AUTHOR:
Petra Engelbrecht[1] iD
Hannelie Louw[1] iD
Julialet Rens[1] iD

AFFILIATION:
[1]North-West University, South Africa

Experiences of transition processes from Grade 7 to Grade 8 in two South African schools: An exploratory study

Abstract

This paper focuses on exploring the transition South African learners make from Grade 7 to Grade 8, emphasising the experiences of teachers, parents and learners in two school cultures during this transition phase. This qualitative exploratory research project was placed in a constructivist research paradigm. The data were systematically analysed in an exploratory and interpretative way by identifying segments responsive to our research questions. The participants in the two purposively selected South African schools included a voluntary sample of 12 teachers, 19 parents, and 19 learners in Grade 8 using the draw-and-write technique and focus group interviews with each learner group based on the interpretation of their drawings. Focus group interviews were also conducted with a small group of the parents and teachers of the Grade 8 learners in the two schools, and individual interviews were conducted with the school principals. Findings indicate some common ground but also qualitative differences between the two schools with specific reference to the quality of educational opportunities and socio-emotional challenges that may influence social inequalities in future.

Keywords: *educational opportunities; social inequalities; socio-emotional qualities; transition*

1. Introduction

Globally, the importance of school transitions and the possible impact thereof on short-term and long-term well-being and academic attainment are emphasised by researchers (Barlow, 2021; Jindal-Snape *et al.,* 2019). Research indicates that learners often find the transition from primary to secondary school exceedingly difficult if they are not guided to manage the disruption caused when they move from primary schools to secondary schools (Barlow, 2021; Boone & Demanet, 2020; Jindal-Snape *et al.,* 2019). This transition phase can have an impact on educational outcomes and social and emotional well-being, and research indicates that there may be an initial decline in learners' educational outcomes and changes in

their peer relationships and emotional well-being (Jindal-Snape *et al.,* 2019). Research in the global North has also indicated the following common socio-emotional and educational challenges experienced by learners and their parents regarding transition that may lead to negative outcomes if not addressed earlier: choice of school including the quality of education in specific schools; academic attainment; fear of being bullied; and being separated from friends (Holt *et al.,* 2022; Jindal-Snape *et al.,* 2019). In the South African context, the transition from public primary school (Grades R to 7) to public secondary school (Grades 8 to 12) involves a transition to a different and more formal school. As in other countries, learners' time in primary schools is usually spent in consistent school communities with close interaction with classroom teachers and peers, while secondary schools are usually larger in scale and organised with a greater emphasis on academic achievement and working with different teachers every day and week (Holt *et al*., 2022).

Research indicates that well-designed and well-implemented transition interventions that involve both teachers and parents can assist in the process of making this transition period a positive experience for all involved (Jindal-Snape *et al.,* 2019). Holt *et al.* (2022) stress the significant role of equality and quality of schools as well as teachers' ability to support learners, thereby enhancing a positive motivational orientation to schoolwork and social and emotional well-being.

By taking the unique context of each school into account, a shared understanding of the socio-emotional factors that play a dynamic role during the transition period can improve this challenging time for young people (Holt *et al*., 2022); Waitoller & Lubienski, 2019). The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 in South Africa has for example exacerbated pre-existing inequalities in education in South Africa with specific reference to learning losses owing to school closures. Many disadvantaged school communities were unable to facilitate quality education with the help of online learning or self-learning with parental and sibling support during the transition from Grade 7 to Grade 8 (Soudien, *et al*., 2022).

Equality and quality in education can be regarded as the degree to which national education systems support individuals to access education and develop the capabilities necessary for successful and equitable social and economic inclusion (National Education Evaluation and Development Centre, 2019; Soudien, *et al*., 2022). In addition, it is the degree to which education systems provide equal opportunities for the social advancement and inclusion of learners by providing quality education for all in mainstream schools and thereby advancing social equality. Globally, research, including research in Southern Africa, indicates that a complex combination of personal and contextual factors influences the decision parents, and their children need to make regarding school choice including during their children's transition from primary to secondary schools (McKeever, 2017). These choices that are based on socioeconomic factors could feed social inequality in education (e.g., McKeever, 2017; Vandekinderen *et al*., 2018).

