



Secondary School Transition: Bridging the Gap Through Social Emotional Learning

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PROJECT BRIEF

PROJECT NAME: Secondary school transition: Bridging the gap through social emotional learning

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose

The transition into secondary school can diverge students into positive and negative developmental trajectories. This research aimed to identify biological, psychological and social factors that ensure a positive transition into secondary school, and to test if the Motus Social Emotional Learning Program could support the transition by improving these factors. Based on previous research, this project examined the role of the cortisol awakening response, measured through saliva samples, and student-reported emotion regulation use, social support and self-esteem.

Key Findings

- The cortisol awakening response did not predict a positive secondary school transition.
- In line with previous international research, girls were more likely than boys to have a negative transition experience, and high perceived social support and self-esteem were predictors of a positive secondary school transition.
- The Motus Social Emotional Learning Program improved emotion regulation use, social support, self-esteem and psychological well-being one week after the program.
- The only program effects that were maintained post-secondary school transition were emotion regulation use and psychological well-being. However, effect sizes were small.
- When participating students were asked about their experiences, they believed the content was important and liked the program's gamified pedagogy. However, there was too much information in a short time, and some recommended sport-related activities.
- Students would also like to learn more about the practical side of the transition.

Implications

- Environments should actively promote social support and self-esteem.
- School personnel should pay particular attention to girls across the transition.
- There should be increased communication between primary and secondary schools to ensure that all students have perceived social support across the transition.
- Social emotional learning programs such as Motus can benefit the transition.
- Practical aspects of the transition, such as lockers and timetables should be covered.
- The Motus program will now include more content related to improving self-esteem and perceived social support. The program will also be restructured to six one-hour lessons and will be adapted in pedagogy to better meet the needs of different classes. This will be researched and compared against the evaluation of the original structure.

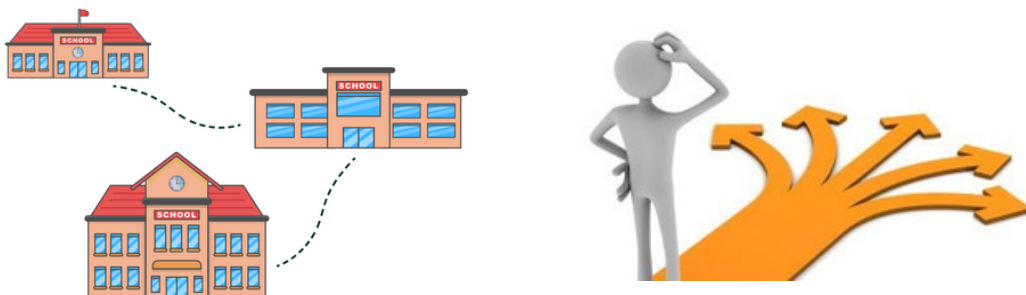
Early Adolescent Psychological Well-Being

During early adolescence, spanning from 10 to 14 years, individuals can experience a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and social changes that can significantly impact their psychological well-being (PWB). Research across early adolescence has found significant increases in the concentration of the stress hormone cortisol 30-45 minutes after awakening, better known as the cortisol awakening response (CAR) (Platje et al., 2013; Lupien et al., 2001). The heightened CAR is believed to be linked to the increased demands and challenges of adolescence, including academic pressures, social interactions, and the onset of puberty (Rosmalen et al., 2005). These hormonal changes can have both short and long-term effects on emotional lability and PWB, which is why adolescence is often depicted as a period of storm and stress (Hall, 1904). Emotion regulation is the process of individuals influencing emotions to achieve goals and this becomes increasingly important in managing this emotional volatility during early adolescence (Gross & John, 2003; Young et al., 2019). This demand for independent emotion regulation is supported by rapid brain development, which enables more sophisticated and cognitive emotion regulation alongside existing strategies such as emotional suppression (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011). For example, cognitive reappraisal is the ability to change how one thinks about a situation to change how one feels, and this has been positively associated with PWB (Gross & John, 2003; Hu et al., 2014). This rapid expansion of cognitive abilities and meta-cognition also allows adolescents to engage in more complex reasoning and exposes them to heightened introspection and a greater sense of identity (Orth & Robbins, 2014). Self-esteem is an individual's assessment of their value, self-worth and self-perception (Harter 1999), and this tends to fluctuate as adolescents grapple with questions of self-concept, belonging and purpose. Adolescents' social networks typically expand as they transition into secondary school and become more independent of caregivers. This can increase variability in social support; the network of relationships, resources, and assistance available to students (Saylor & Leach, 2009). The need for peer acceptance and social belonging also intensifies, making social interactions and relationships paramount to PWB (Chu et al., 2010). These contemporaneous changes contribute to early adolescence being the developmental period with the highest onset of social-emotional disorders (Rapee et al., 2019).



