be carried out nationally on the Junior Cycle reforms and the impact they have on students during their transition to post primary. This research would focus on the introduction of taster programmes and a peak in the number of subjects during the opening months of post primary school, to gauge its impact on pupils who are struggling to move from a restricted primary curriculum.
- IV. Finally a number of potential improvements to practice emerged from the research. A need for increase in so called ‘transition time’ was reported by participants. Transition time means having incoming first years in the school without other year groups for a day and a half minimum to allow students to adjust to the new building and other practical concerns. In the case study school a more structured mentoring system with better trained mentors would improve the transition for students. The introduction of a buddy system, where first years would be paired off with another first year to ease the social transition could be introduced. These recommendations for practice emerged from the interviews and would help students during their transition to post primary.

6.4 Reflexivity in Relation to Personal Learning.

This researcher applied a reflexive approach to this study to gain a fuller appreciation of the phenomenon of student transition from primary to post primary school. This researcher was acutely aware of his own personal, cultural and social context within the study. A research diary was kept and notes taken throughout the study to aid reflexivity on my role as a ‘human instrument’ (Lincoln and Guba 2000) in this process. Throughout the research there was a high level of awareness on behalf of the researcher on his own personal bias and its impact on the researcher. I had been a teacher in the school for over ten years and was worried it could impact on the collection of data during the interviews stage and the analysis of the data which was done using an interpretivist model (Gibbs 2007). However, this awareness coupled with much reflection ensured any bias was limited. Through consultation with my supervisor and reflecting on the data at various stages, this researcher feels any undue bias was avoided. While I was very nervous in the beginning of the data-gathering process once I had completed the first interview I felt much more comfortable with the process. Similarly, the data analysis of the first two interviews was an unsteady process but confidence grew after a discussion with

my supervisor. I have gained many insights into my own practice as a teacher and feel increase levels of feedback from my students will inform my practice. I will be much more aware of the new first year students and the complex transition they are experiencing. Also I will tailor my practice as a teacher to ensure students settle in well, rather than moving straight into curriculum delivery. Also my future role as a guidance counsellor will be informed by this research, as I seek a key role as part of the transition programme for incoming first years in post primary schools.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter concludes this research on teachers and parents perceptions of students concerns about making the transition to post primary. This chapter provided a summary of the research findings along with providing the strengths and limitations of the study. Also, a number of recommendations were given based on this research and relevant literature in relation to policy, research and practice.

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Appendices

Appendix A Volunteer Information Sheet

EHSREC No: 2019_03_12



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

VOLUNTEER INFORMATION SHEET

A case study of the key issues for pupils transitioning from primary to post-primary in a rural community school.

Dear [enter role],

I am a postgraduate student on the MA in Guidance Counselling & Lifelong Learning at the University of Limerick. For my MA dissertation in the University of Limerick, I am carrying out a study of the transition process from primary to post-primary school in a rural catchment area. This information sheet will tell you what the study is about.

What is the study about?

The study aims to find out how students cope with the transition from primary to post primary in a case study school with a focus on the interventions currently in place.

What will I have to do?

You will be invited to take part in an interview lasting approximately one hour. The interview will be audio recorded. Your involvement in the study will take place at a time and venue that suits you. I will be the interviewer.

What are the benefits?

The study aims to provide rich textural qualitative data on parents and SST members of the case study school perceptions and experiences of their role in transition process from primary to post primary. This study will benefit both guidance counsellors and school managers in the creation of and implementation of school policy and procedures on the transition from primary to post primary school.

What are the risks?

There are no apparent risks. You might decide that you don't want to answer a question. If this happens, you do not have to answer any question you do not wish to.

What if I do not want to take part?

Participation in this study is voluntary and you can choose not to take part or to stop your involvement in this study at any time.

What happens to the information?

The information that is collected will be kept private and stored securely and safely on the researchers' computer. The computer is protected with a password and the data is encrypted. The

transcript of the interview will be anonymised and a pseudonym will be used instead of your name. Your school will also be anonymised.

Who else is taking part?

Relevant teachers who are members of the Student Support Team and parents who have experience of dealing with students who have transitioned from primary to post primary school. I hope to have a mix of genders.

What if something goes wrong in the interview?

In the very unlikely event that you find the interview distressing the interview can be paused or you can terminate the interview.

What happens at the end of the study?

At the end of the study the information will be used to present results in my dissertation. The information will be completely anonymous. All anonymised data gathered from the research will be stored securely and safely by the University of Limerick for 7 years, after which it will be shredded.

