

A Threefold Perspective on the Challenges of the Transition to Secondary School in French-Speaking Switzerland

Deniz Gyger Gaspoz¹, Daniel Bosmans², Sheila Padiglia³

University of Teacher Education BEJUNE (HEP-BEJUNE), Switzerland

Abstract

In Switzerland, pupils reaching the end of their 8th year of primary school are guided according to their academic results. This guidance process is essential, as it will determine whether children go on to vocational training or to gymnasium studies and represents a major challenge for both the children and their parents. The stakes are all the higher in French-speaking Switzerland, where vocational training is often perceived as less attractive. This period can be particularly stressful for pupils, parents, and teachers alike. The teacher's role as a source of guidance and support is both difficult and important during that time. Still, for the pupils this is a crucial moment since it is synonymous with an initial selection and guidance process so it has a defining influence on the students' educational biographies and will determine his or her transition either to vocational or to gymnasium studies. The present pilot study aims at a better understanding of the socio-affective and cognitive issues emerging during this transitional period in the context of French-speaking Switzerland, and this, from a threefold perspective: that of the students, the teachers, as well as the parents. The quantitative results show that Year 8 students perceived more stress than Year 9 ones but the latter felt it to a greater extent. Following on from the qualitative results, courses of action for headteachers regarding the measures to be taken to improve the transition process are suggested, as well as recommendations for school management on how to best facilitate this defining period in children's lives.

Keywords: Transition, Risk and Protective Factors, Teenagers, Primary School, Secondary School

1. Introduction

In the context of transition during compulsory education, different moments are particularly important: starting school, moving to secondary I (General Certificate of Secondary Education level or thereabout) and leaving compulsory school when entering and moving on to secondary II (Advanced (A) level or thereabout). Guidance in secondary schools is subject to directives and regulations which, in Switzerland, vary from canton to canton. As part of the present study, the focus will be on entry into secondary I (i.e. children aged 11 to 13). This is a particularly important moment for children because, depending on their academic results, they will be guided either in a direction that will lead them on to gymnasium studies or to vocational training. To our knowledge, this transition has still been little studied in French-speaking Switzerland, even though it is of crucial importance to students in terms of school biography. Tap et al. (2004) state that the situation is similar in France and there is an urgent need to investigate guidance practices in the school system, especially for the adolescents who are under immense family and institutional pressure, and this, despite seemingly little support from either. The objectives of the project phase reported in this paper are to:

1. Identify the expectations and concerns of the teachers during the transition to secondary I;
2. Identify risks and protective factors among students during their transition, including cognitive and affective issues;
3. Suggest avenues for optimization in order to improve collaboration between teachers, school management and parents during the transition to secondary education.

This paper reports on a pilot study which was carried out in one school in the spring of 2023 and which is part of a 3-year project to be carried out in six schools in the three French-speaking cantons of Berne, Jura and Neuchâtel in Northern and Central Switzerland. A brief explanation and a review of the main concepts follow in the next section.

2. Literature Review

During this phase of their schooling, pupils are guided differently according to cantonal directives applied to the school they attend. In any case, the period of orientation proves to be fraught with challenges for the student at the beginning of adolescence, a pivotal time in terms of the development of their identity, relationships, and cognitive skills (Zittoun & Perret-Clermont, 2002; Zittoun, 2008; Pohlmann-Rother et al., 2023). Work on stress in the school environment (Esparbès-Pistre, 2015; Meylan et al. 2015b) has developed a lot in recent years and shows that it is essentially linked to the need to comply with teachers' and parents' expectations. It is therefore necessary to look more closely at how students experience this period while studying the risk and protective factors at stake as perceived by teachers and parents.

Teenage years are in themselves a period of transition (puberty, rites of passage, etc.) (Zittoun, 2006, 2008) and of ruptures in the sense that most young people find themselves in a situation in which they do not always know how to react appropriately. The young person's fields of experience change (Zittoun, 2012) and they explore different possibilities, which can be relatively stressful or distressing. In this crucial phase, young people call on various internal and external resources to facilitate the transition, particularly in school matters. From this perspective, family, teachers, or friends are some of the resources that can provide important support.

Risk and protective factors in the field of school transitions refer to the elements or conditions that can positively or negatively influence the period of adaptation and the students' well-being as they move from one stage to another in their educational journey (Poncelet & Lafontaine, 2011). Both risk and protective factors can be associated with the individual, the family, the school or even the social environment. Risk factors can be defined as variables associated with an increased likelihood of difficulties or problems during school transition. Protective factors are variables or conditions that act as resources or support mechanisms to foster a successful school transition. These elements can help mitigate the negative effects of risk factors and promote a positive period of adaptation for the student. For example, a lack of motivation, low self-esteem or a feeling of incompetence are risk factors, while having good social support (friends, family, teachers) is a protective factor (Meylan et al. 2015b). Risk and protective factors can influence how a student reacts to stress: the former increases the likelihood that a person will develop a negative stress reaction, while the latter decreases this likelihood. This is why we will also be interested in the students' stress level (Meylan et al. 2015a, 2015b) during this period.