As pointed out by Soudien, Reddy and Harvey (2022), 75% of all learners in the South African school system are in no-fee schools that are beset by the legacies that came with the past racialised inequality, including teacher shortages in key subjects, large classes and high dropout rates. The more privileged fee-paying schools, which formerly served only white learners, have now been expanded to accept all learners whose parents can afford to pay the school fees (or where scholarships are available), and these schools tend to perform and be managed better (Soudien, *et al*., 2022; Spaull, 2015). Furthermore, adolescents in

low socioeconomic status communities in South Africa experience multiple risks, including low household income and the primary home language not being the language in which learners are taught, which can disrupt learners' emotional and cognitive development (Pillay *et al*., 2023). Parents' school choices for their children are, therefore, determined by their socioeconomic status. As already pointed out by Wildeman and Nomdo in 2007, a situation has been created where it seems as though service delivery, which influences choices and aspirations in education during, for example, school transition phases, continues to be a function of available capacity in specific localities, instead of delivering on policy and equality demands (Kitching, *et al.*, 2022).

An analysis of the literature indicates that, in contrast to research in higher income countries (for example Scotland and Australia), little research is available on transition from Grade 7 to 8 within the South African context (Kitching, *et al.*, 2022). This exploratory research study therefore specifically focuses on the major transition learners make after seven years of primary school to the first year of secondary school in two diverse school contexts. Against the background of the disparities in education in South Africa, which now also include the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, we endeavour to explore possible answers to the following questions:

- What are the influences of available and effective educational opportunities in specific and unique school cultures during this transition phase in education that can serve either as a means for change or the reproduction of inequalities in two selected South African schools?

- How can schools intervene meaningfully to address socio-emotional challenges in transition processes from Grade 7 to Grade 8 in an inclusive South African education system?

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study combines Sen's capability approach (Kern, 2022; Sen, 1999) with the socioecological and dynamic model of transition (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Swart & Pettipher, 2016) as the theoretical lenses. By placing transition in a socioecological approach based on Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bio-ecological model and Rimm-Kauffman and Pianta's (2000) ecological and dynamic model of transition, it can be posited that the transition to secondary school takes place in an environment defined by reciprocal, multifaceted, and complex relationships between individuals and their contexts (Swart & Pettipher, 2016). The core feature of the capability approach, on the other hand, is its sharp focus on what people are effectively able to do and to be, that is, their capabilities (Kern, 2022).

In this research project, we focused specifically on the capability to be educated, referring to, as stated by Vandekinderen *et al*. (2018: 4), "what young people may have reason to value". To understand the full potential of critical transition events and how they can hamper human capability, learners should be viewed in multidimensional and dynamic contexts that include direct and indirect effects, in which different microsystems, such as school culture, family, neighbourhood, or peers, are affecting one another and can influence well-being and development (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Swart & Pettipher, 2016). By combining these two approaches, a broader lens to understand the complexity of issues and the challenges individuals face during school transition processes can be developed.

3. Research design and methodology

This qualitative exploratory research project was placed in a constructivist research paradigm that regards the nature of reality as multiple and socially constructed by people active in the research process while we, as researchers, are attempting to understand the lived experiences of participants (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A multisite comparative qualitative case study research design was decided upon to provide a rich and situated account of teachers', parents' and learners' perspectives and lived experiences of the transition process (Harrison *et al.,* 2017; Holt *et al.,* 2022). Against the background of the aims of this study (to identify available educational opportunities that can contribute to successful transition processes and how schools can provide support in this regard) this approach could enable us, as researchers, to develop a more compelling interpretation of the multifaceted and complex factors (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Harrison *et al.,* 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) that can play a role during the transition process from Grade 7 to Grade 8 in diverse contexts

3.1 Research context and sampling

As part of this exploratory study, convenience sampling was used due to the physical locality of both schools in the two provinces, and two high schools (cases) situated in similar challenging socioeconomic contexts were studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One site (School A) is in a rural town well known as a tourist attraction in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. The area in which most of the learners live is characterised by poverty. The second school (School B) is on the outskirts of a large town (a semi-urban area) that forms one of the hubs of the South African gold industry in the Northwest Province. The area in which this school is located is characterised by poverty and a lack of socioeconomic growth.

3.2 Participants and data collection strategies

As stated in the previous section, convenience sampling was used in the selection of the two schools (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By using two schools in two different provinces using a cross-case analysis that could vary we believe the more compelling our interpretation of complex transition issues in South Africa could be (Harrison *et al.,* 2017). As mentioned before, participants in both regions included a voluntary sample of teachers, learners in Grade 8, their parents and the two school principals.

