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Students' Positive Expectations and Concerns Prior to the School Transition to Lower Secondary School

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-method study examines students' expectations and concerns before transitioning from primary to lower secondary school and the role of students' school-related wellbeing and self-esteem in their concerns. Students reported their beliefs about the forthcoming school transition and filled in a questionnaire assessing school burnout and self-esteem. The results showed that the students had positive expectations comprising comfort, friendships, learning, school environment, increased freedom and teacher -student relations. The students' concerns were mainly related to friendships. Furthermore, results indicated that students who reported concerns about peer relations were likely to experience more exhaustion from school than students who did not report concerns about peer relations. Among girls, concerns about peer relations were also related to a cynical attitude towards schoolwork. This study promotes to understand how students can be prepared and what topics should be specifically discussed with them to support their successful transition from primary to lower secondary school.

Students' Positive Expectations and Concerns in the School Transition to Lower Secondary School

Successful school transitions have major effects on students' schooling and school-related wellbeing (e.g., Hanewald, 2013; West et al., 2010; Wigfield et al., 1991). Not surprisingly, the transition from primary to lower secondary school is accompanied by both hopes and concerns (e.g., Sirsch, 2003; Topping, 2011; Weller, 2007; Zeedyk et al., 2003). However, little is known about students' beliefs about their new school before the transition as expressed by the students themselves (e.g., Akos & Galassi, 2004; Ashton, 2008; Farmer et al., 2011; Pratt & George, 2005; Waters et al., 2014). Studies of students' expectations have shown that prior to the transition, students are more concerned about informal issues in lower secondary school than the formal school system (Waters et al., 2014; West et al., 2010). It has also been shown that students who have great concerns before the transition are also more likely to encounter difficulties after the transition (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019). Hence, grasping the aspects that are related to the students' concerns and positive expectations before the transition could help parents and teachers eradicate some of their concerns and, hence, prevent difficult transition experiences. Accordingly, this study examines primary school students' expectations and concerns prior to

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their transition and the role of students' school-related wellbeing and self-esteem in their concerns. It may be that students who have low self-esteem, that is, a general tendency to evaluate themselves in a negative way (Rosenberg, 1965), or who report school burnout, such as exhaustion or cynicism in school (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009), are especially likely to have concerns about the transition. Therefore, the present study also examines how concerns before the school transition are associated with the students' levels of school burnout and self-esteem. This study was conducted in Finland, where students start their lower secondary school at 12–13 years of age.

Transition to Lower Secondary School

The transition to lower secondary school has been associated with important changes in students' lives. Typically, students move to a new school environment with larger buildings and grounds. Substantial changes also occur in the students' peer relations, as well as their role among their peers: They move from being the oldest and most experienced students in primary school to being the youngest in lower secondary school (Waters et al., 2014). Zeedyk et al. (2003) suggested that this transition is one of the most difficult tasks in students' educational careers, not only in the general sense of their wellbeing but also in terms of their mental health (see also McLellan & Galton, 2015; West et al., 2010). Going through a school transition has been found to affect students' perceptions of their competence and their motivational orientation in their future schooling (e.g., Harter et al., 1992; Tonkin & Watt, 2003; Wigfield et al., 1991). More specifically, students transitioning from middle to lower secondary school often show a reduction in both intrinsic motivation (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Otis et al., 2005) and student engagement (Wigfield et al., 2006). The transition has also been shown to have a negative effect on students' school adjustment (Martínez et al., 2011) as well as their self-esteem and domain-specific beliefs. These changes can be found among both boys and girls and in students with low, average and high ability levels (Cantin & Boivin, 2004; Wigfield et al., 1991; Wigfield & Eccles, 1994).

According to a study by Jindal-Snape and Foggie (2008), students who are independent, able to make friends and deal with change are most likely to transition successfully to lower secondary school. It has also been suggested that the transition is successful if the new environment meets the student's developmental needs. Eccles and Midgley (1989) proposed that a decline in a student's motivation and wellbeing may result from an abundance of changes associated with the school transition that do not support the fulfilment of the student's developmental needs (Deci & Ryan, 1985). It has been further suggested that perceived social support and overall social issues are key factors in predicting a successful transition (Lester & Cross, 2015; Strand, 2019).