Youngsters are, during this period, under immense stress (Pascoe et al., 2019) which was defined by Giron (2001, p.1) when he stated that:

We can only talk about stress at school if the school situation is perceived by the student as carrying a stake, when they have the feeling that what is expected of them exceeds their skills and when they consider that the objective to be achieved deserves the effort required of them... The challenge is that of socialisation, it is that of successful entry into society. The child is therefore confronted with this common thought which takes the form of pressure to succeed that they will internalise very early on.

As one of the objectives of this study is to identify affective issues, it is important to mention an instrument which has been developed in research about stress, the Toulouse Stress Scale (TSS). This scale assesses the nature and intensity of stress. It is made up of 30 items focusing on the physical and psychological symptoms of stress and how the participant experiences them. The original version of this scale was elaborated by Tap et al. (2002) from previous data collecting instruments (Cohen, Kamarck and Mermelstein, 1983; Lemyre and Tessier, 1988) and includes four dimensions: psychological, physical, psychophysiological symptoms and temporality disorders. To illustrate, psychological symptoms include things such as "I worry",

physical manifestations “I bite my nails or bite my lips”, psycho-physiological “I am tired” and temporality disorders “I have difficulty organising what I have to do”.

The teaching staff’s role during this transition is crucial, as Esparbès-Pistre et al. (2015) state that they, along with other stakeholders, can be sources of relief as well as contributing factors to children’s stress. Indeed, teachers can play a protective role but they also serve as the basis of the assessment and decisions that will decide the student’s academic direction. One of the issues at stake is to understand how teachers characterise and organise their assessment practices in terms of recommendations and what challenges they face (Lintorf and Van Ophuysen, 2022). Hofstetter (2017) was able to demonstrate in a qualitative study, in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, that teachers formulate their recommendations at an early stage and learners hardly manage to change what is called pre-categorizations or where they will eventually end up. This period is also a source of many issues for parents (Poncet & Born, 2008; Liechti, 2012) who see in the orientation decision an important moment for their child.

There is thus a need to understand how the various stakeholders (pupils, parents, teachers) perceive this period and to identify the tensions which are played out between, on the one hand, the cantonal directives (need for guidance under the responsibility of the teaching staff) and the expectations of pupils and parents. The present study is exploratory in the sense that it initially started with a limited sample to better understand the issues emerging from the period of transition to secondary school from a triple perspective (students, teachers, and parents).

3. Methodology

The methodology used in this project was mixed. The instruments designed to collect data were questionnaires explained below and these yielded both quantitative and qualitative data.

3.1. Participants

The participants reported on in this paper were teachers of Year 8 classes (class mistress/master as they are called in Switzerland, children aged 11-12) and Year 9 (children aged 12-13, with a teacher of one of the main subjects being in charge) and parents. This study covers a population of 119 pupils in Year 8 and 125 pupils in year 9 attending a school in the canton of Neuchâtel. There were 16 Year 8 teachers and 27 Year 9 teachers who answered the questionnaire and 162 parents’ responses were collected in paper form.

3.2. Data Instruments

The participants were asked to answer questions in one out of six different questionnaires (Years 8 and 9 children, Years 8 and 9 parents, Years 8 and 9 teachers) from Zeedyk et al. (2003) which were translated into French and adapted in relation to their concerns, the skills they considered useful for a successful transition, what they put in place as a teacher to support students and the measures adopted by the school to support students in the transition from Year

8 to Year 9. The methodology developed by Zeedyk et al. (2003) was used, after adapting it to our context. Both parents and students were thus encouraged to answer questions related to their expectations of this passage; their concerns, the skills they considered necessary as well as the role of the school in this transition.

To assess the stress perceived by the students, we asked them to complete the Toulouse Stress Scale (TSS) made up of 30 items. For each of those, subjects are asked to position themselves on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This scale highlights four dimensions:

1. The physical manifestations of stress, consisting of 10 items, among the manifestations we can cite cardiac, respiratory, intestinal disorders, etc. (internal consistency is $F0\ 61 = .86$).
2. A depressed mood, which consists of 9 items. This factor corresponds to all the feelings linked to the loss of self-confidence (powerlessness, discouragement), and of control over situations and relationships (internal consistency of $F0\ 61 = .86$).
3. The fever/tension factor consists of 5 items and is linked to hyperactivity and difficulty managing time (internal consistency of $F0\ 61 = .77$).
4. The lassitude factor, consisting of 6 items, is essentially based on fatigue, loss of energy and feelings of emptiness (internal consistency of $F0\ 61 = .92$).

The research took place just after the Easter holidays. This period was chosen because Year 8 pupils think about the upcoming transition into secondary education and Year 9 pupils are almost at the end of the school year, thus being able to reflect on issues coming up during their first year in their new school.

3.3. Data Analysis

Quantitative data findings were statistically analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 2022). The results of the qualitative data were analysed using the content analysis method (Bardin, 2013) and compared between the three stakeholders in the transition using MAXQDA (version 2022.8). A pooling of quantitative and qualitative results has therefore allowed us to adopt a mixed method to make the next phase of the project more robust. For the TSS, a similar data analysis procedure as the one described in Tap et al. (2004, p.7) was followed.

4. Findings

4.1. Pupils

4.1.1. Results from the TSS

The quantitative results show that Year 8 students perceived more stress (Fig. 1). This may be due to the expectation of moving on to Year 9 (Fig. 2), and of finding out the results of the

selection, which often generates stress. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that fewer Year 9 perceived stress, but those who did, felt it to a greater extent than those in Year 8. Generally speaking, certain trends are more pronounced in Year 9 but nothing significant emerged.