Secondary School Transition

Adolescents moving to secondary education experience multiple simultaneous transitions (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019). Alongside puberty, individuals must adapt to more people, different teachers, and a stricter structure (White, 2020; Mumford & Birchwood, 2021). This transition has been referenced as one of the most stressful periods of an adolescent's life (Zeedyk et al., 2003) and poor adjustment has been linked to lower academic performance, school drop-out, and negative PWB (Riglin et al., 2013; Rice et al., 2011; West et al., 2010). However, there have been mixed findings regarding how secondary school transition influences PWB (Lohaus et al., 2004). Some studies found that the transition positively impacted PWB, whereas others reported the opposite effect (Evans et al., 2018). Further, there has been a negative discourse around the transition, with research focusing more on the absence of psychopathology rather than positive PWB or flourishing (Bagnall & Jindal-Snape, 2023). This is despite positive PWB being included in the World Health Organisation's (2005) conceptualisation of mental health and being a measure of successful transition (Scanlon et al., 2019). More research is needed to understand how positive PWB can be maintained across the transition into secondary education.



Factors Influencing PWB Across Secondary School Transition

A high CAR has been found to predict mental health difficulties across the transition because it increases susceptibility to stress (Zandstra et al., 2015). However, no study to our knowledge has examined the relationship between the CAR and positive PWB across secondary school transition. Students must also exhibit appropriate social-emotional competencies to adapt to the new environment of secondary school (Kuo et al., 2020). Establishing support networks and building self-esteem have been identified as social-emotional competencies that can help the transition and they capture key aspects of the broader, multifaceted construct of PWB (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020; Symonds, 2015). Emotion regulation use has been less explored across the transition, despite being associated with PWB during this developmental stage (Schäfer et al., 2017).



In Ireland, social support (Smyth, 2016), social capital (Darmody et al., 2012) and anxieties (Naughton, 1998) have been previously investigated across secondary school transition, but no Irish transition study has tested the CAR or collectively examined the social-emotional competencies of emotion regulation, social support, and self-esteem. As Ireland has declining youth mental health (Dooley et al., 2019) and secondary school transition can be a period of risk (West et al., 2010), this research examined the relationship between these social-emotional competencies, the CAR and PWB across secondary school transition. Once these relationships are understood, the next step is to understand if these social-emotional competencies can be improved through education. As early adolescents spend most of their time in school, it is a suitable setting to engage in social emotional learning to develop these social-emotional skills (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Social Emotional Learning

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) involves education on the five core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision-making (Greenberg et al., 2017). Following meta-analyses that found improvements in academic performance, pro-social behaviours, and PWB (Durlak et al., 2011; January et al., 2011), the popularity of SEL programs has vastly expanded in recent years. Since 1994, the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has led the expansion of SEL worldwide. Their work includes the development of international best practices of SEL (Zins & Elias, 2007) and the refinement of implementation factors such as SAFE principles to ensure SEL effectiveness. SEL interventions are based on a three-tiered approach. Indicated programs are delivered to students with mental health disorders, selective programs target students at risk of developing mental health issues, and universal programs aim to improve the mental health of all individuals (Greenberg et al., 2017). From a societal perspective, universal interventions that target small population shifts in PWB can concurrently increase individual flourishing and reduce mental disorders (Huppert, 2009). In addition, universal programs remove the stigma of singling out students for interventions (Durlak et al., 2011). The evidence base behind SEL has attracted the attention of policymakers and educational leaders. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union have recently published reports, emphasising the importance of SEL for students' holistic development, noting its positive impact on academic performance and well-being (OECD, 2018; Cefai et al., 2018). Both have advocated for the integration of SEL into educational policies and curricula, highlighting the need for effective implementation and assessment to improve student outcomes and foster supportive learning environments. However, SEL differs across contexts, meaning that countries should start with best practices and then adapt programs to contextual needs (Elias, 2019).