Student's Beliefs Concerning Lower Secondary School

Students' expectations and concerns in the transition from primary to lower secondary school have been studied quite extensively and existing studies have indicated that bullying is a major concern (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Topping, 2011). However, peer relations (Topping, 2011) and the fear of being isolated or marginalised may also cause concerns (Pratt & George, 2005); at the same time, students look forward to making new and more friends (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Waters et al., 2014; Zeedyk et al., 2003). For example, a study by Zeedyk et al. (2003) showed that, although students were looking forward to having new friends, new academic subjects, new teachers and a new routine, they also expressed some trepidation about the same issues. In addition, big differences between the old and new schools—for instance, school size, the number of teachers, the environment and the higher academic level—worry students (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008). As stated above, our study also focuses on positive aspects of the transition, which have been largely overlooked in previous research (see Jindal-Snape et al., 2019). Therefore, from the students' perspective, the transition to lower secondary school is complex. Students may see it as both a challenge and a

threat (Mackenzie et al., 2012; Sirsch, 2003) as well as a new opportunity (Topping, 2011; Waters et al., 2014; Zeedyk et al., 2003).

It has been suggested that transitions pose a risk to students' wellbeing and self-esteem (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). However, it is also possible that wellbeing and self-esteem will contribute to how well students deal with the transition (Sirsch, 2003). In other words, it is possible that students with wellbeing problems, such as stress or burnout, or generally negative self-esteem have more concerns about the transition compared to other students because they may be less optimistic about their future (see e.g., Nurmi & Pulliainen, 1991). Especially, elements of school-related stress and burnout, such as exhaustion owing to school demands, a cynical attitude towards school and feelings of inadequacy as a student, can be assumed to interrelate with concerns regarding the school transition. It is also possible that these associations differ between girls and boys. It has been shown, for example, that girls generally experience greater school maladjustment, including school burnout, than boys do (Salmela-Aro et al., 2008). Boys, in turn, show a higher level of general self-esteem (von Soest et al., 2016). Here, we examine whether students with exhaustion or a cynical attitude towards school or low self-esteem report more concerns about the school transition than other students do. Such knowledge would be important to teachers to identify students who may be at risk for an unsuccessful transition from primary to lower secondary school beforehand.

In Finland, compulsory formal education consists of 9 years of comprehensive school, with a relatively late school entry age of 7 years. All Finnish students receive a similar basic education up to age 16. The primary level consists of Grades 1–6, while lower secondary school consists of Grades 7–9. Students usually attend the nearest primary school in their neighbourhood.

The transition from primary to lower secondary school at 12–13 years of age can be challenging for some students because there are fewer lower secondary schools than there are primary schools, and students mainly have to change to another school building when they transition. Furthermore, lower secondary schools are usually located in different areas from primary schools and have many more students. Finally, students are mainly taught by one classroom teacher at the primary level, but in lower secondary school, students are taught by subject teachers who usually specialise in only one or a few subjects.

The Aim of the Present Study

The aim of the present study is to gain an understanding of students' expectations and concerns prior to the transition from primary to lower secondary school. The research questions are as follows:

1. What kinds of positive expectations do students have of lower secondary school before the transition?
2. What kinds of concerns do students have about lower secondary school before the transition?
3. Do students with particular kinds of concerns about their forthcoming school transition differ from other students regarding their wellbeing (school burnout) and self-esteem? Are there gender differences?

The present study makes important contributions to the literature. This is among the few studies to examine students' beliefs as both positive expectations and concerns before the transition to lower secondary school, as well as the effect of students' wellbeing on their concerns. Furthermore, it clarifies gender differences in terms of how girls and boys conceptualise the transition, and how it is possible to organise and implement positive transition practices to facilitate their further schooling careers.

Method

Participants and Procedure

This study is part of an extensive follow-up study (Lerkkanen et al., 2006–2016) from the beginning of students' kindergarten year to the end of ninth grade, with simultaneous data gathering from their

parents and teachers. The sample of the present study consisted of 1,037 students (47.7% girls) in Grade 6 (age 12–13 years). The participants were recruited from three medium-sized towns and one municipality—two in Central Finland, one in Western Finland and one in Eastern Finland. At the beginning of the study, the students' parents were asked for written consent. The representativeness of the sample was good in terms of the parents' educational backgrounds (Statistics Finland, 2007). In the sample, 6% had only completed the 9-year compulsory education (compared with 6% in the general population), 30% had completed secondary education (30% in the general population), 36% had a bachelor's degree or vocational college degree (35% in the general population) and 28% had a master's degree or higher (29% in the general population). The parents filled in their questionnaire at the end of their child's Grade 6 year (March–April), and as a last part of the questionnaire, they interviewed their child regarding their expectations and concerns about the forthcoming school transition. Students also completed a questionnaire on school burnout and self-esteem at school at the end of Grade 6 (April).