The data collection strategies included semi-structured focus group interviews conducted with five teachers in School A and seven teachers in School B, nine Grade 8 learners in School A and ten learners in School B and ten parents of Grade 8 learners in School A and nine parents in School B, as well as individual interviews with the principals of both schools (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). To address our research questions, the semi-structured group interviews with the teachers and the individual interviews with the school principals focused first of all in establishing shared understandings of transition on bridging Grade 7 to Grade 8, further discussion of the choices available to learners regarding the choice of high school, the way in which the transition to Grade 8 is managed in the school and the availability of support in relation to possible learning needs in Grade 8. Additional questions for the parents more specifically focused on school choices available to learners. For the learners, the questions focused on their lived experiences of transitioning to Grade 8 and the way that Grade 8 contributed to their aspirations for the future. The participants represented various population groups and language groups.

Learners are young and for cultural reasons including, (as mentioned in previous paragraph) diverse home languages, they may initially be uncomfortable sitting and conversing with an unknown adult (Reohr *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, we used the draw-and-write technique as initially formulated by Driessnack (2005), before the focus group interviews with the learners. This less intrusive, child-friendly technique requires learners to make symbolic drawings that they describe in paragraphs and contributed to identify possible definitional issues regarding the meaning of what they regarded as transition. The learners were asked to make a drawing of what makes their transition to high school easy/difficult. On the other side of the page, they were asked to write a paragraph in which they explain their drawings in any language they prefer.

The instructions were repeated in the participants' home language where necessary to ensure they fully understood them. They wrote pseudonyms on their drawing briefs and indicated their grade, gender and age. This approach enabled us to refine the interview schedules for the learners.
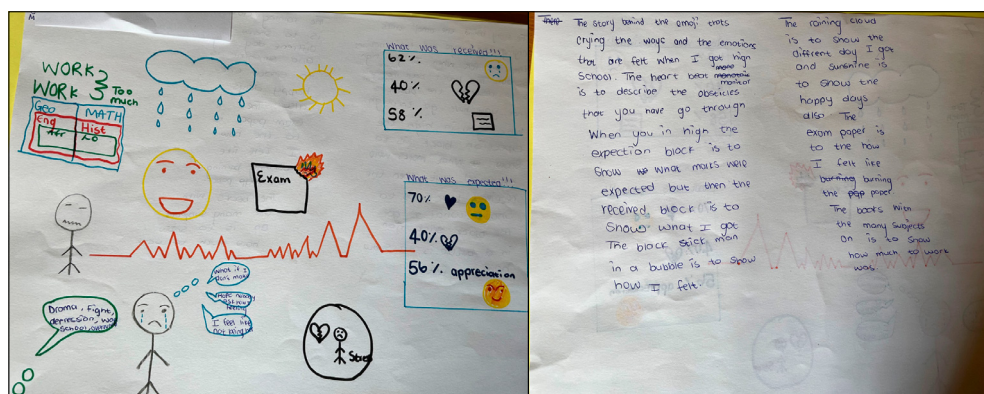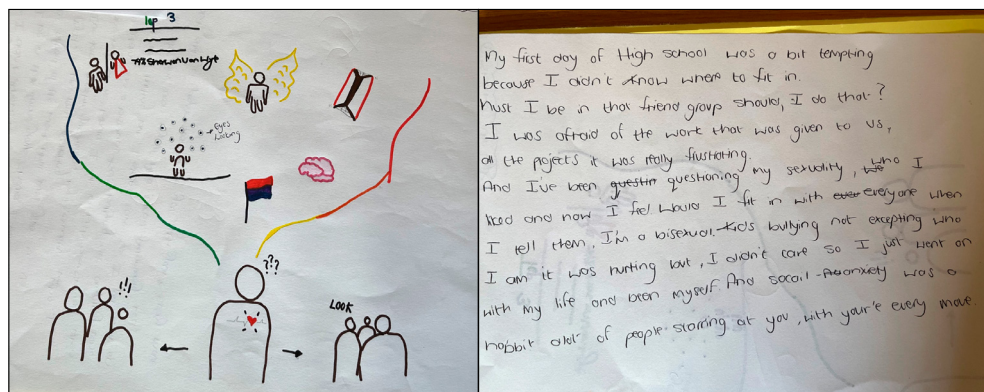