Social Emotional Learning in Ireland

In Ireland, well-being promotion has become a government priority (Department of the Taoiseach, 2017). A 5-year school framework (DES, 2018) has been introduced to promote well-being as a core element of ethos and to provide evidence-based approaches to support student well-being. Its fundamental principles include school policies being child-centred, evidence-informed and outcome-focused. However, SEL program evaluations have displayed mixed results for early adolescents in Ireland. The Weaving Well-Being Tools for Resilience Program has reported no change in self-efficacy, emotion regulation or psychopathology, but qualitative data showed that children perceived improvements in their own emotion regulation skills (O'Brien, 2020; Barrington et al., 2019). The Lust for Life Schools Program similarly found positive qualitative student feedback (Hector et al., 2022) but non-significant improvements in positive and negative indicators of well-being (Clancy et al., 2023; O'Connor et al., 2022). Despite more research being needed on these SEL programs, several continue to be scaled up in Ireland. For example, the Weaving Well-Being Tools for Resilience program and the Lust for Life program have reached over 1,000 schools (O'Brien, 2020; <https://alfschools.com>). The only SEL program to demonstrate significant quantitative improvements in coping skills and well-being among Irish early adolescents was FRIENDS for Life (Ruttledge et al., 2016). This is a cognitive-behavioural program that teaches coping strategies such as cognitive reappraisal. This paucity of evidence-based SEL programs in Ireland is analogous to Europe's lack of SEL research (Sklad et al., 2012). The Irish government framework has also highlighted school transitions as a risk factor but no published Irish SEL evaluations have been carried out across the transition (White, 2020).



**FRIENDS
RESILIENCE**

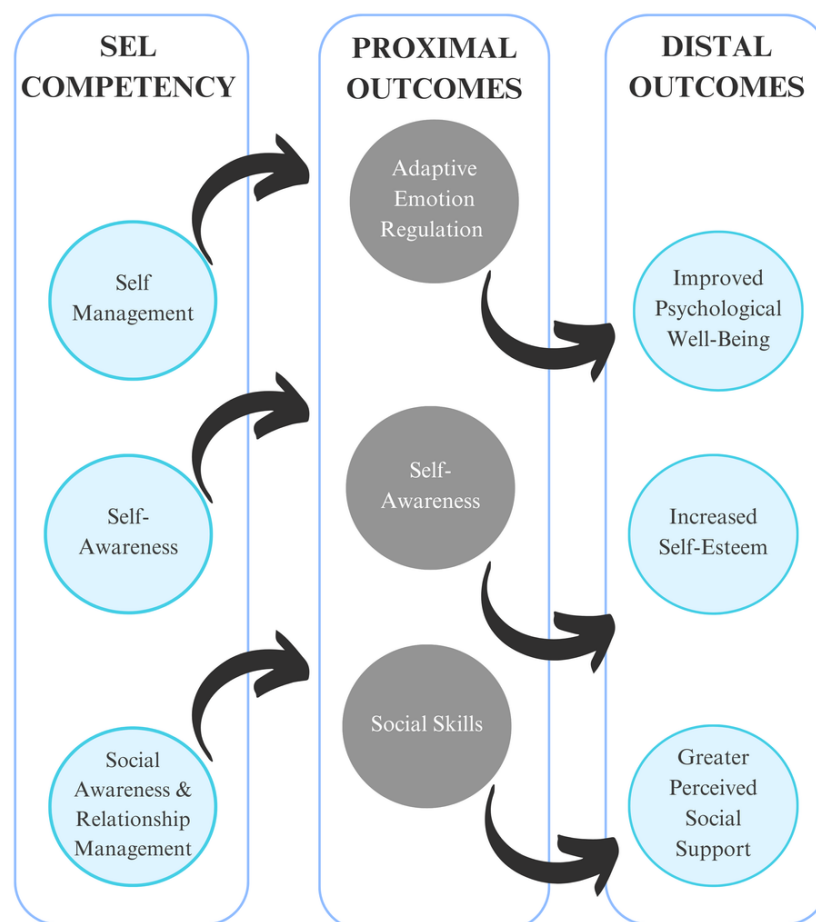
Social Emotional Learning And Secondary School Transition