What if I have more questions or do not understand something?

If you have any questions about the study, you may contact me at 0515515@studentmail.ul.ie. It is important that you feel that all your questions have been answered.

What happens if I change my mind during the study?

At any stage should you feel that you want to stop taking part in the study, you are free to stop and take no further part. There are no consequences for changing your mind about being in the study.

Contact name and number of Project Investigators:

Principal Investigator

Gerry Myers, Lecturer, School of Education, University of Limerick, Tel (061) 213374

Email: gerry.myers@ul.ie

Other investigator

Patrick Moran

Postgraduate Student

School of Education

0515515@studentmail.ul.ie

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I would be grateful if you would consider participating in this study.

Yours sincerely,

Patrick Moran

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (quote approval number). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:

Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee

EHS Faculty Office

University of Limerick

Tel (061) 234101



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OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

PARTICIPANT CONSENT

Title of Project: A case study of the key issues for pupils transitioning from primary to post-primary in a rural community school.

Should you agree to participate in this study please read the statements below and if you agree to them, please sign the consent form.

- I have read and understood the participant information sheet.
- I understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for.
- I understand that the results of this study may be shared with others but that my name will not be given to anyone in any written material developed.
- I am fully aware of what I will have to do, and of any risks and benefits of the study.
- I know that I am choosing to take part in the study and that I can stop taking part in the study at any stage without giving any reason to the researchers.

This study involves audio recording of the interview sessions. Please tick the appropriate box

- I am aware that the interview will be audio recorded and I agree to this. However, should I feel uncomfortable at any time I can ask that the recording equipment be switched off. I know that I can ask for a summary of the interview, which will not include anybody's name. I understand what will happen to the transcripts and recordings once the study is finished.

I agree to the statements above and I consent to taking part in this research study.

Name: (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Investigator's Signature _____

Date: _____



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Dear (Participants name),

I am currently in my second year of the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development in the University of Limerick. For my MA dissertation, I am carrying out a study of parents and SST member's perceptions of pupil's transition from primary to post-primary school in a rural catchment area.

In carrying out this study, I wish to recruit relevant teachers and parents who would be willing to participate in an audio recorded interview of approximately one hour. This interview aims to gain insight into the transition process in the case study school. I am seeking to recruit relevant teachers and parents from the case study school and would be very grateful if you would consent to take part. If you participate in this study your anonymity is guaranteed.

I enclose an Information Sheet detailing what will be required of participants. If you have any further questions, please contact me at the e-mail address below.

Yours sincerely,

Patrick Moran

Email: 0515515@studentmail.ul.ie



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OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Interview Questions for SST members

- i. What was your experience of being involved in students transitioning from primary to secondary school?
- ii. What really helped students in this transition process?
- iii. What do you think are the problems in how the school handles this transition?
- iv. Did you notice a difference between students during the transitioning period? And if so what were they?
- v. How could the school improve the transition experience for incoming students?
- vi. Was there a difference in the transition for pupils from very small or larger primary schools? And if so, what were they?
- vii. Did any issues arise that you think are unique to a rural setting?
- viii. Having in mind the nature and setting of this school, what would be the best way to aid transition?
- ix. What role in there for the Guidance Counsellor in this process?
- x. On reflection, is there anything else that would have helped you and students who were involved in the transition?



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OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Interview Questions for Parents

- I. How did you feel about your child moving from primary to secondary school?
- II. What has the experience of sending your child to secondary school been for you?
- III. What were your concerns about your child starting secondary school?
- IV. How did your child settle into the school?
- V. What did they find challenging about secondary school?
- VI. What is your perception of the taster programme offered to students? Would you recommend any changes?
- VII. What has your child's experience been in making new friends in the school?
- VIII. What is your perception of the mentoring programme in the school?
- IX. Are there any particular issues that concern you as a parent whose child recently came from primary school?
- X. What is your perception of your role as a parent to aid the transition from primary to secondary?
- XI. Have you any suggestions on how to improve the transition for students in the future?
- XII. Is there anything unique to this rural area that would impact on student's transition to secondary school?



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Title of Project: A case study of the key issues for pupils transitioning from primary to post-primary in a rural community school.

Dear Sir,

Whilst being a teacher employed in your school I am a postgraduate student in the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development programme. As a requirement of my programme of studies I am proposing to undertake a study of parents and SST member's perceptions of student's experience of transitioning from primary school into this school.