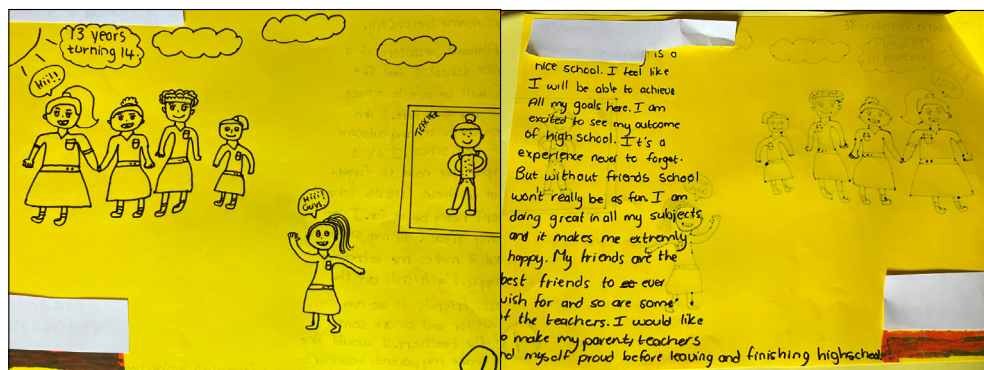**Figure 1:** School A: Learner D3

Figure 2: School A: Learner D5
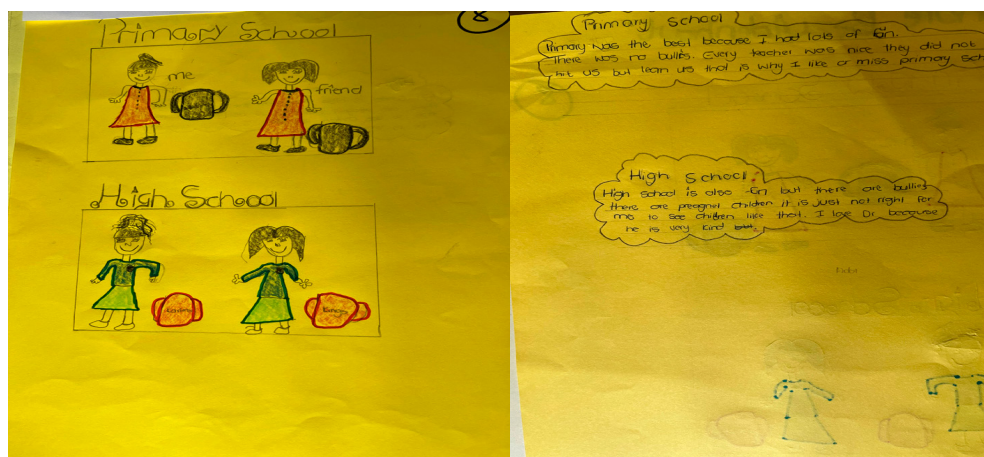
Figure 3: School B: Learner D2

Figure 4: School B: Learner D4

3.3 Data analysis

The data were analysed exploratively and interpretatively to answer our research questions by systematically analysing our data set (learners' drawings and transcriptions of interviews) that were responsive to our research questions. The steps taken in the systematic data analysis included familiarising us with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes and defining and naming themes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Recurring topics that occurred in and across the data sets were identified and named as themes with relevant subthemes in the cross-case analysis to develop a general explanation that fits both cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Naidoo & Muthukrishna, 2016).

3.4 Trustworthiness and credibility of findings

Peer debriefing with fellow researchers as well as an independent researcher and member checks with participants were used as strategies to promote credibility, and trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tomaszewski, *et al.*, 2020). It needs to be noted that exceptional care was taken to guard against personal bias to prevent a biased interpretation of the collected data by using an independent researcher for the peer review process.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for the project was received from the Western Cape and the Northwest Departments of Education and the Ethics Committee of the university under the auspices of which the research was done (NWU-00539-19-A2). Participation was voluntary, and the participants could withdraw at any stage of the process.

4. Results

4.1 School contexts

School A is a dual-medium ordinary public school (offers tuition in English and Afrikaans) for boys and girls from pre-Grade R to Grade 12 and, as the oldest school in town that, under the previous government was only for white learners, it is now characterised by a diversity of home languages and cultures among both learners and teachers. It is centrally located in a rural town in the Western Cape.

The school buildings were adequate until recently but are now cramped due to an increase in learner enrolment and only a limited number of new learners can be accommodated every year. There are approximately 600 learners who are divided between the primary and the secondary sections. The school is classified as a fee-paying school even though most parents come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, but parents are allowed to apply for fee exemption.

The school is in the privileged position that it is well supported financially by for example a philanthropic foundation and other non-governmental organisations in the community on various levels, including scholarships and educational support in the school. Most of the learners in Grade 8 have moved automatically from the primary school to the secondary section. There are at present 295 learners in high school, with two Grade 8 classes (71 Grade 8 learners in total). School A is overall deemed by the community as a school with a good academic standard and good discipline procedures, smaller classes, academic subjects not offered at the other high schools in and near the town as well as the availability of scholarships; therefore, parents specifically choose to send their children to this school. The school, in collaboration with the other high school and four primary schools in the town, has a well-structured and formal transition programme in place and has a well-functioning wellbeing support team in the school itself.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown period, especially in 2020, initially influenced the overall functioning of the school. However, a well-planned rotational system was implemented in 2020 to combat learning losses, with all learners returning to the normal timetable by the first term of 2021.