Students should be taught content that applies to their everyday lives to be an effective prevention mechanism. This necessitates research into SEL effectiveness at developmental periods when students need social-emotional guidance. As individuals progress into early adolescence and secondary school, their cognitive, emotional and social capacities evolve, making it crucial to tailor SEL interventions to meet their needs (Carsley et al., 2018; Denham, 2018). In addition, it is important to examine SEL effectiveness at specific developmental stages where brain development is highly malleable (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). SEL has proven effective at primary school transition (Ştefan et al., 2022), and there are promising findings of SEL effectiveness at secondary school transition. School-based interventions have targeted secondary school transition (Beatson et al., 2023; Donaldson et al., 2023) but there has been a shortage of SEL transition programs targeting universal populations in the UK and Ireland (White, 2020). As such, there is a clear need for an evidence-based program to support the transition.

Theory of Change for Secondary School Transition SEL

Clear outcomes facilitate the design and effectiveness of targeted interventions. In line with the CASEL (2020), it is important to enhance proximal or short-term outcomes in order to improve distal or long-term outcomes. Distally, positive PWB is a valuable measure of secondary school transition (Symonds, 2015). Previous school-based programs have been criticised for focusing on negatives rather than positive skills, and school staff find it more acceptable to focus on positive PWB rather than mental health difficulties (Bastounis et al., 2017; Humphrey & Wigelsworth, 2016). Targeting positive PWB rather than psychopathology aligns with the NICE's definition of mental health (2008) and the recent emergence of strengths-based discourse regarding mental health and well-being. Proximally, adaptive emotion regulation, and particularly cognitive reappraisal is a consistent feature of effective SEL programs and can be taught (Wante et al., 2017; Pedrini et al., 2021). Adaptive emotion regulation use has been associated with concurrent increases in PWB whereas strategies such as emotional suppression have negatively correlated with PWB (Mertens et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2014). Emotion regulation education becomes even more substantial during early adolescence because transitioning students deem it as vital, and here have been self-reported reductions in social-emotional and self-management skills across this developmental stage (Stiehl et al., 2023; Martinsone et al., 2022). Self-esteem is another vital distal outcome across the transition because it helps form an individual's identity and role within sec

-ondary school, supports resilience against setbacks, and positively influences academic performance, relationships, and PWB (Carlén et al., 2023). Teaching students to identify and understand their strengths, weaknesses, emotions, thoughts, and behaviours can contribute to the proximal outcome of self-awareness and the “ah-hah moments” that can increase self-esteem (Stein & Grant, 2014). A Portuguese SEL program has demonstrated improvements in self-esteem across secondary school transition (Coelho et al., 2017). Social support from peers, parents, and teachers should also be targeted across secondary school transition (Evangelou et al., 2008). Teaching relationship management content can help develop the proximal outcome of social skills (January et al., 2011). Social skills are vital to SEL effectiveness and positively associated with the distal outcome of social support (Lawson et al., 2017). A universal SEL program in Canada has demonstrated improvements in social support among early adolescents (Katz et al., 2020).





The Motus SEL program

The Motus SEL program is a brief cognitive-behavioural intervention designed for sixth-class students' social-emotional transition into secondary school. The program is broken up into three 120-minute sessions. It is a brief context-specific program rather than a curriculum, taught by an external psychology graduate who has received ten hours of online training, a protocol to teach and monthly debriefing with a training facilitator.