Measures

Student Beliefs

The students' positive expectations and concerns were collected by open-ended questions concerning the transition to lower secondary school. Parents were instructed to ask their child two open-ended questions sequentially and to write down the answers in the child's words as precisely as possible (see also Eskelä-Haapanen et al., 2017). The two questions found at the end of the parents' questionnaire were as follows: (1) *What do you find is nicest (most pleasant) about starting lower secondary school?* and (2) *What kinds of concerns or fears do you have about starting lower secondary school?* The students' beliefs concerning their positive expectations and concerns were identified using qualitative problem-driven content analysis and inductive reasoning (Krippendorf, 2013).

Self-esteem

Self-esteem was assessed with the abbreviated version of Rosenberg's (1965) self-esteem scale. The students evaluated their self-esteem as a self-report during the spring term of Grade 6 (April). The scale consisted of three unidimensional items, for example, "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself"; the students rated these items on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A mean score was calculated from all three items. The Cronbach's alpha reliability for the scale was .87.

School Burnout

School burnout was examined with the School Burnout Scale (SBI) developed by Salmela-Aro and Näätänen (2005; see also Salmela-Aro et al., 2009). The students assessed their school burnout symptoms as a self-report during the spring term of Grade 6 (April). The SBI consists of 10 items measuring three factors of school burnout, which are as follows: (a) exhaustion at school (four items), (b) cynicism towards the meaning of school (three items) and (c) sense of inadequacy at school (three items). In the present study, two factors from the original scale were used; at the end of Grade 6, the students rated their exhaustion, for example, "I often sleep badly because of matters related to my schoolwork", and cynicism, for example, "I feel that I am losing interest in my schoolwork", on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Mean scores were calculated for each factor. The Cronbach's alphas were .82 for exhaustion and .84 for cynicism.

Data Analysis

The data were first analysed using qualitative problem-driven content analysis and inductive reasoning (Krippendorf, 2013; Patton, 2015). Analysis was conducted via the six following phases:

1. The first author conducted several close readings of the students' transcribed texts. Every student had a unique identification (ID) number. One student could mention several positive expectations or concerns or simply state, "I do not know" or "I cannot name any", meaning no specific opinion. There were also 305 blank answers, meaning no answer at all (positive expectations = 146, concerns = 150). Thus, there could be none or many expressions from one ID. The total numbers and percentages of analysed expressions are shown in Tables 2 and 3;
2. Verbatim texts were used to find analytical paths, for example, parallel and consistent expressions, from the choice of suitable texts for answers to research question 1;
3. The previous procedure was repeated for research question 2;
4. Theoretical literature and previous studies on students' school transition from primary to lower secondary were utilised to deduce meanings from emerging expressions (Patton, 2015);
5. Main meanings came into prominence through the interpretative process of careful examination and constant comparison (Patton, 2015), which were based on discussions between the researchers;
6. The main meanings were reduced to classify them for interpretation by synthesising the main meanings together into categories. The analysis revealed 16 main meanings that could be connected to positive expectations about starting lower secondary school and 15 main meanings that could be connected to students' worries, which were synthesised into six thematic categories. The thematic categories connected to positive expectations were: 1. comfort, 2. friendships, 3. learning, 4. school, 5. increased freedom and 6. teacher–student relationship; categories connected to concerns were: 1. worries, 2. peer relations, 3. learning, 4. school as a new environment, 5. school day and 6. teacher–student relationship.

Direct quotations have been added to improve trustworthiness and make practices invisible. The translations of the extracts from the data used in the reporting were carefully checked by a native English speaker.

Quantitative Analysis—Associations Between Students' Main Concerns, School Burnout and Self-esteem

After discovering six main thematic meanings related to concerns, we applied quantitative methods to examine whether students with concerns about the transition differed from other students in terms of their school burnout (exhaustion and cynicism) and self-esteem. Furthermore, because significant gender differences have been documented in school burnout (Salmela-Aro et al., 2008) and self-esteem (von Soest et al., 2016), the interactions between gender and these concerns were also considered. To investigate research question 3, univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA) was carried out. The analyses separately included Self-Esteem, Exhaustion or Cynicism as a dependent variable and Concerns and Gender as fixed factor variables. Concerns was a dummy variable, including 0 = no concerns and 1 = one or more concerns. We first examined whether Concerns and Gender had an interaction effect on the dependent variable. Next, if an interaction effect was found, the data was split by Gender, and univariate ANOVA was conducted by using only Concerns as a fixed factor variable. Finally, if no interaction effect was found, the main effects for Gender and Concern were interpreted from the ANOVA using estimated marginal means.