School B is also a dual-medium ordinary public school for learners from Grade 8 to Grade 12. It is in a semi-rural area on the outskirts of a large town in Northwest. The learners have various home languages and some of the learners come from neighbouring areas. The school is part of a specific community that was created under apartheid to house mostly people of colour, and many of the present residents are second- or third-generation residents.

The school is classified as a no-fee school, but there is a learner support fund of R100 per month to which parents can contribute voluntarily. A local church is involved in supporting the school regarding practical needs, but no external financial support is provided. In contrast to School A, additional learning support for learners is mainly handled by the teachers themselves owing to the lack of funding for additional resources for support. The teachers are sometimes overwhelmed and overworked in trying to provide the additional support the learners need. As a result, the principal extended the school day to enable most learners to complete their homework at school before going home. The Grade 8 learners come from different primary schools in this area where, in many instances, the academic standard is not high, and the learners enter secondary school with learning challenges such as reading problems.

School B is overall deemed by the community as a school with a relatively good academic standard and good discipline procedures; therefore, most parents who cannot afford to send their children to fee-paying schools in town prefer to send their children to this school. The principal plays a positive leadership role and has strict security measures in place at the school to make the school safe.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown period, especially in 2020, has had a negative long-term influence on the overall functioning of this school and has increased pre-existing educational challenges and educational inequality. A rotational system was implemented in 2020, with learners supposed to be returning to the normal timetable by the first term of 2021. As only a small number of learners returned to school, the principal decided to cancel the rotational system and all the learners returned to the school in smaller classes. The challenges caused by academic backlogs during this period are illustrated by the fact that 80 Grade 8 learners had to repeat the grade in 2022.

With specific reference to planning for the transition of new learners, the principal takes the lead by visiting all primary schools in the area and talking to the Grade 7 learners before the end of the academic year. He also distributes a pamphlet with information about the school.

4.2 Combined findings

Two main themes identified during the data analysis and illustrated in the table below, illustrate the diverse ways in which both challenges and opportunities play a role during the transition period and how they can serve as a means for progress within education for the learners of both schools.

The first theme focuses on more formal educational opportunities and challenges in these specific school contexts. The second theme refers to the more informal socio-emotional factors that play a role in influencing parents, as well as these adolescent learners' lived experiences of the transition period.

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1: Educational opportunities and challenges	• Parents' choice is based on socio-economic circumstances • Reputation of the school • Leadership and management • Provision of learner support • Community involvement • Efforts to support transition • Impact of Covid-19 pandemic
Theme 2: Socio-emotional factors	• Relationships with peers • Bullying • Future expectations • Increased academic workload

Theme 1: Educational opportunities and challenges

With specific reference to School A, the availability of educational opportunities, including the good academic record of the school, the depth of available learner support and the involvement of community role players for learners whose parents cannot afford to pay the school fees, played a key role in parents' school choice and the aspirations they have for their children's future. Both the teachers and the parents pointed out that it is the only dual-medium school in town that offers English and Afrikaans, as the other high school in town offers Afrikaans and Xhosa as languages of instruction.

Furthermore, there is an opportunity to transition automatically from Grade 7 to Grade 8 for learners who were in the primary school section of the school. Moreover, the class sizes are smaller than in the only other public high school in town.

> You want to give your child the best … so it was an obvious choice to place her in this school.[1] (School A: Parent D6b)

The teachers, parents and learners in School B agreed that, in most instances, financial restraints played a major role in their choice of this school.

> A person's financial affairs do not always work out as planned. So, this is what forces and drives a person to make a decision. (School B: Parent D5)

In School B, the participants also mentioned the school culture, its convenient location and the overall school reputation as reasons for parents and learners selecting this specific no-fee school. The parents put trust in the leadership of the principal and the teachers to provide a quality education for the learners.

> And another thing is, I trust the teachers in this school. I know what they do; I came from their hands. (School B: Parent D7).

> We have, as Madame knows, we have a phenomenal head, and the leadership is there, finish … (School B: Teacher D7)

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1   Participants' responses in Afrikaans have been translated into English.

Based on the reputation of both schools, most parents and learners have elevated expectations about going to these secondary schools and the future it can create for learners.