Program Content

The Motus program's seven steps to emotional intelligence cover emotional literacy, cognitive-behavioural content, neuroscience, the five ways of well-being, emotion regulation, empathy, and social skills.. Its 7-step content aligns with the five SEL factors: Self-awareness is incorporated in Step 1: what are emotions?, Step 2: my emotions, and Step 3: my brain; Self-management includes content related to Step 2: my emotions, Step 3: my brain, Step 4: my well-being, and Step 5: my resilience. Social awareness and relationship management encompass Step 6: empathy, and Step 7: social skills. Finally, responsible decision-making is aligned with the content in Step 3: my brain. The Motus program aims to be developmentally appropriate to early adolescence, as recommended by the CASEL (Elias et al., 2019). It teaches several social-emotional skills identified as important across secondary school transition (Symonds, 2015). The program's main distal outcome is to improve positive PWB across the transition by teaching students to replace maladaptive emotion regulation strategies with adaptive strategies such as cognitive reappraisal. The program also aims to increase acceptance use by teaching mindfulness and disempower strategies often described as maladaptive, such as emotional suppression and rumination. The program also targets social support and self-esteem by developing social skills and emotional awareness. The program teaches social skills such as active listening, helping friends and creating a support network, and self-awareness content such as emotional literacy and identification. This gives students the language to perceive themselves more accurately, facilitating personal growth, self-acceptance and healthy self-esteem. These learning outcomes align with the WHO's Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2021 – 2030.

Program Pedagogy

The Motus SEL program utilises the pedagogy of gamification; “game-based mechanics, aesthetics, and thinking to engage people, motivate action, promote learning, and solve problems” (Kapp, 2012, p. 10). Classes are divided into teams where they receive points for winning games and quizzes. This pedagogy is suitable for early adolescents because they enjoy reward-based activities (Stuerle, 2022). The program aims to increase student motivation and engagement by integrating game elements such as challenges, rewards, and competitions. This program has been designed to improve outcomes related to positive secondary school transitions and to promote developmentally appropriate pedagogies that increase student responsiveness. However, SEL program evaluations are often subject to adultism, whereby researchers assume they are more knowledgeable than students (Teixeira et al., 2021). It is, therefore, essential to listen to student experiences of SEL.

Student Experiences

Research and policies now promote youth perspectives in program evaluation and development (Bastounis et al., 2017). As well as giving a unique insight into secondary school transition, youth perspectives are essential for SEL evaluation because they provide insight into student engagement and how and why a program is effective (Hector, 2022). The Lancet Commission on Adolescent Health and Wellbeing (2022) supports the inclusion of youth perspectives in interventions aimed at improving adolescent well-being (Patton et al., 2016). Students have agency, and this interacts with intervention effectiveness. A comprehensive analysis of 31 studies on mental health interventions within school settings revealed that aspects of how adolescents interacted with the interventions, termed intervention receptiveness, had a more significant influence on their mental health after the intervention than the actual quality of the intervention itself (Rojas-Andrade & Bahamondes, 2019). These results indicated that adolescent perceptions about SEL interventions play a pivotal role in determining their success in improving mental health outcomes, surpassing traditional measures of success such as intervention quality. However, student experiences have been neglected in both SEL research and Ireland (Mills, 2019; Skerritt et al., 2021). Recognising student experiences would address the power differential in SEL program evaluation and provide insight into the social validity of SEL programs.

Aims

This program of research aimed to understand what biopsychosocial factors are associated with secondary school transition and to evaluate if these factors can be improved via the Motus SEL program.

METHOD

Ethics

The study adhered to established ethical guidelines approved by the University of Limerick Education and Health Sciences Ethics Board (2021_03_07_EHS). Before participation, all individuals, including students, parents/caregivers, teachers and principals, were provided with detailed information about the study objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. It was emphasised that participation was voluntary, participants had the right to withdraw at any time without consequences, and all data was confidential and anonymous. Each questionnaire and saliva sample was given a participant number, and pages with first names and initials were shredded once matched with a participant number. All data were stored in a locked laboratory at the University of Limerick, and only authorised research personnel had access to identifiable information.

Measures

- The cortisol awakening response was measured via morning saliva samples.
- Social-emotional competencies included self-reported questionnaires of emotion regulation use, perceived social support and self-esteem.
- Student experiences were measured via student attitudes in focus groups.