Results

Students' Expectations Concerning the Transition to Lower Secondary School

Intensive qualitative analysis (see Table 1) revealed six categories connected to positive expectations for starting lower secondary school, which were as follows: (1) comfort (satisfaction and dissatisfaction): 4.4%, $n = 45$; (2) the importance of friendships: 34.1%, $n = 354$; (3) learning: 19.3%, $n = 200$; (4) school: 14.4%, $n = 149$; (5) increased freedom: 9.2%, $n = 96$; and (6) teacher–student relations: 8.0%, $n = 83$.

Table 1. Example of the Analysis Process Concerning Students' Answers to Question 1.

ID	Verbatim text	Meaning	Main meaning	Category
1xxx, girl	"New things, like teachers, friends and school subjects".	At the elementary level, there is usually only one classroom teacher. At the lower secondary level, every subject is taught by a subject teacher.	New teachers	Teacher–student relations
2xxx, boy	"What do you mean? Most pleasant? What? I don't exactly know. Wait a second … It is nice to have new friends at a new school and a new classroom. And it is nice to have different teacher in every subject".			
4xxx, girl	"New teachers and a new school environment".			
2xxx, girl	"Schooling is going to be freer. Teachers".	Teachers are discussed at a general level or connected to certain incidents or processes.	Teachers in general	
4xxx, boy	"Maybe that there are no more confusing situations, for example, the teacher is not telling you what to do or what kind of stuff you will need for the next day's PE [physical education] class".			
2xxx, boy	"The nicest thing is getting away from my former teacher".	There is a reason students want to have a change from their former teacher–student relations.	Change in teachers	
4xxx, boy	"To get away from my former school and the teacher is going to change".			
6xxx, girl	"Very good question as I can't think anything that could be nice about transitioning to lower secondary school … Well, yes, to get another teacher".			
2xxx, girl	"To get away from Eric (teacher), music lessons and to start right from the beginning without any teachers' prejudice or bullying".	Students' explain something and connect that it to a certain teacher.	Specific teacher	
2xxx, girl	"I don't know … It would be nice if I could have George as my English teacher".			

Table 2. Students' Beliefs Involving Positive Expectations for Starting Lower Secondary School.

Core themes and sub-themes	Girls ($n = 495$)		Boys ($n = 542$)		Total ($n = 1037$)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
1. Comfort	18	3.5	27	5.0	45	4.4
Satisfaction	4	0.7	1	0.2	5	0.5
Dissatisfaction	14	2.8	26	4.8	40	3.9
2. Friendships	175	35.6	179	33.0	354	34.1
New friends	143	28.9	124	22.9	267	25.7
Old friends	32	6.5	55	10.1	87	8.4
3. Learning	101	20.4	99	18.2	200	19.3
- New subjects	48	9.7	57	10.5	105	10.1
- Domestic science	37	7.5	32	5.9	69	6.7
- Languages	10	2.0	5	0.9	15	1.4
- Learning in general	6	1.2	5	0.9	11	1.1
4. School	65	13.1	84	15.5	149	14.4
- New school	52	10.5	53	9.8	105	10.1
- Leaving elementary school	13	2.6	31	5.7	44	4.3
5. Increased freedom	49	9.9	47	8.7	96	9.2
- Freedom in general	28	5.7	23	4.3	51	4.9
- Breaks (voluntary content)	21	4.2	24	4.4	45	4.3
6. Teacher–student relations	43	8.6	40	7.4	83	8.0
- New teachers	25	5.0	28	5.2	53	5.1
- Teachers in general	7	1.4	3	0.6	10	0.9
- Teachers' change	8	1.6	7	1.3	15	1.5
- Certain teacher	3	0.6	2	0.3	5	0.5
No specific opinion	50	10.1	60	11.0	110	10.6
No answer at all, $n = 146$						

Table 3. Students' Concerns about the Transition to Lower Secondary School.