With specific reference to both schools' academic records and the availability of formal and informal support, the principal and the teachers at School B emphasised the educational and socio-emotional challenges associated with addressing the high dropout number, especially among low-achieving learners. Teachers indicated that the worsening socioeconomic situation of learners' families contributed to learners dropping out of school.

> ... there is no enthusiasm to do their work; there is no driving force to do it; they do not want to do it. Sometimes I feel that they want to be bad, they want to be losers. (School B: Teacher D6)

The teachers in School A emphasised the various support strategies that they, in collaboration with various support organisations that are actively involved in the wider school community, had tried to put in place to address academic challenges. This enabled them to plan specific support structures, such as the distribution of pamphlets about effective study skills among parents and learners and keeping parents involved about their progress. The school principal said:

> And then we have parent evenings where we, if there is something that we need to address, then we contact those specific children's parents and make appointments with them. (School A: Principal)

In School B, the teachers and the principal agreed that providing the necessary support to Grade 8 learners was challenging. Teachers work hard during the day and are busy after school with extra classes for learners who are struggling. They also try to cover the work that the learners did not do because of the shortened curriculum during the pandemic.

> Then it becomes so much pressure for them. That is why our learners are not performing as well as we want them to perform. Because you have to cover last year's work, and this year, it becomes too much for them. That's why they just drop out later, because it's too much. They can't deal with it. (School B: Teacher D3)

The lack of community involvement in providing financial support is challenging for School B, and although the parents have elevated expectations for their children, there is a lack of parental involvement. The principal explained that parents, owing to their personal financial situation, worked long hours and could not attend meetings or functions.

> ... parents do not want to be involved. I look at the context within which parents work … That is why I arrange our meetings for Saturday afternoons or Sunday afternoons. (School B: Principal)

However, the school and a local church try to support learners from poverty-stricken households by providing clothes and food parcels where needed. A university in a nearby town also tries to support the learners by teaching them the basic principles of sport.

> There is one of the [University] guys who does the coaching, and there are more than 40 boys who are involved (School B: Principal)

> We all pay a small amount every month into that fund and then we buy, well, we see there is a jersey needed there and there is a school uniform needed, as well as shoes. But the teachers do it (School B: Principal)

With reference to transition interventions, the collaborative more formal and structured transition programme of which School A forms part has a positive influence on the transition process and provides learners with additional support during both Grade 7 and Grade 8 including the availability of mentors in Grade 8.

> We came, I think, a day before the school started, we came to school, and they actually sorted us out; they called out the Grade 12 mentors' name[s] and then they assigned two or more people or even one person to that specific Grade 12. (School A: Learner D4)

As mentioned earlier, the principal takes the lead in School B regarding the transition process. He visits all the primary schools and talks to the learners about the school.

> We do not have a marketing team that can do it. So I, I go to the primary schools myself and we arrange an open day or parent evening for Grade 7 parents to come to the school and although we do not have great things here, we do exhibit what we have ... and then you show parents what really happens at the high school. (School B: Principal)

At the beginning of the year, there is a weekend when the learners stay at the school and participate in various activities. The learners all agreed that the sleepover was something that they would always remember.

> ... and we had a fun activity weekend with them to get to know the school. (School B: Teacher 7)

> And then the Grade 8 concert also. We conducted that as well just to sort of make them feel a part of this school now. (School B: Teacher 4)

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the learners' schoolwork was discussed among the teachers, parents and learners of both schools. It became clear that issues regarding the pandemic and school closures affected educational progress overall despite the efforts of the parents and teachers. The learners admitted that the lockdown had made them lazy. The parents also felt that they could not really help the learners with their homework and, as they were working, they could not make sure that their children went to school on the days that they were supposed to do so.

> As much as you would like to help, but you can't (during Covid pandemic). So, it did actually put the pressure on us as parents. (School A: Parent D7)

> They are very lazy now, but I think if we, our children support and stand by them then they will make it and they will pick up again. (School B: Parent D7)

Theme 2: Socio-emotional factors

Although both schools have transition support strategies in place that endeavour to provide information and improve the learners' interpersonal relationships during the transition period, the data analysis indicates that this critical educational transition phase influences socio-emotional adjustment for new groups of learners as well as learners who transition from the primary section of School A. Subthemes include parents' and learners' anxiety about the volume of work in high school and an initial decline in learners' academic grades that can influence their overall well-being, issues surrounding the development of supportive relationships with peers and teachers, acceptance by learners' peer groups and the fear of being bullied. All these factors, in interaction with one another, may influence the development of a sense of belonging in high school and learners' academic attainment in the long term.