Fig. 1. Stress felt by Year 8 Children (aged 11-12)

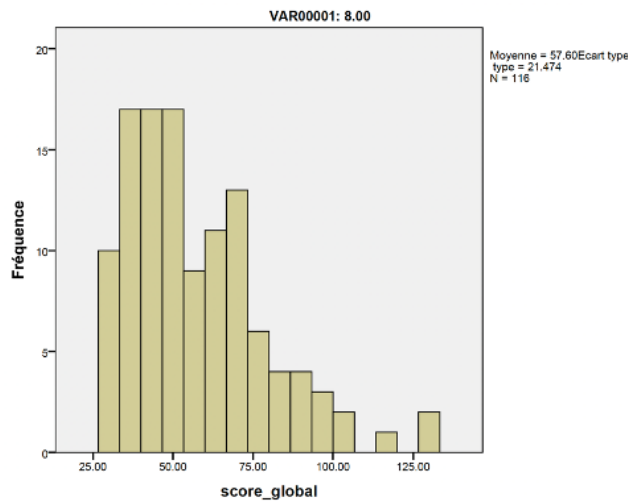
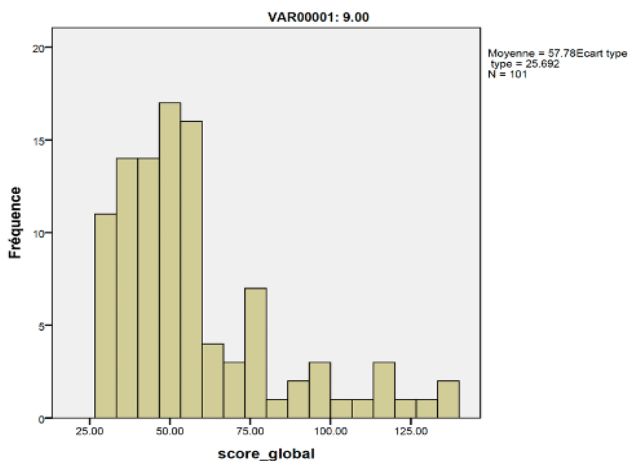


Fig. 2. Stress felt by Year 9 Children (aged 12 -13)



In order to look at the data in more detail, particularly with regards to the 4 stress factors, we compared the averages between Year 8 and Year 9 for the different manifestations of stress (physical manifestations, depressive mood, psychological tension, weariness). In terms of evidence of stress, there were no major differences between the physical and psychological manifestations. On the other hand, our data show that there were more pupils in Year 9 (12 out of 117 - Fig.3) with a very high depressive mood score, compared with 5 (out of 119 - Fig.4) in Year 8. It could therefore show that this factor is slightly more problematic in Year 9.

Fig. 3. Year 8 (aged 11 - 12) - Depressive Mood

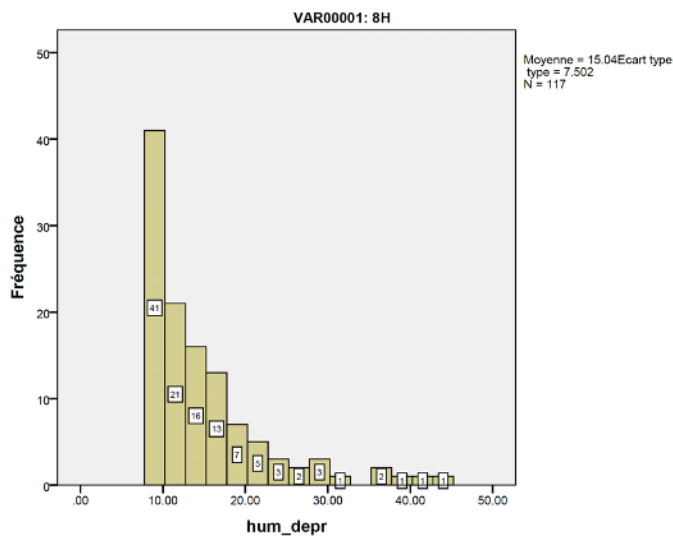
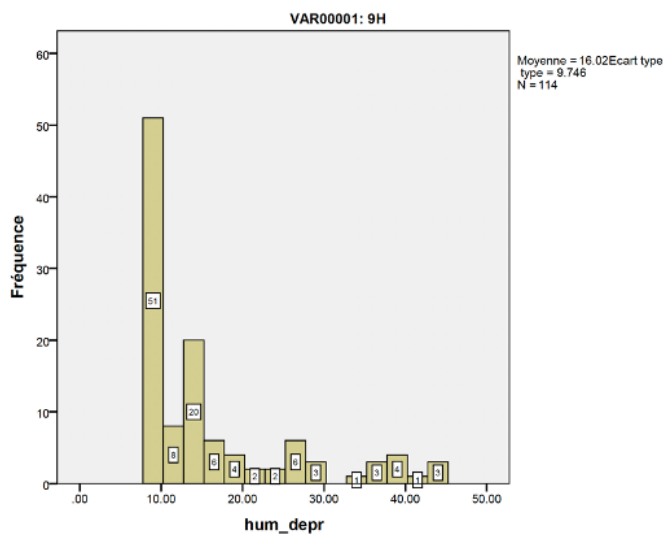


Fig. 4 Year 9 (aged 12-13) - Depressive Mood



The other interesting element is the weariness factor. If we look at the figures in Year 8, there were 4 pupils whose score exceeded 25 (Fig. 5) and in Year 9 there were 9 (Fig. 6). The number of pupils with a high weariness score doubled between Year 8 and Year 9.