Core themes and	Girls (n = 495)		Boys (n = 542)		Total (n = 1,037)	
sub-themes	n	%	n	%	n	%
1. Worries	107	21.6	172	31.7	279	26.9
No worries	104	21.0	171	31.5	275	26.5
Worries about everything	3	0.6	1	0.2	4	0.4
2. Peer relations	135	27.3	123	22.7	258	24.9
- New class	51	10.3	45	8.3	96	9.3
Having new friends	47	9.5	40	7.4	87	8.4
Bullying	37	7.5	38	7.0	75	7.2
3. Learning	97	19.2	81	14.4	178	17.2
Learning in general	31	6.2	19	3.3	50	4.8
Assessment	23	4.4	18	3.2	41	3.9
Homework	15	2.9	19	3.5	34	3.4
Subjects in general	17	3.4	13	2.4	30	2.9
Languages	8	1.6	12	2.1	20	1.9
Math	3	0.5			3	0.3
4. School as a new environment	61	12.1	57	10.4	118	11.4
5. School day	34	6.9	37	6.7	71	6.9
- Changes (longer)	14	2.7	13	2.1	27	2.6
- School journeys	20	4.0	24	4.3	47	4.5
6. Teacher–student relations	24	4.7	27	5.0	51	4.9
No specific opinion					81	7.8
No answer at all, n = 159						

Table 2 shows the students' expectations about forthcoming school experiences. A total of 45 students expressed *comfort*. Only a small proportion of students (n = 5; one boy and four girls) responded with an overall positive statement: "Everything is pleasant", thus showing *satisfaction*. A total of 3.9% of students (n = 40; 14 girls and 26 boys) expressed *dissatisfaction* when responding to the question about the most pleasant things about starting secondary school. These students responded that there was "nothing" pleasant about it, with one elaborating, "It has been said that there is nothing pleasant to expect. Everything is so difficult there". Another stated, "I don't want to go there at all". Peer relations, especially the prospect of gaining *friendships*, was mentioned by more than one-third of the students as something that they looked forward to in starting lower secondary school (n = 354, 34.1% of students). Almost 30% (28.9%) of the girls and 22.9% of the boys expected to make *new friends*. Having *old friends* accompany them to the new school was important for 8.4% of the students: "If old friends remain the same, everything will be nice in the new school". Some students already knew that their classmates were going to be in the same classroom in their new school. A few also made remarks about experiences of bullying and stated as a positive consideration that former students were *not* coming to the new school.

Almost one-fifth (n = 200, 19.3%) of the respondents mentioned positive expectations associated with *learning*. These responses could be divided into learning *new subjects* (10.1%), *domestic science* (6.7%), *languages* (1.4%) and learning *in general* (1.4%).

School (14.4%) as a positive environment was an expectation among 149 students. For one-tenth of the students, a *new school* (10.1%) was the reason for a positive expectation, but at the same time, 44 of the students (4.3%) wanted to *leave elementary school*. Some students expressed the idea of their physical growth, increased maturity and personal development with the possibility of leaving the elementary level: "It's nice to get away from primary school and little kids".

Close to 10% of the students' responses (n = 96, 9.2%) referred to *increased freedom*, freedom *in general*, *breaks* and *voluntary content*. They described the "possibility to stay inside during breaks" and "using spices during lunch breaks"; one student commented, "You are already able to do your homework during the breaks".

Teacher–student relations were mentioned in 83 (8.0%) responses as a positive expectation. Expressions were mostly related to a *new teacher*, *teachers in general* or a *certain teacher*. *Change in teachers* was also mentioned, with comments such as the following: "Getting rid of the current

teacher", "Getting rid of a querulous teacher", "Having more teachers" or "Teacher isn't the same the whole time".

About 10% of the students ($n = 110$, 10.6%) did not pinpoint any specific things that would be nice about starting lower secondary school and just answered, "I don't know".

Students' Concerns About the School Transition

Concerns could be synthesised into six core themes, which were as follows: (1) worries (no concerns or fears at all, everything worries): 26.9%; (2) peer relations: 24.9%; (3) learning: 17.2%; (4) a new school environment: 11.4%; (5) school day: 6.9%; and (6) teacher–student relations: 4.9%. Eighty-one students (7.8%) did not have a specific opinion, answering "I don't know" or "I can't say". Most of the students' concerns focussed on peer relations. Table 3 shows the findings on the students' responses to the second question regarding their concerns or fears about starting lower secondary school. The responses of 275 students (26.5%) showed insouciance in their beliefs about adapting to a new school (21.0% of girls, 31.5% of boys). They expressed *a lack of worries*, mostly by making statements like "Nothing concerns me" or "Nothing concerns me as such, only some minor tensions". In contrast, one boy and three girls stated, "Everything is concerning about starting lower secondary school".