In the interviews with the parents and learners, it became clear that they all had elevated expectations for their future. However, anxiety about the increase in learners' workloads and a drop in their marks illustrated their fears in this regard.

> I think the first term was the worst, because the marks ... dropped a great deal and he was afraid to disappoint me. (School A: Parent D1)

> He is quiet, yes. And about the academics, because on the first, second day, he said: 'Wow, Mommy, it is a lot of books and a lot of work, and don't disturb me!' (School B: Parent D4)

These young adolescents' experiences regarding relationships with peers included concerns about making new friends. Moving without any friends from a different primary school and dealing with older learners played a role in their initial feelings of loneliness.

> My first day was not nice. I had no friends. (School A: Learner D5)

> Yes, all the big kids that are here at the high school... and we were afraid that they would bully us (School B: Learner D10)

Both the parents and learners expressed their pre-transition fear of being physically or emotionally bullied, their experiences of being bullied and peer pressure during the initial transition phase and the way in which they were continuing to deal with it.

> [Initially] it was the normal concerns like bullying. (School A: Parent D7)

> It is basically the same that we all go through: the bullying, the transition to other grades, which freaks a person out. (School B: Parent D3)

The parents also worry about the influence the more senior learners could have on their children, as well as relationships and the possibility of drug use.

> I think because they are entering a new environment where there are older kids and they're exposed to new things like drugs or, you know? Things that they are not used to, and they think because the older kids can handle it, they can also handle it. (School B: Teacher D6)

> ... the use of drugs. That was my biggest fear. You see the children smoke at school, or they use drugs and things, and maybe she will also try it (School B: Parent D2)

> Peer pressure and wanting to proof that I am capable of fitting and friends, toxic friends..... out here. Because there is good friends, but for most I was worried about is the toxic ones (School A: Parent D9).

5. Limitations of the study

It is important to acknowledge several limitations of this study. As an exploratory project, it was not designed to study the transition from Grade 8 to 9 in depth, and no data on pre-transfer concerns a year before the transition process and a year after the transition process were collected. Owing to the small sample size, our findings cannot be generalised, but they can, however, indicate new directions for much-needed research on the transition process in diverse and supportive wider school contexts, but more importantly also under-resourced, secondary schools and the role it may play in addressing inequality in education.

6. Discussion

As discussed in the literature review, the transition from primary to secondary education is regarded as a crucial phase in learners' lives (Boone & Demanet, 2020). It is a challenging time for learners and involves changes in school environments, peer relationships, academic work and future expectations (Holt *et al.,* 2022).

Taking the unique dynamic socioecological contexts of both schools into account, reciprocal, multifaceted and interconnected contexts and relationships as described in our theoretical framework can be identified during the transition from primary to secondary school (McKeever, 2017; Vandekinderen *et al*., 2018; Waitoller & Lubienski, 2019). Our findings indicate common grounds (parents' school choices for their children are mostly shaped by the family's socioeconomic status and geographical location) but also qualitative contextual differences between the two schools with specific reference to the quality of educational opportunities and socio-emotional challenges. In contrast to School B, School A can, despite the difficult socioeconomic circumstances of most parents, provide at least 60 to 70% of its learners with scholarships. The committed financial and other involvement of the wider community further contributes to the quality of available educational opportunities. These factors influence parents' enthusiasm for the school, their willingness to collaborate with teachers and the ideals they and their children have for their children's future.

On the other hand, School B is a no-fee school without additional financial support from donors or non-governmental organisations. This restricts the number of teachers and available support strategies. As a result, although most teachers are professionally qualified and dedicated, they teach large classes in key subjects and there is a steady increase in learners repeating a grade and an increase in the dropout rate, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic. The result is that, despite the commitment of the school principal and most of the teachers to provide the learners with adequate educational opportunities, financial constraints influence the provision of adequate learner support and additional educational opportunities, which can also be a contributing factor to the high dropout number of the school. Reasons why this specific school was chosen by parents include the fact that some parents also attended this school and are, therefore, familiar with the disciplinary and safety procedures of the school, the convenient geographical location of the school, the culture and reputation of the school as the best in the area and the principal's and teachers' believing that their learners have the capacity to learn.

Both schools are characterised by good leadership and teachers' belief that their learners have the capacity to be educated (as defined in our theoretical framework) and that they need support to enable them to navigate their entrance into secondary school. As stated by Day, *et al.* (2016), school leaders play a key role in creating a positive school culture and a proactive school mindset and supporting the staff for schools to achieve success in challenging circumstances. In both schools despite their diverse contexts, the leaders play a vital role in this regard.