Fig. 5. Year 8 (aged 11-12) - Weariness Factor

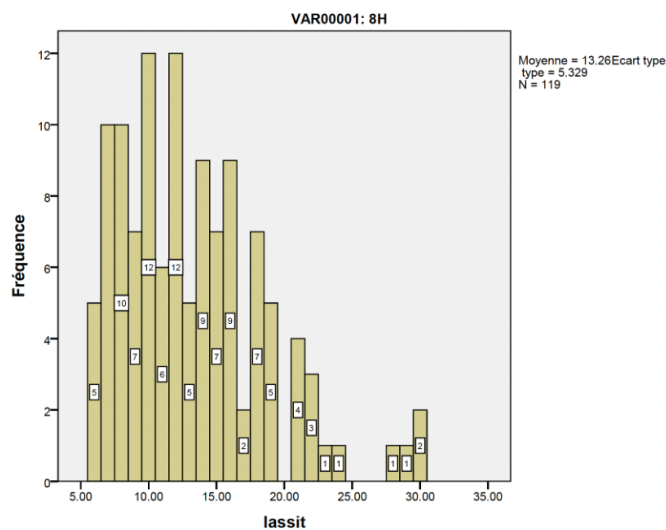
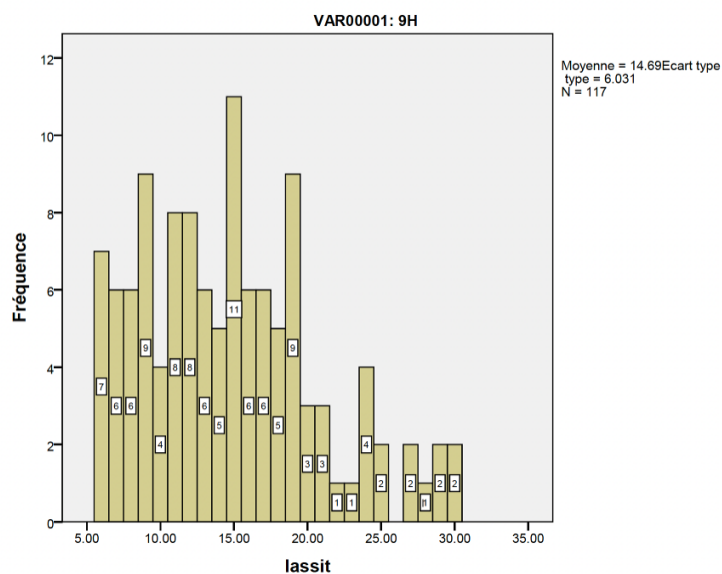


Fig. 6. Year 9 (aged 12-13) - Weariness Factor



4.1.2. Qualitative Part of the Questionnaire

The qualitative analysis of the data collected in answer to the question “What concerns you most about the transition to Year 9?” allowed us to better identify stress factors. Among the main sources of stress, two main categories emerged: one that was linked to the social network and a second one to academic performance. In the first category, the greatest source of worry was related to relationships with other young people. The students did not know who they would end up with, whether they would meet their friends again or not, and thus be able to integrate more easily. The following fears were mentioned: “I’m afraid it will be complicated

with the people who will be in my class”; “It stresses me out to be in a new class because I don’t know anyone there,”, with other statements expressing similar feelings.

Another element in this category was meeting new teachers who would use unfamiliar teaching methods: “I hope I won’t have a bad teacher”; “mean teachers”; “the teachers (I’m scared that their teaching methods won’t be suitable)”. It is also noteworthy that when moving from Year 8 to Year 9 the students have a lot more teachers whereas in Year 8 there is only one teacher per class. The transition from Year 8 to Year 9 thus represents a set of significant ruptures for these students, whether in matters of school organisation, their social circle or even a new physical environment that would need to be understood but which was the source of many apprehensions and could also explain the higher stress rate in this population.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasise that out of the 119 students who responded to the questionnaire, 15 indicated that they were afraid of being bullied: “the older ones (who are violent), the sexual attacks”; “I am a little nervous at the idea of being in the same school as the “big boys”; “school bullying”, “being bothered”. This passage into a world where students from Year 8, who are the tallest and strongest in their school, to that of Year 9 where they become “the smallest and weakest” must, in our opinion, be considered.

Another element of concern for students was the effects of the transition on their academic performance, particularly in relation to the change in school organisation. The students referred to: the introduction of lower and higher sets¹ in classes; increased amount of homework, written work, but also starting school earlier in the day. In some cases, these concerns were linked to specific subjects such as German, English, French and maths.