As with the positive expectations, *peer relations* was an area mentioned in almost one-fourth of the responses ($n = 258$, 24.9%) concerning negative preconceptions, forming the largest core theme among their concerns. Uncertainty about their peers in the future *new class*room concerned 10.3% ($n = 51$) of the girls and 8.3% ($n = 45$) of the boys. In parallel, the uncertainty of *having new friends* also caused concern ($n = 87$, 8.4%): "I'm afraid of being left alone and not having friends at all". The possibility of being bullied at school was a worry for 7.2% of the students. Some students commented that they could end up being bullied if they "don't dress a certain way". They were concerned about being rejected or beaten up. One girl stated, "If they act as they do in television series, they put your head in the toilet".

Concerns about *learning* at school were relatively common (17.2%; 97 girls, 81 boys). Some issues students worried about were as follows: *learning in general* (4.8%), "How will I succeed?"; *assessment* (3.9%), "Grades will surely drop"; *homework*, "There is too much homework"; *subjects in general* (2.9%), "Subjects are much more complicated than in elementary school"; *languages* (1.9%), "Swedish is an irritating language"; and *math* (0.3%), "Some subjects will become more complicated, such as math".

A new school environment worried and scared students as well (61 girls, 12.1% and 57 boys, 10.4%). In addition to finding one's way to the right classroom, among the students' concerns were changing classrooms, different schedules and the huge size of the school building. Learning to navigate the new building worried several students, as shown in statements such as the following: "Can I find the right places?", "What if I get lost?" and "Will I find the right classroom?".

A fifth area that worried students ($n = 71$, 6.9%) was the *school day*. It would be extended in the new school, and the school journeys were going to be longer. Issues the students raised were as follows: "What if I get off the bus at the wrong stop?", "How will I catch the bus in the morning?" and concerns of "tiredness from long school days". *Teacher–student relations* were highlighted as a negative preconception in 51 responses (4.9%), such as the following: "Teachers—you never know", "Teachers are surely nastier than in elementary", "Teachers are more strict" and "What if the teacher shouts?"

Concerns About Peer Relations Associated with School Burnout and Self-Esteem

The results of the qualitative analysis indicated that fears about peer relations in the forthcoming lower secondary school were particularly common among students at the end of primary school; approximately 25% mentioned peer relations, i.e., being in a new class, making new friends or

bullying, as concerns. Examining these responses more deeply could provide new information to educators that will help students deal with the transition from primary to lower secondary school. Therefore, as a last step, we examined whether students with concerns about peer relations differed from other students regarding their school burnout (exhaustion and cynicism) and self-esteem, as well as whether gender played a role in this relationship. In the analyses, a dummy variable represented concerns about peer relations (0 = no concerns, 1 = concerns about peer relations, i.e., about being in a new class, making new friends and/or bullying).

The analysis was first carried out using *cynicism* as a dependent variable. As presented in Table 4, the results showed an interaction for concerns about peer relations x gender. Girls who reported concerns about peer relations were likely to be more cynical about the school than were other girls (F (443) = 5.38, p = .02, $M1$ = 2.09, SD = 0.92; $M2$ = 2.33, SD = 1.06). Among boys, an association between concerns about peer relations and cynicism was not found (F(526) = 1.64, p = .20, $M1$ = 2.34, SD = 0.96; $M2$ = 2.22, SD = 0.83).

Second, the analyses concerning *exhaustion* did not indicate any significant interactions between concerns and gender, but significant main effects for concerns and gender were found (Table 4). That is, primary school students who reported concerns about peer relations also reported significantly more exhaustion than students who did not report concerns about peer relations ($M1$ = 2.14, $SD1$ = .06; $M2$ = 1.97, $SD2$ = .03, p = .01). Furthermore, girls reported significantly more exhaustion than did boys ($M1$ = 2.19, $SD1$ = .05; $M2$ = 1.92, $SD2$ = .05, p < .001).

Third, the results pertaining to *self-esteem* did not show any significant interaction between concerns and gender. Moreover, concerns did not have a main effect on self-esteem, but a main effect of gender was statistically significant. Girls generally reported lower self-esteem than did boys ($M1$ = 3.49, SD = 0.85; $M2$ = 3.85, SD = 0.72; p < .001).