Participants

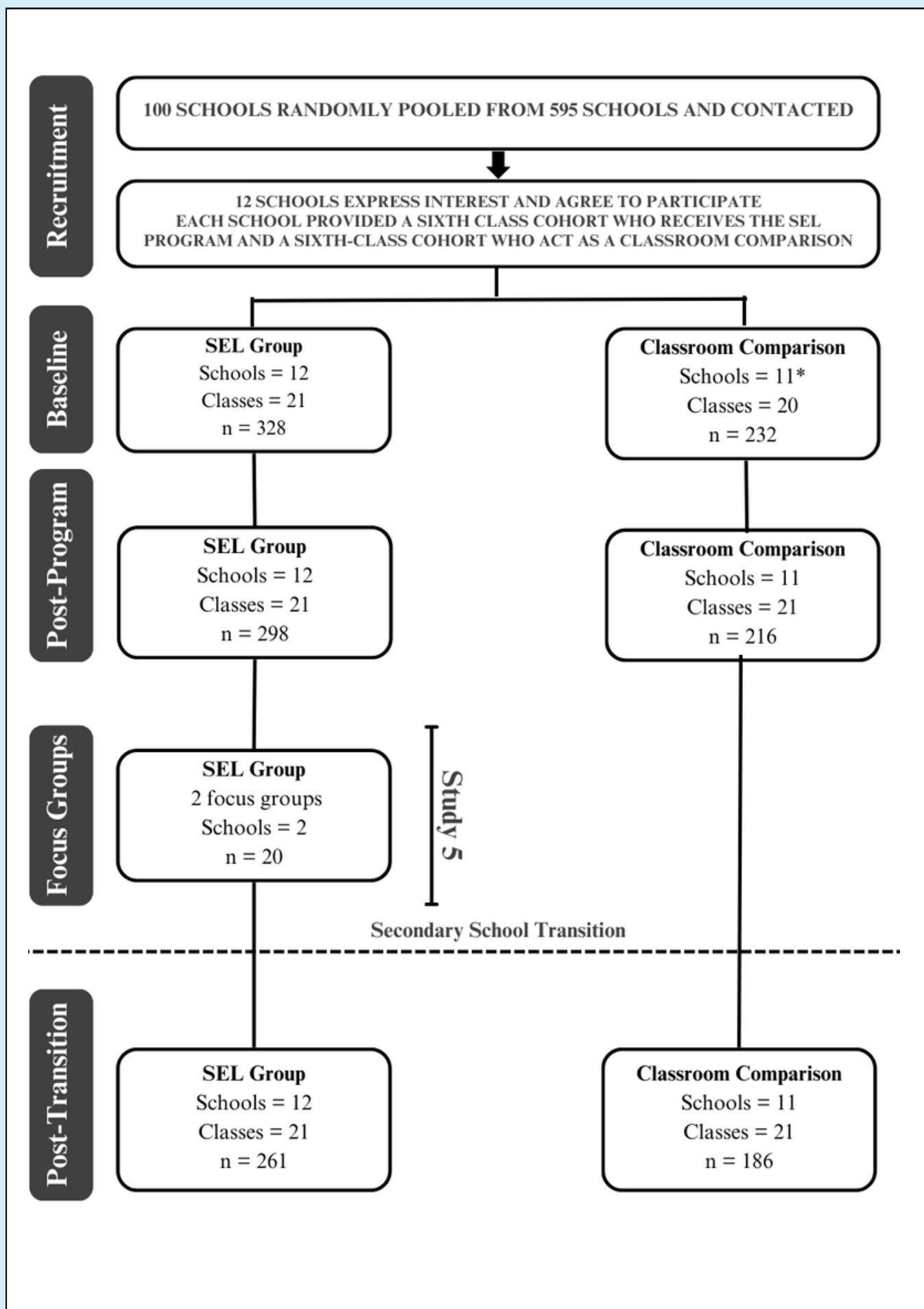
- 1) 114 students provided saliva samples to analyse the cortisol awakening response.
- 2) 233 students self-reported their social-emotional competencies.
- 3) 568 students participated in the Motus SEL program evaluation (328 students in the SEL program and 232 students in the classroom comparison group).
- 4) Two focus groups of 8 - 12 students were carried out to understand student experiences of the Motus SEL program.

OBJECTIVES

1. Examine the relationship between secondary school transition and the cortisol awakening response.
2. Examine the relationship between secondary school transition, social-emotional competencies and PWB.
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of the Motus SEL program across secondary school transition
4. Explore student experiences of the Motus SEL program

DESIGN

1. Multi-site longitudinal analysis across secondary school transition.
2. Non-randomised quasi-experimental evaluation with an SEL group and classroom-comparison group.
3. Multi-site longitudinal analysis across secondary school transition.
4. Student focus groups.