It is also interesting to note that for 9 students (N=125), when they answered the question “Were your concerns about your move to Year 9 justified?”, practically half of the coded responses (50 out of 101) indicated that these fears were unfounded: “No, because I thought there was a lot of work but in fact it’s quite easy”; “I thought the teachers were going to be strict, but in fact no”; “There was no need to have these fears because even if you find yourself alone in a class and you don’t know anyone, you always find someone you get along with.” It is also interesting to note that some students provided us here with strategies to cope with the changes encountered such as “yes, I prepare my things in advance so as not to be late for school”; “drawing helps me de-stress”, etc. We nevertheless noted 30 items indicating that the concerns were well-founded, with 16 items stating that in general the concerns were confirmed, 7 items concerning mainly academic results and/or performance and 7 items concerning the social network: “Yes, because I was afraid of not being in the same class as my friends and I have 0 friends in my class”; “have no one from my old class in my new class”.

These results are interesting as they confirm the results of the quantitative data. The Year 8 students reported more sources of anxiety than the Year 9 students who clearly indicated that

¹From Year 9, in the Canton of Neuchâtel, the teaching of French L1 and maths is done according to sets 1 and 2. The objectives of Set 2 are higher than those of Set 1.

the concerns were unfounded or that they had no reason to be so worried. It can therefore be suggested that when concerns are confirmed they are in themselves new sources of stress thus being reinforced.

When it comes to the support that schools could put in place to ease the transition from Year 8 to Year 9, students highlighted the importance of the role of academic support but also of the emotional support that the teacher could provide. Some students also indicated that the school could “reassure” by letting students with their friends in the same class in Year 9. 14 students also suggested that visits be also offered to familiarise themselves with their new school environment: “The school could organise a meeting with all the new Year 9 and try to get them to become friends” and “The school could also give a tour of the college premises and explain how it works”, a similar finding in the teachers’ data. This proposal thus makes it possible to fight the uncertainty and runaway imagination inherent to any period of transition by making it more tangible with the feeling of being shown the way. Visits to the school where information is provided on the upcoming changes were also identified by 14 students as having played a supporting role during the transition to Year 9. However, students indicating that the school supported them in some way represent less than half of the responses, with the majority indicating that the school did nothing: “not at all”; “it didn’t help me”; “nothing, the teachers didn’t do anything, I did everything myself”. This lack of perceived support from school deserves to be further questioned, considering the expectations formulated previously. Having said that, a few students (N=8) did mention the support received from a particular teacher and less frequently from a friend (N=1) or a family member (N=1). We should also note that the same number of students (N=9) identified their success in relation to the personal efforts invested, which echoes the concept of autonomy also mentioned by the teachers.

4.2. Teachers

The data from the 22 teachers who responded to the questionnaire yielded interesting themes which can be divided into four main categories:

1. Help provided by schools,
2. Help provided by teachers on an individual basis,
3. Children’s self-help in the form of capabilities to be practised or competencies already acquired
4. Worries that both Year 8 and Year 9 teachers may have about their pupils’ transition.

Starting with schools, these can provide help of various sorts at different levels. In answer to our open-ended questions, Year 8 teachers mentioned help to locate places in their new school through visits, help with the information that children will need and the importance of providing these at the right time. This could be achieved through collaboration and communication between schools in terms of the preparation to transition and the transfer of academic performance with the suggestion that a few teachers could teach in both Year 8 and Year 9 to facilitate this. Children themselves participated in the process by becoming more

responsible for their own attitude and actions during the transition. Schools could also put in place a teaching context and style which would emulate what happened in secondary schools and a mentoring scheme, with Year 10 (aged 13-14) pupils helping Year 9 children. The help usually given to statemented children could also be broadened and offered to other children to some degree.

Year 9 teachers mentioned similar points but added peer support in terms of keeping friend groups from Year 8 to Year 9 if possible. This was also a point mentioned by parents and children. Self-help was more specific for them as the children should focus on the quality of their work rather than the increased workload. When it came to collaborate more with the other schools, it was up to the school management to take the lead in organising it. Year 9 teachers also saw the need to focus on secondary school expectations, the overt teaching of learning strategies through some access course and help from Year 8 teachers in the setting of clear rules and expectations from the last year of primary school onwards to foster children's autonomy, another issue mentioned by parents, particularly when things were going well, thus a recurring theme across the board. The teaching of metacognitive and cognitive learning strategies could also be done through the learning support staff if only during a limited support period. A clear welcome from the school through an address by the headteacher and their support in matters of discipline were also deemed important, with a broadening of exclusion cases to deal with troublemakers and thus improve classroom mood.

As well as help from the school as an institution, support from teachers themselves was elaborated on. Year 8 teachers gave assistance in the guise of early intervention and the promoting of autonomy as, for instance, they gave homework well in advance to enable children to organise their own work, getting them to validate test criteria and even measure autonomy progression through exercises. Teaching styles and learning strategies were touched upon as these needed to progress towards secondary school practices. Broader help and mentoring were also given by classroom teachers when giving tools adapted to each child's needs and working on their preoccupations. The need to involve parents was also mentioned, and parents did want to be involved, when organising individual meetings and during parents' evenings but some teachers wished that parents would be more interested, showing the importance of collaboration between everyone involved in transition. Moreover, work on affect was deemed extremely important in order to increase children's self-confidence, an essential point which will be further explored in subsequent papers. On the other hand, no help with localisation in the new school or collaboration were mentioned as this was probably viewed as the school management's responsibility, emphasising again the need for the involvement of all stakeholders at various levels for a successful transition.