We also conducted some additional analyses to examine if girls or boys reporting more than one kind of concern regarding peer relations differed in their levels of self-esteem, cynicism or exhaustion from those reporting only one type of concern. The participating students mainly reported only one concern (peer relations), but a small group of students (n = 32, 19 girls and 13 boys) reported concerns from more than one category, i.e., concerns about a new class, making new friends or bullying. Although the group size was very small, we carried out the univariate ANOVA, which indicated that students reporting one versus a longer list of concerns did not differ in their levels of self-esteem or cynicism. Concerning the level of exhaustion, a significant interaction between concerns and gender was found: girls reporting more than one type of concern described more exhaustion than did girls reporting only one type of concern (F(109) = 8.87, p = .004, $M1$ = 2.96, SD = 1.32; $M2$ = 2.18, SD = 0.98).

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to gain an understanding of students' expectations and concerns prior to the transition from primary to lower secondary school. The results first showed that the students had positive expectations comprising comfort, friendships, learning, the school environment, increased freedom and teacher–student relations. The students' concerns were mainly related to friendships. The results further showed that students who reported concerns about peer relations were likely to experience more school burnout, such as exhaustion from school, than students

Table 4. Summary of Univariate ANOVAs: Main Effects and Interactions.

	Cynicism		Exhaustion		Self-esteem	
Concern	$F(1, 972)$	η_p^2	$F(1, 972)$	η_p^2	$F(1, 971)$	η_p^2
Concerns (A)	0.61	.001	6.46*	.007	2.17	.002
Gender (B)	0.99	.001	15.11***	.015	41.59***	.041
A x B	6.55*	.007	1.01	.001	1.76	.002

Note. *p < .05; ***p < .001.

who did not report concerns about peer relations. Girls who reported concerns about peer relations were also likely to be more cynical about the school than girls who did not report those concerns.

Expectations Prior to the School Transition

First, students' positive expectations and concerns about the school transition were studied. In our analysis, six categories emerged as most prominent in the students' expectations concerning the transition to lower secondary school: friendships, learning connected to formal schoolwork, school as a new environment, changes in school days, teacher–student relations and comfort. Students' positive expectations about their ability to learn and engage successfully in the formal schoolwork and social networks were more prominent than their concerns about learning and peer relations. Self-perception as a competent learner, possessing positive expectations and attitudes for learning (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), is critical for a successful future school career.

Our study showed that *peer relations/friendships*, especially making new friends, form the most prominent positive expectations in the students' views of lower secondary school (see also Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; Strand, 2019; Waters et al., 2014). Weller's (2007) study showed that former close friendships, peer relations and their continuation after the transition have a remarkable effect for a smoother transition period from the primary to secondary level. Martínez et al. (2011) also found some gender differences. Girls perceived that support from close friends and school declined during the transition, and they struggled with forming new friendships; boys' problems were more connected to school problems during the transition period (see also Hardy et al., 2002). The core theme of *learning* comprised students' beliefs about learning in general, different subjects, assessments and homework. Less than one-fifth of students mentioned learning in their positive expectations and concerns in parallel. Similarly, Ashton (2008) and Waters et al. (2014) found that social aspects were most important, while academic outcomes were rarely mentioned among students prior to moving to secondary school.

Concerns Prior to the School Transition

In our study, in parallel (Ashton, 2008), friendships—including a new class, making new friends and bullying—were mentioned as concerns in nearly one-quarter of the answers (see also Waters et al., 2014). Bullying did not seem to be a major concern in our study, although it could be an indicator of more severe problems in school-related wellbeing among girls. New *environments* were perceived as both positive expectations and concerns. Previously learned behaviour patterns need to be adapted to new environments and may affect both friendships and academic achievements (Ding, 2008; Hanewald, 2013; Waters et al., 2014). While the students expressed concerns about the extended school days and longer school journeys in the transition to lower secondary school, their *increased freedom* posed positive expectations. Marston (2009) found that most students moving to secondary school looked forward to more freedom and new challenges. Overall, successful transitioning entails social adjustment, institutional adjustment, curriculum interest and continuity (Evangelou et al., 2008).