The socioeconomic context of both schools became apparent in the way in which the Covid-19 pandemic and school closures and the impact these had on the academic progress of learners were handled. The pandemic in 2020 and 2021 has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities in education in South Africa with specific reference to learning losses due to school closures and the inability of many disadvantaged school communities to facilitate satisfactory

online learning or self-learning with parental and sibling support during the transition from Grade 7 to Grade 8 (Soudien, *et al.*, 2022). The close links between the primary and secondary school teachers in School A and positive collaboration with parents played a major role in the efforts to overcome some of the learning challenges the learners experienced when they returned to school after the Covid-19 pandemic, especially with reference to the new intake of Grade 8 learners (Holt *et al.*, 2022). In contrast, despite the leadership's efforts to overcome the negative academic impact of the pandemic in School B, many learners refused to go back to school. Our data findings clearly indicate that, especially in School B, the Covid-19 pandemic had a negative impact, on the academic performance of the learners and led to an increase in school dropout numbers, especially in Grades 10 and 11.

As highlighted by Holt *et al*. (2022), targeted transition interventions can influence learners' experiences of the transition from Grade 7 to Grade 8. In School A, the well-planned and comprehensive ongoing financially supported structured transition intervention since 2017, has focused on equipping groups of Grade 7 and 8 learners with skills not only to manage the way in which they personally cope with the transition process but also to provide peer support to other learners. By doing so, opportunities for creating and maintaining a motivating environment for learners are created and can contribute to learners' sense of belonging (Kitching, *et al.*, 2022). In School B, the school principal takes the lead in efforts to make the transition process a positive experience for learners. He and his staff do their best to support Grade 8 learners by, for example, organising a special weekend or sleepover. Such actions enhance a positive motivational orientation to schoolwork and positive social and emotional learner well-being (Holt *et al*., 2022). However, the only overall wider community support that School B receives is from the church – helping with clothes or food parcels, although a nearby university also plays a supporting role in coaching learners in different sports activities

As mentioned in the introductory section of this paper, moving from primary to secondary school is not only an academic but also a social turning point for learners during which they experience a strong fear of the unknown. As mentioned earlier, research has indicated common pre-transition worries about socio-emotional factors, including mixed feelings about relationships with their peers, fear about being bullied and fear about increased workloads (Holt *et al*., 2022; Kitching, Carstens & Engelbrecht, 2022).

These common fears were all apparent in our research findings and were expressed by the parents and learners of both schools. The learners and parents talked openly about their fears and problems regarding peer relationships and bullying. For the learners, the continuity and further development of positive peer group relations were a key factor. The parents also worried about the role of older learners in their children's lives with specific reference to the dangers of drugs and bullying. For those learners who transitioned from the primary to the secondary section of School A, this process went more smoothly, while for the small number of new learners in this school and most of the learners in School B, negotiating the development of new friendships and a feeling of connectedness to the school was more difficult. As mentioned in the findings, pre-transition fears of being bullied by older learners can cause stress and anxiety, and although instances of post-transition bullying were reported in both schools, the reported incidents of bullying seem to have decreased over time, in many instances owing to the support of parents and teachers in the non-acceptance of bullying (see Barlow, 2021).

The expectation of an increase in academic performance, a more complex and heavier academic workload and less scaffolding from teachers, as was the case in the primary school, initially had a negative socio-emotional influence on both learners and parents in both schools. Key factors that are making a positive contribution related to academic planning are situated in both school communities, namely the structured academic support, the more informal socio-emotional support of peers, parents and teachers and the teachers' believing in the capability of the learners to be educated (see Jindal-Snape *et al.,* 2019). However, the learning losses that have taken place during the Covid-19 pandemic in School B where learners were less able to draw on structured support have had an impact on academic performance with a resultant increase in the dropout numbers of the school (see Soudien, *et al.*, 2022).

7. Conclusion

Our findings in this exploratory study indicates that the degree to which education systems can provide equal educational opportunities by providing quality education and determine the success of this transition phase is clearly determined by a complex combination of contextual and personal factors. These factors have the potential to lead to either inequality or equality in education in South Africa and have an impact on long-term social equality.

Furthermore, the importance of targeted interventions that contribute to positive learning experiences, as well as positive socio-emotional relationships with peers in these adolescents' lives during the transition phase cannot be underestimated. Providing learners with robust, innovative and sustainable transition programmes that preferably can be financially supported and include wider community support is imperative if we are serious about moving toward greater social equality in the South African context.

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