Year 9 teachers' role was seen as very different to Year 8. They had a direct impact in helping children to adjust to new surroundings. Not only could they give explanations on timetable, lockers, and general college organisation but also on course contents and the overall management of learning. Exercises helping them to work on autonomy, taking initiatives and organisation techniques were all part of what children could do to help themselves.

When it came to teaching learning strategies, ideas such as starting by going over known material, increasing the difficulty levels, introducing note-taking techniques, and working on learning together were all mentioned to ease children into Year 9, along with regular feedback on how they were doing. Affect was elaborated on at length, as a heart-warming welcome to ease communication and de-dramatisation of a new school environment were found to be important, along with learning about their fears, and being very patient in order to increase children's confidence. They endeavoured to start their programmes with easier first chapters and evaluation formats to promote confidence whilst working on cooperation and group dynamics to improve the class's mood.

Competencies needed to be worked on in both Year 8 and Year 9 were mainly to do with increased autonomy and metacognitive skills. In Year 8, children were prepared to become more efficient and methodical, to reflect on what they were doing both before and following the completion of a task. On a cognitive level, maths and French were emphasised, particularly with the view to improve their vocabulary, their memorisation, and their verbalisation. Social and affective skills were also looked at in terms of learning enjoyment, open-mindedness, ability to follow instructions and not giving up at the first hurdle.

On the other hand, Year 9 teachers focused more on what should have been achieved before reaching secondary school but still had not. For instance, they wanted more readiness in getting one's material together and looking after it, finding their way in school books, preparing for tests through the organising of revision sessions and generally being more in charge of their own learning. When it came to cognitive skills, teachers mentioned French oral and written skills, numeracy, and history as being the main subjects found wanting. Affective issues took the form of lack of motivation, developing a more positive attitude towards learning and being ready to help their peers. On a social level, a greater awareness of school rules, of behaviour rules, of respect and of their place and role as pupils still needed working on. Autonomy as a recurring theme, with a mention of more creativity were also emerging from Year 9 teachers.

Understandably, Year 9 teachers had a lot of worries. Some of them were to do with missing qualities and competencies, such as lack of autonomy, perseverance, confidence, and maturity as well as an inability to pay attention and enjoy their learning. Children were also found to be ill-prepared, not at the right level, and not ready to learn in terms of metacognitive strategies, even compelling some teachers to mention the need to repeat the year. They also worried about the lack of continuous specialised support, and the potential for a feeling of isolation in a new environment.

Year 9 teachers echoed their Year 8 colleagues on most issues mentioned above, with some added worries, such as, being able to self-correct, to start working without prompting, valuing their education, and working on their forgetfulness (equipment, timetable). So many new things and ways to get used to also emerged such as not being used to the marking system, the constant change of teachers, the content and pace of secondary school instruction, and new systems such as the use of lockers rather than coat pegs. A lot of guiding was necessary in the first few weeks

to enable them to cope with multiple learning needs (from the teacher's perspective), feelings of stress in a new environment and trying to get more comfortable, to get a sense of belonging and find one's place in a new environment.

4.3. Parents

The parents elaborated much less than the children and teachers in their responses, thus unknowingly confirming teachers' remarks about parents needing to be more involved. The qualitative questionnaires sent to parents included 4 open-ended questions, slightly different for either year. For parents of Year 8, the questions explored 4 main themes: what parents were looking forward to about the transition to Year 9, concerns about the transition, measures that could be put in place by the school to facilitate the transition, and the desired support from the school. The questionnaire for parents of Year 9 pupils included these 4 themes: what they hoped for at the time of the transition to Year 9, concerns related to this transition, the (children's) skills that would be useful for this transition, and finally any help they would like from the school.

Qualitative analysis of the questionnaires obviously revealed a wide range of responses depending on the parents' experiences, but several concerns shared with the teachers stood out. One of the main ones was the desire to keep the same classmates (or part of) in Year 9. Under the current system, children are redistributed to different classes from Year 9 onwards each year. Some parents stressed the anxiety their children feel and the loneliness this can cause. Among the useful skills that children used to make the transition, autonomy and "good school skills" were cited when the transition seemed to have gone well.

Stronger support from the school during this transition was also called for, through measures such as sharing objectives for the following year and a stronger presence of the teaching staff in discussions with the family, or the introduction of mentoring help for new pupils by older pupils from the new college.

5. Discussion

The expected results of this project can be categorised into different strands. One of the objectives was to better understand the perceptions, expectations, and concerns of parents, students and teachers on the transition to secondary I. More specifically, the purpose was to question the role that teachers can play as a factor of protection in the former. Teaching styles, strategies and content were perceived as a major contribution teachers can bring in order to prepare or alleviate the lack of children's preparation to transition. Although collaboration and communication were not mentioned by Year 8 teachers, this was deemed essential by Year 9 teachers to ensure continuity of teaching style and content, and evaluation strategies. Both groups thought that this was to be organised by school management, a good suggestion to ensure standard practice and implementation.