I request your consent to undertake this study in this school. I further request access to interview volunteer parents and members of the SST team. I enclose a participant information sheet, participant consent form and the guideline schedule of questions for your information. The school and the participants will be anonymised in my findings and dissertation. If you are agreeable to this please sign the participation and access form (Appendix G)

Yours Sincerely

Patrick Moran
0515515



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

School Participation and Access Consent Form

Title of Project: A case study of the key issues for pupils transitioning from primary to post-primary in a rural community school.

I consent to Patrick Moran undertaking the above study in this school and I consent to him having access to teachers and parents to carry out interviews on the premises.

Signed: (Principal)

Date:

Signed: (Postgraduate Student UL)

Appendix H: Extracts from Research Diary

Interview 1: Staff member 1

8 May 2019

11:15am

I had my first interview today with a staff member, who is also a member of the SST. The interviewee was very nervous. This staff member was relatively new to the school and felt nervous about the interview. This came across in the early answers of the interview as the participant spoke very quickly. Equally, I was very nervous and sought to put the interviewee at ease. I slowed down the pace of the interview. At question three, I explained the question slowly; this was to slow the pace of the answers and to put interviewee and me at ease. I decided before the interview took place that all interviews would take place in the guidance office to ensure privacy and keep interruptions to a minimum. I tried to pause for a number of seconds between questions to allow the interviewee to gather his thoughts. Thinking back over the interview, the fact I was teaching in the school longer than the participant might have influenced the answers given. However, as the interview went on the interviewee seemed more relaxed and gave more natural and detailed answers

Interview 5: staff member 5

22 May 2019

11:15am

This was the second last interview with a staff member. I felt this staff member would have huge knowledge on the topic of student transition to post primary. However, she arrived late to the interview and seemed very rushed throughout the opening questions of the interview. She had just left class and her mind seemed elsewhere especially for the first question. I decided to slow the interview by probing some of her answers more and with the experience; I had gained from other interviews I looked for clarification on some points. The interview seemed to change midway through one of the interviewees' answers with her phrase of "*anything else on that now, let me think*", this was the first time the staff member paused and slowed her answers somewhat. It also reflected she was considering her answers and giving some extra thought to the questions posed. Basic clarification questions changed the tone of the answers given and allowed the interviewee to elaborate on aspects of the transition she deemed important. This has yielded valuable data for this researcher and this study, this will be helpful in the actual writing of the dissertation.

Interview 7 parent 1**28 May 2019****5:30pm**

I had my first interview with a parent today. The interview took place at 5.30pm in the schools staff room. This was the only interview that did not take place in the guidance office, as the office had been locked for the evening. I have forgotten to inform the Guidance Counsellor of the need to use his office. The change of location threw me off a little and it took me a while to adjust. In addition, I was worried we would be interpreted mid interview by someone entering the staff room. This however did not happen thankfully. I felt nervous but the parent was very calm. Her answers were very carefully thought out and delivered in a calm manner. As the interview developed I felt the parent was giving answers that I wanted to hear and was very positive about every aspect of the school, she was very slow to give any criticism of the transition unless pushed to clarify her answers. She remained very positive, however did mention her concerns about bullying in the school and the need for more vigilance. She seemed more interested in this aspect of the transition and her calm exterior changed somewhat. This section of the interview was very enlightening in relation to the importance of the social transition.

Data analysis**15 June 2019****11:30am**

Today I had my first attempt at using the Gibbs model of thematic analysis. I picked an interview transcript that I felt would be rich in data. I decided to use interview number six as the first interview to attempt thematic analysis. I felt I was very familiar with this interview as it had been conducted recently and was one of the last interviews I had transcribed. It was fresh in my head since the transcribing process, having typed it recently. I felt I would spot themes easily. Having spoken with my supervisor at great length about how the process worked I set aside the day to attempt thematic analysis of this interview. However, it became apparent that this process should be done over a number of days rather than just in one sitting. I decided to begin by reading the transcript a number of times. Having read it, four or five times I felt I had a sense what the interviewee was saying. I decided to write in the margin what I thought the interviewee was saying. This took a long time as I was trying to stay loyal to what the interviewee was saying. I was very nervous about my ability to analyse the data correctly and to prevent my bias from influencing the thematic approach taking place. I was not used to using my own interpretation. This added to the sense of uncertainty. I decided to leave the process and return to it at another stage.