Factors that impact positive secondary school transitions



Self-esteem



Social Support



Gender

Our research shows that self-esteem and social support positively predicted psychological well-being across the transition, whereas girls were more likely than boys to have a negative transition. This indicates that social support and self-esteem should be universally promoted, and girls should be given additional attention during the transition. The cortisol awakening response did not predict psychological well-being across the transition. However, previous research has highlighted that a high cortisol awakening response predicts mental health issues across the transition. This indicates that a high cortisol awakening response could be a vulnerability factor but it does not inform positive transitions.

Promoting Social Support



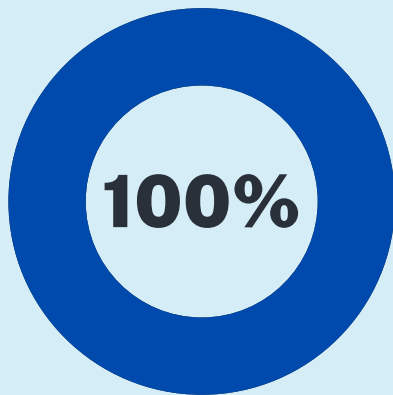
Previous research has recommended that schools should encourage positive interactions between peers, teachers and parents, offer access to school counselling services and peer support groups, and create a safe and inclusive environment (Waters et al., 2014). More communication is also needed between primary and secondary schools to ensure extra efforts are made for transitioning students with low perceived support or no primary school peers (Scanlon et al., 2019). It's also important to build relationships between students going to the same secondary school, secondary school teachers and older peers. Buddy systems have proven effective (Smyth et al., 2004).

Promoting Self-esteem

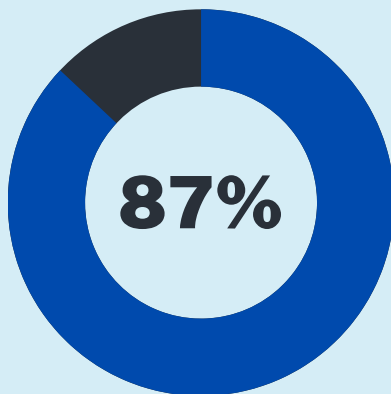
Schools should celebrate achievements and diversity (Katsantonis et al., 2022). Teachers should also provide continuous praise, act as positive role models and encourage students to participate in extracurricular activities and leadership roles. School staff should pay particular attention to girls across the transition, encourage active involvement from parents and create mentorship programs to connect girls with positive role models that provide guidance and support (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).



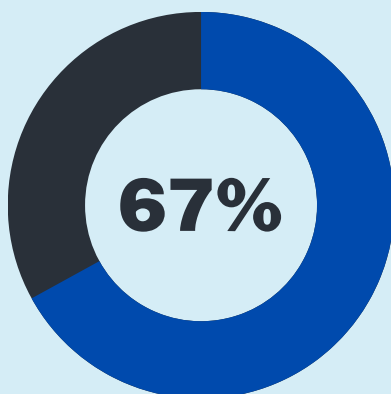
Implementation



Delivered as per
planned in 66
lessons



High Program
Delivery
Quality in 66
lessons



High Student
Responsiveness
in 66 lessons

Participants

328

STUDENTS

22

CLASSES

12

PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Facilitators reported that the program was delivered as instructed within the time expectation of three 120-minute lessons over three weeks.

The facilitators reported a high teaching quality in 55 of 63 lessons and high student responsiveness in 42 of 63 lessons

Post Program Effectiveness



Emotion Regulation



Social Support



Self-esteem



Psychological Well-Being

One week after the Motus SEL program was delivered, student reported significant improvements to emotion regulation use, perceived social support, self-esteem and psychological well-being.

Post Transition Effectiveness



Emotion Regulation



Psychological Well-Being

Approximately six months after the Motus SEL program was delivered and after students transitioned into secondary school, the only significant improvements that remained were emotion regulation use and psychological well-being.