The students' responses also highlighted that the school's role, and more particularly the teachers', was important for Year 8 students. Here teachers found themselves faced with a "double constraint", they were both the source of support and guidance for the student (risk of repeating a year, of finding themselves in Set 1 rather than Set 2 for French L1 and maths). This can also explain the greater stress felt by Year 8 students for whom the selection process has serious consequences. In the same way, our results show that at that time in their life, friends and the close social circle played a predominant role in supporting the young person transitioning to Year 9. It is therefore interesting to note that once the transition to Year 9 was complete, students no longer saw teachers as support, quite the opposite. The social circle remained important but the students demonstrated that they were trying to rely on their own skills.

A second objective was to study the risk and protective factors during the transition to secondary I from the teachers' point of view and identify ways to deal with them. This certainly emerged from the data as affect was one theme which was mentioned by all teachers in terms of worries, competencies to be acquired and help that they could provide. Schools were not perceived as sources of help, perhaps because they do not deal directly with students on a day-to-day basis. That is not to say that specific programmes to deal with emotions could not be put in place and thus standardise practice amongst their teachers. On the other hand, robust support mechanisms were cited as essential, and not only for statemented children, as support had to be broadened to all who needed it.

There was a consistency in themes mentioned by both Year 8 and Year 9 teachers in terms of help available and the source of that help although Year 8 teachers did not think, understandably, that help with locating the next college facilities was in their remit. Bizarrely, although they saw the need to involve parents in the process, they did not mention the role schools could play in order to achieve this. They may have thought that they, as teachers, can identify when parents' involvement is necessary in reaction to punctual situations but a more prophylactic approach extended to all parents and children did not come to the fore.

One main concern was the lack of preparedness for both sets of teachers with Year 8 feeling that their students were nowhere near ready in terms of levels achieved, autonomy and other skills and competencies required to thrive in secondary schools, and with Year 9 confirming that this was the case. This certainly calls on a multi-agency approach, not just the teachers' role to get the children ready to move on to secondary education.

The threefold perspective in this project was most useful as some common issues were mentioned by all stakeholders. As far as risk factors were concerned, leaving a known environment (social and spatial) mentioned by students, parents, and teachers alike, the issue of potential harassment that were common among parents and students but not among teachers, even though the latter should have this as one of their preoccupations, and finally the lack of autonomy and preparedness, both for the new environment and the level children should be at

when entering Year 9. These different issues can be the source of the stress that we found, in a more significant way, among Year 9 students.

When it comes to protective factors, common themes were to prepare children more extensively for autonomy in learning (amongst students, only mentioned by Year 9) and the importance of being able to rely on their circle of friends and maintain it during the transition. Moreover, our various stakeholders underlined the importance of setting up a coaching/monitoring system by older students to support young people who arrive in Year 9, children who would already be familiar with the new establishment and its school culture. A few teachers were also mentioned by students and parents as supportive factors. Teachers highlighted that there was a lack of coordination when the establishments were geographically separate, an issue which needed addressing by school management.

6. Conclusion

The field of transition to secondary education is still little studied, the vast majority of studies focusing on the transition to secondary II (post obligatory education), in particular vocational training. The idea of this project was to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges of this transition, with a perspective from French-speaking Switzerland, in addition to studies carried out in German-speaking Switzerland (see for example Niederhauser & Hascher, 2022; Lintorf and Van Ophuysen, 2022; Van Ophuysen , 2018).

There were some limitations to the present pilot study, one of which was the limited number of returns from teachers, making statistical calculations inappropriate. However, what it lacked in quantitative data, it certainly made up for in the quality and depth of teachers' comments and suggestions. Another limitation was that only participants' responses from one canton were sought for, but this was deemed adequate for a pilot study which will then be extended to a larger number of schools in three cantons for the main project. Finally, more specific demographic information should have been obtained as Esparbès-Pistre et al. (2015) found quite different results in their study between boys and girls in terms of levels of stress and number of female participants suffering from it.

Another contribution of the research has been the adaptation of an existing questionnaire and its insertion in a more extensive and more appropriate questionnaire for the population studied, a data collection method which can then be replicated in other educational contexts by the scientific community.

In the next phase, interviews will be conducted with the teachers responsible for Year 8 and Year 9 classes to deepen their point of view on the passage and the selection process put in place. The number of these interviews will therefore depend on the number of Year 8 and Year 9 classes in the 6 establishments selected for the main study. Following the main phase of this project, we will be keen to propose to the educational community (teachers and school management) measures to promote support for Year 8 and Year 9 students and to raise their

awareness of the issues emerging during this difficult period. There will also be a need to make them aware of the notion of school stress (and its possible impact in terms of children's burnout) and the management of emotions in students. Finally, we also hope to bring elements of reflection on the way in which the non-explicit evaluations feed in the recommendations for the next phase of their education. At the same time, it will be necessary to better consider the teachers' needs during this period. If the aim is that they can better support their students, they should also be able to have the necessary support from their school management, or even from the cantonal school authorities.

Another objective of this study was to be useful to education authorities. In the next phase, we will prepare a Policy Paper for each canton to present the main results by canton with the desire to open a discussion on the issues of the transition from Year 8 to Year 9 and to reflect on the education guidance system to be put in place. The various practical suggestions provided will be targeted for each stakeholder in the transition so that they can play their part in improving and facilitating this important stage in a child's life.