Associations Between Peer Relation Concerns and Students' School Burnout and Self-Esteem

Exhaustion owing to school demands was associated with concerns about peer relations in lower secondary school, in line with previous research showing that students with wellbeing problems may be less optimistic about their futures (Nurmi & Pulliainen, 1991). Our study expands previous research by showing this association at the end of primary school. This result also reveals to educators that students with school-related wellbeing problems, such as exhaustion, may need special support to deal with the transition to lower secondary school. This may be particularly important among girls reporting exhaustion. We conducted additional analyses to examine whether girls or boys

reporting more than one kind of concern regarding peer relations differed in their levels of self-esteem, cynicism or exhaustion from those reporting only one type of concern. The results indicated that girls reporting more than one type of concern described more exhaustion than did girls reporting only one type of concern. Thus, high exhaustion may be related to several different concerns during the school transition, particularly among girls.

Our results also showed that girls who reported concerns about peer relations in lower secondary school exhibited higher cynicism towards school than did other girls. This is an especially important result because it indicates that girls with cynical attitudes towards school may need special support in their relationship building during the challenging school transition, in which their social context often changes. Such support can have longitudinal effects on students' school years in lower secondary school: It has been shown that peer support during the transition to lower secondary school decreases students' cynicism in lower secondary school, which, in turn, predicts higher academic achievement in lower secondary school (Virtanen et al., 2019). The transition from primary to lower secondary school is an important point to support those students; studies have provided evidence that cynicism is stable during later school years, and students reporting high levels of cynicism are clearly more susceptible to dropout than are those with less cynicism (Bask & Salmela-Aro, 2013).

Our study considered puberty-aged students' beliefs before the transition to lower secondary school. During puberty, students face several biological, psychological and social changes (Anderson et al., 2000). Future studies are needed to develop multi-professional, i.e., teachers, principals, psychologists, dialogical collaborations that include parents and peers to create supportive practises, familiarise students with new environments and content to face this demanding period successfully, and help parents to support their early adolescents' self-control (Ng-Knight et al., 2016).

Limitations

Some limitations need to be considered in any attempts to generalise the findings of the present study. First, the study was cross-sectional; therefore, no causal conclusions can be made. Second, the effect sizes of the significant results were small, and additional analyses comparing students with one peer-related concern vs. students with more than one peer-related concern resulted in very small group sizes. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution, and the analyses should be replicated with other data before generalising the results. Third, only associations between concerns about peer relations and levels of school burnout and self-esteem were examined, because concerns about peer relations were most common among the students, which is typical in this age group. However, because the group sizes were too small and there was not enough statistical power for more analyses, we were not able to analyse these issues further. Therefore, it would be important to examine other types of concerns and their role in students' wellbeing in future studies. Fourth, the study was carried out in one cultural context—Finland. It is possible that the specific features of primary school practices and the school environment will influence the students' beliefs. Consequently, comparative studies are needed in other cultural environments. Fifth, transition practices differ in different educational systems and between schools. Some primary school students may have already visited their future school to see the environment and meet their new teachers and peers, while this may still be ahead for others. This may have affected the students' beliefs. Finally, the data were collected as instructed in a parental questionnaire; parents wrote down their children's answers without tape recording. In addition, the students may have given answers to fulfil their parents' expectations.

Practical Implications

The results of this study indicate that students have both positive and negative expectations about the impending transition to secondary school. The students indicated they were looking forward to a

range of positive experiences upon entering lower secondary school. However, some aspects of the transition were considered cause for concern.

Perceptions of these specific aspects of the transition should be considered when designing content for transition-support programmes. Through an awareness of students' concerns, parents and teachers can foster smoother transitions, for example, by arranging pre-transition interventions (van Rens et al., 2018). Pre-service teacher education needs to include an understanding of the main issues related to school transitions to ensure that graduate teachers have the necessary skills and knowledge to deal with some of the pressures that students face during this period in their educational careers (Hanewald, 2013; McLellan & Galton, 2015; West et al., 2010). Teachers' ability to support their students is an important element in quality learning environments. Students' positive social and emotional wellbeing, and a motivational orientation towards schoolwork have been associated with teachers' supportive practices and students' experiences of them (Bru et al., 2010).

This study contributes to the literature on school transitions and demonstrates that school burnout (exhaustion among all students and cynicism among girls) was likely to be associated with concerns about peer relations when facing the transition to lower secondary school. In other words, concerns about making new friends, entering a new class or bullying in lower secondary school can be indicators of more severe problems in school-related wellbeing. Thus, according to this study, it is essential for teachers and parents to prepare students for a successful transition from primary to lower secondary school.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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