Student Experiences

**WE'RE GOING TO
SECONDARY NEXT YEAR SO
IT'S MORE IMPORTANT TO
KNOW THIS STUFF THIS
YEAR.**



Most students found the content relevant to their development and they enjoyed learning about it. The students had thought about secondary school and they felt that the program helped them prepare for it. They mentioned that it was important to know how to manage bullying, make new friends, and manage friendships.

Students noted that the workshop needed to be longer to consolidate the information. At times, they felt overwhelmed trying to recall the information and they thought that some content needed to be revised more. Both groups recommended that the program should have more sessions, and some students advised that the lessons should be an hour rather than two hours.

**YOU WERE UNDER A LOT OF
PRESSURE TO LIKE TRY AND
TAKE A LOT IN**



Student Experiences

I LIKED THE WAY IT WAS LAID OUT. THE SLIDES AND STUFF. AND THEN THERE WOULD BE A BREAK AND WE'D HAVE A GAME.



Students unanimously enjoyed the gamification included in the program. Students stated that the competition between teams, games and activities were their favourite part of the program.

WE WEREN'T DOING ANYTHING ACTIVITY-WISE. WE WERE JUST MATCHING EMOJIS AND WRITING DOWN THINGS AND FOR US, THERE WAS A LOT OF TALKING AND IT JUST GOT BORING.

A typical pattern in the data was variation between individuals and schools in both application and content recall. Some students, particularly boys and those from DEIS schools could not recall some concepts in the program and did not practise the skills they learned because they could not remember the skills or disagreed with them.



Schools/Teachers

- Schools/teachers should promote skills related to social support and self-esteem such as self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses, empathy, and social skills before and during secondary school transition.
- Schools should consider SEL programs to benefit secondary school transition.
- Students were concerned about schoolwork and practical issues such as getting lost and timetables (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Teachers can address these concerns through school visits and conversations about new subjects and timetables. Academically, students who were taught generic skills around examinations, homework and studying felt better able to handle the new educational demands of secondary school (Howard & Johnson, 2004).
- Students' responsiveness to gamified pedagogy should be considered as a tool to increase early adolescent receptiveness. However, there are risks to gamification; it can teach students to only engage with gamified pedagogies and only learn for external rewards. It can also be time-consuming for teachers to implement, meaning it could be better utilised by external facilitators.
- Schools should continue including student perspectives when evaluating psychoeducational programs (Foulkes & Stapley, 2022).

Motus Learning

- it is imperative to bolster the quality and quantity of content related to self-awareness and relationship management to improve the outcomes of social support and self-esteem. The program could teach self-awareness content such as self-reflection, strengths and weaknesses, and relationship management skills such as assertiveness and support-seeking.
- Segmenting the program into smaller, digestible lessons, such as six one-hour lessons is achievable and could facilitate deeper engagement and retention.
- Booster sessions: The Motus SEL program now includes a teaching schedule, teaching resources, and a web-based app to support SEL content revision for ten weeks after the facilitator-taught program is implemented. This involves one workbook activity and five gamified classroom activities based on the five ways of well-being to be done weekly on the app. This could be the content that maintains the Motus program's short-term effects and should be researched further.
- Enhancing the program's adaptability to cater for individual needs is essential for fostering personalised growth and addressing diverse learning styles. Facilitators must be trained to adapt content to different intellectual levels and SES, and there should be open communication with schools before the workshop to determine how much program adaptation is needed.

CONCLUSION

Secondary school transition can diverge students into positive and negative developmental trajectories. This research has contributed to our understanding of secondary school transition by identifying biopsychosocial variables associated with the transition. Identifying SEL feasibility at specific developmental periods, such as secondary school transition, and including student experiences are essential steps towards understanding SEL effectiveness. The Motus SEL program seems to be universally beneficial to PWB, but the program's effects on emotion regulation could be moderated by gender. A brief SEL program can improve emotion regulation and PWB across the transition when the content is relevant to their lives and the pedagogy is gamified. However, a concerted effort is needed to provide sufficient time for students to consolidate SEL content and to ensure broader student engagement. This project underscores the critical importance of tailored SEL programs during secondary school transition, offering actionable insights for stakeholders to enhance student well-being and success across educational settings.

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