Based on the present findings, the implementation of one or more continuous professional development courses for teachers around student support for the transition between primary and secondary I will be suggested. Training can provide teachers with tools to better support students (especially in terms of managing emotions) and understanding the challenges of this transition. A practical guide for parents will also be handed out to aid the transition to secondary school. All these practical outcomes will ground the present research in pragmatic reality and will put the student at the centre of our preoccupations.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the three-year project on Transition between the primary and secondary school systems. Our thanks go to Mme Françoise Casciotta, M. Vincent Fivaz and the teaching team at Le Cercle Scolaire Le Locle for welcoming us into their school and obtaining the data for this study. We would also like to thank Dr Giuseppe Melfi for his help with all statistical calculations in the present paper.

References

- Bardin, L. (2013). *L'analyse de contenu*. Presses Universitaires de France.
- Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., & Mermelstein, R. (1983). A Global Measure of Perceived Stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 24(4), 385–396. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2136404>
- Esparbès-Pistre, S., Bergonnier-Dupuy, G., & Cazenave-Tapie, P. (2015). Le stress scolaire au collège et au lycée : différences entre filles et garçons. *Éducation et francophonie*, 43(2), 87–112. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1034487ar>
- Hofstetter, D. (2017). *Die schulische Selektion als soziale Praxis: Aushandlungen von Bildungsentscheidungen beim Übergang von der Primarschule in die Sekundarstufe I*. Beltz Juventa.
- Lemyre, L., & Tessier, R. (1988). Mesure de Stress Psychologique (MSP): Se sentir stressé-e [Measurement of psychological stress: To feel stressed]. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science / Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement*, 20(3), 302–321. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0079945>
- Lintorf, K., & Van Ophuysen, S. (2022). Leistung ist nicht alles— Empfehlungskriterien bei sicheren vs. Unsicheren Übergangsempfehlungen am Ende der Grundschulzeit. *Empirische Pädagogik*, 36(3), 377–395.
- Meylan, N., Doudin, P.- A., Curchod-Ruedi, D., & Stephan, P. (2015a). Burnout scolaire et soutien social : L'importance du soutien des parents et des enseignants. *Psychologie Française*, 60(1), 1-15.
- Meylan, N., Doudin, P. A., Curchod-Ruedi, D., Antonietti, J. P., & Stephan, P. (2015b). Stress scolaire, soutien social et burnout à l'adolescence : quelles relations ? *Éducation et francophonie*, 43(2), 135-153.
- Niederhauser, J. & Hascher, T. (2022). Beurteilung beim Übertritt von der Primar- in die Sekundarstufe 1. Eine Analyse von Praxen und Herausforderungen für Lehrpersonen in zwei Schweizer Kantonen (2022). *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Bildungswissenschaften*, 44 (3), 365-377.
- Pohlmann-Rother, S., Wehner, F., & Kaiser-Kratzmann, J. (2023/i.D.). Transitions to primary school: School entry decisions, parents' and educators' ideas about school readiness, and cooperation between ECEC facilities, primary schools, and parents. In S. Weinert, H.-G. Rossbach, J. von Maurice, H.-P. Blossfeld, & C. Artelt (Eds.), *Educational processes, decisions, and the development of competencies from early preschool age to adolescence: Findings from the BiKS cohort panel studies*. Springer.
- Tap, P., Esparbès-Pistre, S., Lacoste, Serge, Vasconcelos, M. d. L & Duarte Santos, R (2004). Estime de soi et niveau de stress : leur relation avec les difficultés d'orientation chez 1748 adolescents de collèges et de lycées. *Conférence Bissaya Barreto, Coïmbra, Portugal*. https://www.academia.edu/52714204/ Tap_P_Esparb%C3%A8s_Pistre_S_Lacoste_Serge_V

[asconcelos M d L and Duarte Santos R 2004 Estime de soi et niveau de stress leur relation avec les difficult%C3%A9s d orientation chez 1748 adolescents de coll%C3%A8ges et de lyc%C3%A9es](#)

Tap, P., Esparbès-Pistre, S., Lacoste, S., Lamia, A., Lévêque, G., & Sordes-Ader, F. (2001). L'orientation scolaire et/ou professionnelle comme source potentielle de stress, *Rapport final de recherche au Conseil Régional Midi-Pyrénées*.

Van Ophuysen, S. (2018). Die Übergangsempfehlung als Aufgabe von Grundschullehrkräften. Theorien und Forschungsstand. In R. Porsch (Hrsg.), *Der Übergang von der Grundschule auf weiterführende Schulen. Grundlagen für die Lehrerbildung, Fortbildung und Praxis* (S. 89–113). Waxmann.

Zeedyk, M. S., Gallacher, J., Henderson, M., Hope, G., Husband, B., & Lindsay, K. (2003). Negotiating the transition from primary to secondary school: Perceptions of pupils, parents and teachers. *School Psychology International*, 24(1), 67–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034303024001010>

Zittoun, T. (2006). *Transitions - Development through symbolic resources*. Information Age Publishing Inc.

Zittoun, T. (2008). Learning through transitions: The role of institutions. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 23(2), 165-181.

Zittoun, T. (2012). Modalités d'usage des connaissances et sphères d'expériences. In Bernie et Brossard (Eds). *Vygotsky et l'école* (pp. 251-261). Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux.