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A Peak Through the Lense of the Gifted: Perceived
 Well-being of Gifted Students as They Transition
 from Primary to Secondary Education – A
 Retrospective Study

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Perceived Well-being of Gifted Children as They Transition from Primary to Secondary Education: A Retrospective Study

Abstract

In the current qualitative study, a retrospective exploratory analysis was conducted of the perceived well-being of gifted children during their transition from primary to secondary school. This research provides a first step in gaining more understanding of how gifted students experience their school years and, specifically, the educational transition years, which have been shown to impact the well-being of all students. Research on giftedness has shed light on the lack of knowledge about the specific struggles these students might face and on the common misconceptions that might lead to their needs not being met. In this study, to address this research gap, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten adults who self-identify as gifted. The interviews were coded and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, which allowed common themes within these gifted students' transition experiences to be identified. The results revealed that gifted students perceive their transition into secondary school as mostly negative when contrasted with the positive expectations they had before entering secondary school. Most students recall an overall perception of not fitting into the typical educational system and struggling to connect with same-age peers. Students also expressed a desire for more support from teachers and staff during this transition period. Further research must be done to gain more understanding of how these factors influence the well-being of gifted students and what schools can do to make this transition smoother.

Keywords: gifted students, primary to secondary school transition, student well-being, gifted student perceptions, qualitative study, exploratory analysis

Introduction

Human development is a complex process and when it comes to education and learning there is a myriad of factors that can positively contribute to a student's talent development or that can hamper it. A vulnerable period for developing children occurs during major educational transitions, such as that between primary and secondary education (West et al., 2010). This period is characterized by considerable emotional fluctuations combined with the uncertainties that students must face when starting secondary education (Measor & Woods, 2019). Currently, the Youth, Education, and Society (YES) research group at the Hanze University of Applied Sciences is conducting studies to better understand what changes occur during the transition from primary to secondary education that might positively or negatively affect the well-being of individual children. This study will contribute to the YES research group by investigating the same questions regarding the complex experience of transition into secondary education specifically, but specifically in the population gifted students.

Transition from Primary to Secondary School

Most research on the primary to secondary school transition consists of quantitative studies, which have not shown the transition to be as influential to student's well-being as qualitative studies, which are much fewer, and unrepresentative. A longitudinal qualitative study by West et al. (2010) revealed the significant influence of school and peer transitions on the well-being of students within and beyond secondary education. Other research on students' experiences during this transition has shown a decline in psychological well-being (Virtanen et al., 2019), academic emotions, and achievement among students (Sainio et al., 2021) as they are rapidly introduced to a new environment (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Overall, qualitative research, though limited, has begun to shed light on the critical nature of

the transition from primary to secondary education (Pratt and George, 2005, as cited in West et al., 2010).

The Gifted Child

The rapid and concentrated aspect of the educational transition into secondary school can prove overwhelming for most students (Elliot et al., 2017). Whether a child can get through and overcome this difficult transition might depend on various factors, such as preparation during primary school, actual and perceived support, and individual psychological strengths (Virtanen et al., 2019). This can be an especially difficult moment for more vulnerable students, such as those with atypical development, as is the case with children identified as gifted (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). To properly understand how these educational transitions can affect gifted children, researchers must consider what generally affects all children during this time and the specific characteristics of gifted children that make them more vulnerable. However, the lack of consensus and clarity in the scientific community when defining the construct of giftedness can make studying and understanding giftedness challenging.

The Problem with the Common Giftedness Definition

Most selection and research on gifted children has focused on identifying giftedness as a child with exceptional intellectual abilities when compared to peers of the same age (McBee & Makel, 2019). Due to this, there is an inherent focus on the academic achievements and IQ of the student while disregarding the multidimensional nature of giftedness (Borland, 2017; Carman, 2013). Reducing gifted individuals to IQ scores or high school grades leads to ignoring the specific needs and motivations that drive gifted individuals. This creates a lack of understanding of the struggles they might encounter compared to their typically developing peers (Salvatore Mendaglio, 2023). Consequently,

modern research on giftedness is shifting towards a more multidimensional definition that reflects the social environment in which the child is embedded and the individual characteristics that shape the experience of giftedness (Smedsrud, 2020). Given the history of defining giftedness mostly as student's who achieve high IQ scores and grades in school, in the classroom, a gifted child is most likely to be defined by how much load they can take or how much they achieve. Giftedness expert Sal Mendaglio (Sal Mendaglio, 2023) emphasizes how giftedness should not be equated to production or achievement, but as the *potential* for extraordinary learning and achievement. Therefore, high cognitive abilities are necessary for achieving high performance, but not necessarily sufficient, and it is especially the case in gifted students (Subotnik, 2004). If provided with the right resources and support, this child has the potential for great achievement due to their above-average cognitive abilities (Sal Mendaglio, 2023). However, it is important to also pay due attention to the factors that influence this potential, such as environmental and intra-individual factors (such as willpower, motivation, endurance, self-control, and impulse-control) and the interactions between them. Not addressing these can lead to a gifted child who does not realize their potential (Smedsrud, 2020).

Student Well-being and Perceptions

Studies on well-being amongst students indicate that a lack of psychological well-being plays an important role in underachievement among students (Blaas, 2014).

Underachievement in the student population is a challenge that educational systems face in general, regarding the number of students at risk of not completing their education. The construct of *student well-being* has been identified as a multidimensional construct whose core element is related to the subjective appraisal of a student's school experience. This experience emerges from "positive over negative emotions, the satisfaction of needs, and

the effective academic, social and psychological functioning at school, needed to pursue valued goals (Hossain et al., 2023).” Given that the most common definitions of student well-being highlight the subjective, emotional, and cognitive evaluations of students’ school experiences, looking at students’ perceptions of such experiences might be relevant. Perceived student experiences may be a stronger indicator of what constitutes student well-being within a certain student population overall, and it gives practical insight into the factors that can increase it (Douwes et al., 2023).

Well-being in Gifted Students

As previously mentioned, an important factor that constitutes student well-being is the satisfaction of needs. Gifted students’ needs often go unmet due to false perceptions that these mostly relate to intellectual domains (Blaas, 2014). Furthermore, the perception of unmet needs in gifted students may impact their overall perception of school experiences, especially those occurring during already complicated periods in education, such as transitions. Another aspect related to student well-being to look into in gifted students is their perception of positive over negative experiences and their social and academic functioning. The emotional valence they assign to their transition experiences, especially those related to changes in their social and academic lives, can also affect their perception of well-being, as shown in hedonic approaches to student well-being conceptualizations (Hossain et al., 2023). The limited research and, consequently, lack of understanding of giftedness leads to not knowing how to address any existing problems that this group of students might encounter during a period that research indicates is already complicated for students in general (Piske & Collins, 2024). Therefore, looking into gifted students’ subjective experience and perceived well-being during their transition into

secondary school might bring a better understanding of the needs of this population of students and how they differ, if so, from typically developing students.

Current Study

The current research aims to develop more knowledge to better understand the experience of gifted students, especially during this difficult period in education. The research question to be explored will be how gifted children experience this transition from primary to secondary school from their perspective. This will be done to find the common thread in gifted students' experience of well-being to better understand how to support these children to underperform when they reach secondary education.

Methods

Research Design

The present qualitative study was conducted with an exploratory research design aimed at exploring how gifted children perceived their experience of transition into secondary education. Interviews were conducted with participants focusing on identifying influential factors involved in this often-challenging transition. Gifted students' experiences are often overlooked given past research's focus on their high IQ and academic achievement potential. Conducting an exploratory analysis leads to an opportunity to learn about the many factors that might be influencing gifted students as they transition from primary to secondary school. Additionally, the qualitative research design is better suited for exploring complex phenomena, such as this transition period, where there is no clear understanding of the factors involved.

The research design, including the interview scheme, received ethical approval from the Hanze University of Applied Sciences ethics committee for previous similar studies

conducted by the Youth, Education, and Society research group (YES) of the Hanze University of Applied Sciences.

Procedure

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited by sending participation invitations to the university gifted peer support groups organized by the Student Services Center of Maastricht University and the University of Groningen, the honors programs at the University of Groningen and Hanze University of Applied Sciences, as well as by reaching out to students in several master's programs at the University of Groningen.

Data Collection

To answer this exploratory research question, individual interviews were conducted with adult university students who had previously been identified as gifted or who self-identified with the qualities of giftedness. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured, open-question manner to allow students to deeply reflect on their experiences as gifted students during the transition from primary to secondary.

Before the data collection phase began, each participant was provided with an information package that contained information about giftedness for identification purposes and an informed consent form that provided a summary of the study being conducted, its purpose, its voluntary nature, and a confidentiality agreement to be signed. Each participant had to read and sign the informed consent form, which gave permission for the recording and processing of the data collected from the interviews.

All interviews were conducted online via Google Meet and lasted between twenty and forty minutes, depending on the participants' interest and willingness to discuss their experiences. Each interview was conducted the same using the approved interview scheme

(See Appendix A) which had been adapted to account for the study's retrospective nature. The interview questions were divided into three sections to obtain information about significant moments of primary school, the period leading up to secondary school, and their actual experience during their first year of secondary. By asking questions about these three periods, further information could be derived about how their secondary experience differed from their primary school experience. The interview scheme involved the use of *probes* to aid participants in answering the questions. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Following data collection, a thematic analysis was then conducted from the transcribed data based on codes extracted from the raw interviews.

Participants

For this study, a sample of 10 participants between the ages of 18 and 25 (*N female = 9, N male = 1*) was recruited from gifted student support groups at two different universities, Maastricht University and the University of Groningen. Permission from group organizers was obtained and access was granted to post a recruitment message to the student group chats. The inclusion criteria used for the study included students who had been previously identified as gifted at some point in their education or who currently self-identified as gifted. The process of self-identification involved the students identifying as gifted after receiving information on typical characteristics and experiences of the gifted by a school counselor or psychologist at some point in the past or after receiving information brochures about giftedness from the Student Services Center at the University of Groningen, given for the purpose of this research. No official giftedness diagnosis protocol was required from the participants. No other personal information about the participant was collected other than country of education, age, and gender.

The participants completed primary and secondary education in a variety of different countries, with the majority following their education in The Netherlands or France. There were four participants from The Netherlands, three from France, one from Belgium, one from Spain, and one from Hungary. Additionally, three of these participants completed secondary education in a different country or region from where they finished primary education. One participant finished primary in Hungary and secondary in the United States, one participant finished primary in France and the first part of secondary in India, and another participant finished primary in Flemish Belgium and secondary in French Belgium. Of the 10 participants, 9 were active members of a gifted support group, and 1 chose to join after hearing about the study and identifying with the information given.

Materials

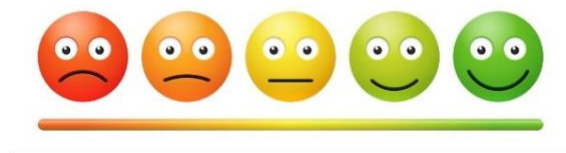
To conduct the interviews and collect the data, the previously approved and validated interview scheme *Child Interview Guide (Appendix A)*, currently being used by the Youth, Education, and Society research group (YES) of Bochane et al. (2024), was adapted for the current adult participants and the study's retrospective nature. To analyze the collected data, a detailed *Code Book (Appendix B)* was prepared to keep track of the emerging codes, themes, and theme groups.

Child (Student) Interview Guide

The Interview Guide followed the same structure and questions as the original *Child Interview Guide* prepared by Bochane et al. (2024), with the only change being the questions' structure to reflect the study's retrospective nature. For example, a question phrased as, "When you think back to when you started secondary school, how do you view those concerns now," would be rephrased as "When you think back to before you started secondary school, how did you view those concerns once you were in secondary school?"

Each interview was divided into 3 sections. The first section was dedicated to understanding the main aspects that each student enjoyed about primary school and what they perceived changed as they transitioned into secondary school. The second section was dedicated to the students' perceived experiences right before they made the transition, including positive and negative expectations, and during their first year in secondary school. Lastly, the third section involved questions regarding what students thought would have helped them look forward to this period, worry less about it, and have a better first-year experience. As part of the prepared interview scheme, each question included *probes* that could be used to guide the students in answering the questions when they couldn't remember or could not think of detailed experiences. An example of this would be when asked to share specific aspects they were concerned about before entering secondary; some *probes* given would be, "Were you worried about making new friends, bullying, the course load...etc." In addition, each participant was asked to rate how they remembered feeling right before entering secondary school on a Smiley Face Likert Scale of 1 to 5, shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1



Codebook

A *Code Book* was prepared and updated with each interview to keep track of the codes that emerged from the collected data and to detail the process that was taken for the

coding and analysis of the data collected from the interviews. This process used a framework based on a grounded theory approach, where the codes and themes emerge from the data as it is analyzed (Bryant, 2020). This Code Book (*Appendix B*) contains three sections: a guide for coding, an excerpt from the List of codes, and an excerpt of the codes by color category. The *Guide for Coding* includes the steps taken during the coding phase of data analysis, including the process used for deriving the *Code Book* from the first interview and the different topic categories that were used to code the data. The *List of Codes* excerpt gives an example of a few of the codes encountered and the way they were documented, such as their color markings, the number of mentions each received, and whether the code related to the primary (1), transition (0), or secondary (2) period. The *Codes by Color Category* shows an excerpt detailing how the codes were organized into separate topic categories under their assigned color. This section also includes additional information about the valence each code was given (+: positive, -: negative, 0: neutral), if relevant or whether it was related to academic or social aspects. The different sections of the *Code Book* will be referred to throughout the data analysis.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Following the interviews, the audio recordings were fully transcribed using the transcription software Otter.ai (Crumley, 2018). Prior to beginning the coding and data analysis process, all the recordings were listened back, and the transcripts were adjusted and edited where necessary to ensure the audio and transcript matched. Before saving, each transcript was anonymized and assigned a number based on when the interview was conducted in accordance with the rules of the ethical committee and AVG rules.

A thematic analysis was conducted using an inductive, data-driven exploration and coding based on the current research question (Saldaña, 2020). The *Code Book* was

prepared, with the *Guide for Coding* created based on the data of the first transcript. The *Guide for Coding* and the *Full List of Codes* were used to code the rest of the transcripts and were updated as needed if new codes emerged with each consecutive transcript analysis. The thematic analysis consisted of two main stages: the Coding Phase and the Themes Phase.

The Coding Phase involved two coding rounds that led to the developing of a detailed and comprehensive set of codes. During the first round of this phase, the transcribed interviews (raw data) were actively read twice to identify the essence of the text and sections of interest for coding. The sections of interest were then highlighted with one color for further analysis. The second round involved the active reading of each transcript a third and fourth time for the purpose of identifying the specific codes that related to the research question of the study, that is, codes that described aspects of the perceived experience of the students during their transition into secondary education. During the third reading of the second round, the segments identified in round one were assigned a specific color highlight based on the *Guide for Coding*. The fourth reading of this round involved the matching of each colored segment with already identified codes in the *List of Codes*. If the segment matched an existing code, the frequency of this code was increased, if it didn't, then a new code was created to represent this segment. After this process was followed for all 10 interviews, a final run-through of the interviews was conducted, leading to a final set of data-driven codes based on the study's research question. The codes were then organized based on the main topic category assigned (indicated by the color highlight) to create the *Codes by Color Category* section of the Code Book. If relevant, the codes in certain topic categories were either given a valence value based on whether the segments representing

each code were positive (+), negative (–), or neutral (0), or they were marked by whether they mentioned an aspect related to academic, social, or both.

The second phase of the thematic analysis, referred to as the Themes Phase, followed the rounds of coding. This involved the process of searching for themes within the data based on the final set of codes developed in the Coding Phase. This phase consisted of two rounds: a theme identification round and a theme categorization round. The theme identification round consisted of reading through the codes in the *Codes by Color Category* section of the Code Book and identifying the most significant theme that emerged from the codes in each topic category. This process was followed by the second round of the Theme Phase, the theme categorization round. This round involved organizing the previously derived themes by identifying the relationships between them and grouping them into larger group themes.

The final step of data analysis consisted of organizing the data based on the group themes found and representing these by means of tables for each group theme containing individual sections for each theme. The themes in each group theme table were organized based on the number of codes in the theme, from the largest theme to the smallest. Within each theme, the codes were further organized, if possible, into sub-sections based on whether they referred to experiences in primary, the transition period (last months of primary to right before entering secondary), secondary (first year), or both primary and secondary. The themes where the codes could not be organized in this manner were divided based on whether the codes referred to “academic” or “social” aspects (or both). Furthermore, in each of the sub-sections of the themes, the frequency in which each code was mentioned was indicated, and the codes were listed from the most frequent to the least frequently mentioned. The most frequent codes within a whole theme were marked for easy

recognition. For the themes where the codes received a valence, this was also indicated in the table, next to the code and frequency, as an added factor to obtain a better picture of how the gifted students interviewed experienced this transition.

In the results section, a summary of the total codes and themes found will be given in addition to the group theme tables provided. The tables will be followed by a summary description of each group theme and the themes that were categorized in this group. The theme descriptions will include the total number of codes found here and the most frequently mentioned codes. To better understand the types of codes in each theme, the valence frequency proportions will be stated (+: x , -: x , 0: x), and for the themes that did not have a valence, the proportion of academic-related codes vs. social-related codes will be indicated. Lastly, a summary of the Smiley Face Likert rating scale results will be given, indicating the proportions of the ratings the participants gave for each.

Results

The following sections provide a description of the group themes, themes, and codes extracted from the ten interviews conducted on the perceived experience of gifted students as they transitioned from primary to secondary school. In order to show the full transition experience as the students recalled it, the codes for each theme in Groups 1 and 2 were divided between those referring to Primary, those for the Transition period, those for Secondary, and those referring to both Primary and Secondary, as shown in Tables 1 and 2. The codes in Group 3, which could not be divided into these sections, were divided into "Academic" and "Social" codes. In the descriptions for each theme after the tables, the total number of codes per theme is given and the number of codes for each of the school periods. This is followed by the proportions of perceived positive versus negative valence experiences

or academic versus social experiences. Lastly, the most frequently mentioned codes within the theme are given.

Descriptive Analysis

The interviews conducted revealed an overall shared pattern amongst gifted students when asked about their experiences before, during, and after making the transition into secondary school. There was a total of 177 unique codes and 16 total themes that describe these gifted students' shared perceived experiences during their transition into secondary school. Some codes belonged to more than one theme and therefore are counted into the total number of codes for each the themes they appear in. These 16 themes were further divided into three main Group Themes based on the topics encountered during the interviews. The first group theme, which contained the greatest number of themes, was *Student's Perceived Struggles*, the second was *Influences for Choice of Secondary, Concurrent Reflections and Coping*, and the third was *Expectations for Secondary Education before Transition*.

Table 1

Thematic Table for Group 1 Themes: Student's perceived struggles (Including frequencies* and valences**)

Theme #1: Perceived struggle due to sensitivity to change and limited support							
Primary Years	Frequency +, 0, -	Transition	Frequency +, 0, -	Secondary	Frequency +, 0, -	Primary and Secondary	
Problems with daydreaming/concentration	5 -	Gifted more sensitive and complex emotions	3 -	First year worse than expected	8 -	Few friends	6 0 -
Underachievement - boredom	4 -	Told study-habits must change, not how to cope	1 -	Socially worse than expected	5 -	Having different way of thinking	4 -
Teachers didn't pay attention	3 -	School counselor helped w/ transition	1 +	The entire system just wasn't for me	3 -	Universal system that must fit everyone	4 -
Primary education not pleasant socially	2 -			Being force to do too much	3 -	Regular school: too much structure	2 -
Primary edu - not much effort needed	2 +			Isolation / exclusion and rejection	3 -	Feeling need to adapt to others	2 -
Having to change school due to struggle	1 -			Transition year manageable	3 -	Problems explaining thought process	2 -
Frustrating - learning at a faster pace	1 -			Constant repetition in same way not motivating	3 0	Classroom environment too crowded - hard to let	2 -
				Too many courses - confusing / overwhelming	2 -	Project based much more stimulating/challenging	2 +
				Struggle finding friends	2 -		
				Teachers didn't take me seriously	2 -		
				Lack of school support	2 -		
				School mentor/psych didn't understand	2 -		
				No one cared about how you felt	2 -		
				Helped teachers that were more flexible/understanding	2 -		
				No free time for extracurricular- frustrating	2 +		
				Memorization over understanding	1 -		
				Creativity not endorsed as in primary	1 -		
				Took for granted autonomy in primary	1 -		
				Couldn't function anymore	1 -		
				Need to get out	1 -		
				Teachers too slow, not stimulating	1 -		
				Expectation of struggle became reality	1 -		
				Struggle coping with failure	1 -		
				Struggle maintaining grades	1 -		
				Challenging due to implicit expectations	1 -		
				Teachers unable to handle my curiosity	1 -		
				Mental more struggle than academics	1 -		
				Peers mixed learning motivations - hard	1 -		
				Couldn't understand mindset of others	1 -		
				Education tailored to individual needs	1 -		
				Academics better than expected	1 +		
Total Number of Codes = 49	7		3		31		8
Theme #2: Emotions experienced due to academic and social disengagement							
Primary Years	Frequency +, 0, -	Transition	Frequency +, 0, -	Secondary	Frequency +, 0, -	Primary and Secondary	
Underachievement - boredom	4 -	Content with choice of secondary	5 +	Felt misunderstood by others same age	2 -	Academics not stimulating - felt bored	5 -
Primary education no pressure	4 +	Afraid or worry (expectations)	4 -	Too many courses - confusing / overwhelming	2 -	Frustration-having different way of thinking	4 0
Primary education - anxiety about doing well	1 -	Worried of how others perceive me	3 -	School size overwhelming / not exciting	2 -	Anxious to take gifted / transition exam	3 0
Teachers made me feel invisible	1 -	Scared of not meeting making / friends	3 -	Anxiety and pressure for future career	2 -		
Feeling of belonging	1 -	Anxious about making transition	2 -	Private school more stable and controlled	2 -		
1 friend to reach out to made it manageable	1 +	Sensitive to changes to routine	2 -	Feeling lonely	1 -		
		Separation from friends emotional overwhelm	1 -	No free time for extracurricular- frustrating	1 -		
		Questioning normal	1 -	Struggle coping with failure	1 -		
		Worry about not managing workload	1 -	Sadness - took for granted autonomy in primary	1 -		
		Happy to start something new	1 +	Bored of inconsistent support	1 -		
				Struggle finding friends	1 -		
				No deep friendships - floating between groups	1 0		
Total Number of Codes = 31	6		10		12		3
Theme #3: Relations with Peers - Perception of not fitting in amongst same age peers (more apparent as they transition into secondary)							
Primary Years	Frequency +, 0, -	Transition	Frequency +, 0, -	Secondary	Frequency +, 0, -	Primary and Secondary	
I had nice friendships	2 +	Worried of how others perceive me	3 -	Socially worse than expected	5 -	Few friends	6 0
Gifted school more even peer interactions	2 +	Struggle being understood socially	3 -	Isolation / exclusion and rejection	3 -	Not feeling understood	5 -
Primary education not pleasant socially	1 -	Worry about being accepted	2 -	Classmates still nice in 1st yr of secondary	3 +	Making friends has always been hard	3 -
Feeling of belonging	1 -	Friends gave protection & recognition	2 0	Being different and singled out- trauma	2 -	Feeling need to adapt to others	2 -
Different maturity + difficulty interacting with peers	1 -			Struggle finding friends	2 -		
1 friend to reach out to made it manageable	1 +			Felt misunderstood by others same age	2 -		
Enjoyed solitude	1 0			Sports	2 +		
				Teasing /bullying	1 -		
				Being in higher grade - hard to make friends	1 -		
				Secondary education - worse socially	1 -		
				Social expectations	1 -		
				Weekend event organized with class - helped	1 +		
				No deep friendships - floating between groups	1 0		
Total Number of Codes = 28	7		4		13		4
Theme #4: Lack of perceived fit into common educational system (more apparent in transition to secondary)							
Primary Years	Frequency +, 0, -	Transition	Frequency +, 0, -	Secondary	Frequency +, 0, -	Primary and Secondary	
Primary education no pressure	4 +	Gifted Education within other schools not good	1 -	The entire system just wasn't for me	3 -	Academics not stimulating - felt bored	5 -
Gifted education / plus program better fit	3 +			Transition year manageable	3 0	Universal system that must fit everyone	3 -
Primary edu pleasant learning experience	3 +			Too many courses - confusing / overwhelming	2 -	Regular school: too much structure	2 -
Higher levels = more work not more advanced	2 -			Negative expectation about education	2 -	Project based much more stimulating/challenging	2 +
Teachers made me feel invisible	2 -			Private school more stable and controlled	2 +		
Primary school prepared me well	2 +			Creativity not endorsed as in primary	1 -		
Homeschool my own pace - freedom	1 -			Memorization over understanding	1 -		
				Teachers too slow, not stimulating	1 -		
				Secondary like a prison	1 -		
				Academic division based on choice of 2nd language	1 -		
				Needed more diversity in challenges	1 -		
				Teachers played favorites	1 -		
				Education tailored to individual needs	1 +		
				Studying from books better than computers	1 0		
Total Number of Codes = 26	7		1		14		4
Theme #5: Lack of perceived support from schools and teachers (family most important support)							
Primary Years	Frequency +, 0, -	Transition	Frequency +, 0, -	Secondary	Frequency +, 0, -	Primary and Secondary	
Primary school prepared me well	2 +	Helps from family with transition	6 +	Lack of people with knowledge about giftedness	3 -	Nonexistent support from school	3 -
Teachers made me feel invisible	1 -	Support transition - what to expect	2 0	No support for neurodiverse (no awareness)	2 -	Having siblings in same school helped	1 +
		Told study-habits must change, not how to cope	1 -	Teachers didn't take me seriously	2 -	School counselor helped w/ transition	1 +
				No one cared about how you felt	2 -		
				Teachers cared more about grades	2 -		
				No guidance and orientation for High School	2 -		
				Lack of school support	2 -		
				School mentor/psych didn't understand	2 -		
				Helped teachers that were more flexible/understanding	2 +		
				Family understood	2 0		
				Transition orientation not necessary	2 0		
				Limited resources for gifted	1 -		
				Hard to know what support is out there	1 -		
				Teachers unable to handle my curiosity	1 -		
				Education tailored to individual needs	1 +		
				Weekend event organized with class - helped	1 +		
Total Number of Codes = 24	2		3		16		3
Theme #6: Increase psychological struggle due to academic pressures and expectations							
Primary Years	Frequency +, 0, -	Transition	Frequency +, 0, -	Secondary	Frequency +, 0, -	Primary and Secondary	
		Worry about being accepted	2 -	Struggling to increase personal performance (self and others)	3 -	Not understanding why I am different	3 0
				Constant repetition in same way not motivating	2 -		
				Being different and singled out- trauma	2 -		
				No one cared about how you felt	2 -		
				Anxiety and pressure for future career	2 -		
				Making decisions at a young age- stress	2 -		
				Mental more struggle than academics	1 -		
				Overthinking	1 -		
				Social expectations	1 0		
				Struggle coping with failure	1 -		
				Increase anxiety / stress	1 -		
Total Number of Codes = 13	0		1		11		1
Theme #7: Perceived differences in cognitive and emotional intelligence (led to feelings of not fitting in with peers and school system)							
Primary Years	Frequency +, 0, -	Transition	Frequency +, 0, -	Secondary	Frequency +, 0, -	Primary and Secondary	
Different maturity + difficulty interacting with peers	1 -	Gifted more sensitive and complex emotions	3 -	The entire system just wasn't for me	3 -	Not understanding why I am different	4 0
Frustrating - learning at a faster pace	1 -			Being different and singled out- trauma	2 -	Making friends has always been hard	3 -
				Help to understand themselves & coping	1 0	Fear of being the weird one	1 -
				Wanted to be challenged & different	1 -		
Total Number of Codes = 11	2		1		4		4
Theme #8: Perception of not being understood by others (academic and social)							
Primary Years	Frequency +, 0, -	Transition	Frequency +, 0, -	Secondary	Frequency +, 0, -	Primary and Secondary	
Feeling understood (in gifted education)	1 +	School counselor helped w/ transition	1 +	Felt misunderstood by others same age	2 -	Not feeling understood	5 -
				School mentor/psych didn't understand	2 -	Problems explaining thought process	2 -
				Family understood	2 +		
				Help to understand themselves & coping	1 -		
Total Number of Codes = 8	1		1		4		2

* Frequency represents the number of students who mentioned the code (max of 10). Totals reflect the sum of the frequencies in each educational period (primary, transition, secondary, primary and secondary) and total in left-hand corner = total number of codes in the theme.

** Valence value given by each student to each coded experience: 0 = neutral, + = positive, - = negative

The sum of totals for each theme as noted in the tables does not equal to the total of the entire Group Theme due to some codes appearing in multiple themes.

Table 2

Thematic Table for Group 2 Themes: Influences for choice of Secondary, Concurrent Reflections and Coping During Transition Period (Including frequencies*)

Theme #9: What would have been helpful							
Primary Years	Frequency	Transition	Frequency	Secondary	Frequency	Primary and Secondary	Frequency
Learning coping skills for secondary school	3	Prep students with more open conversations	3	Gifted curriculum option/different set-up	4	Opportunities to meet like-minded others	3
		Promote exciting opportunities	2	Support groups for gifted students	4	Having more insight about giftedness	2
		Organize pre-school day - meet ppl	2	Have less assignments at once / take less classes	3		
		Knowing people going to same school	2	Knowledgeable teachers about gifted	3		
		Support w/ school choice decisions	2	Given more autonomy and freedom	2		
		Orientation event - get to know school	2	Teachers that know how to adapt to diff	2		
				Orientation academically	2		
				Need for more project-based edu	1		
				Have smaller classes, less distractions	1		
				Counsellors who see indiv diff and help	1		
				Needed more diversity in challenges	1		
				Help to understand themselves & coping	1		
				More time for extracurricular	1		
Total Number of Codes = 22	1		6		13		2
Theme #10: Influence and emotions when choosing secondary school							
		Transition	Frequency				
		Relatives or peers	5				
		Content with choice of secondary	5				
		Academic program / classes offered	4				
		Location of secondary school	3				
		Reputation of secondary school	3				
		Not many choices for gifted education	2				
		School with better social opportunities	2				
		Total Number of Codes = 7					
Theme #11: Perceived value of what is being learned and how its being delivered (main motivators for academic achievement)							
Primary Years	Frequency	Secondary	Frequency	Primary and Secondary	Frequency		
Gifted education/plus program was a better fit	4	Constant repetition in same way not motivating	2	Project based much more stimulating /challenging	2		
		Effort not worth it if no interest in subject	2				
		Enjoyment of learning important	2				
		Low perceived value of education	1				
Total Number of Codes = 6	1		4		1		
Theme #12: Engagement in deep reflections (being different and not understanding why)							
Primary Years	Frequency	Transition	Frequency	Secondary	Frequency	Primary and Secondary	Frequency
Feeling of belonging	1	Questioning normal	1	A lot of time spent reflecting on experiences	2	Not understanding why I am different	3
				Couldn't understand mindset of others	1		
Total Number of Codes = 5	1		1		2		1
Theme #13: Coping activities that helped throughout transition							
Primary, Transition, and Secondary	Frequency	Secondary	Frequency	Primary and Secondary	Frequency		
Journaling helped make sense of things	2	Non-academic activities	3	Friends gave protection & recognition	2		
		Joining student representative organisations	2				
		Sports	2				
Total Number of Codes = 5	1		3		1		

* Frequency represents the number of students who mentioned the code (max of 10), Totals reflect the sum of the frequencies in each educational period (primary, transition, secondary, primary and secondary) and total in left-hand corner = total number of codes in the theme.

‡ The sum of totals for each theme as noted in the tables does not equal to the total of the entire *Group Theme* due to some codes appearing in multiple themes.

Table 3

Group 3 Themes: Expectations for Secondary Education before Transition (Including frequencies*)

Theme #14: Positive expectations (more stimulating classes and more positive social experiences)								
Academic		Frequency	Social		Frequency			
More challenge academically		6	Expected same experience socially		3			
Good grades - not worried for transition		5	Meeting more like-minded people		3			
Learning new things		4	Changing school = new beginning		2			
Excited for more interesting classes		4	keeping same friends		1			
Excited about fun elective options		3						
More stimulating teachers		1						
Academics not worried		1						
Total Number of Codes = 11		7			4			
Theme #15: Negative expectations (struggle to form friendships and managing academic expectations)								
Academic		Frequency	Social		Frequency			
Afraid or worry about other's expectations of me		4	Worried of how others perceive me		3			
Negative expectation of struggle		3	Struggle being understood socially		3			
Sensitive to changes to routine		2	Scared of not meeting / making friends		3			
Negative expectation about education		2	Worry about being accepted		2			
Worry about not managing workload		1	Worry about being bullied		1			
No exciting courses (not interesting)		1						
Worry that teachers are not stimulating/knowledgable		1						
Total Number of Codes = 12		7			5			
Theme #16: What I looked forward to								
Academic		Frequency	Social		Frequency	Academic and Social		Frequency
More challenge academically		6	Making new friends		5	Growing up		5
Learning new things		4	Meeting more like-minded people		3	Greater independence		3
Excited for more interesting classes		4	Sports		2	Freedom to make own choices		2
Excited about fun elective options		3	Being with the big kids		1	Changing school = new beginning		2
Change of structure		1						
Total Number of Codes = 13		5			4			4

* Frequency represents the number of students who mentioned the code (max of 10), Totals reflect the sum of the frequencies in each educational period (primary, transition, secondary, primary and secondary) and total in left-hand corner = total number of codes in the theme.

‡ The sum of totals for each theme as noted in the tables does not equal to the total of the entire *Group Theme* due to some codes appearing in multiple themes.

Group 1 Themes: Students' Perceived Struggles

There were eight themes that emerged from the interviews that were categorized in this group theme, with a total of 122 codes (with some codes appearing in more than one theme). All the themes within this group theme and the codes for each can be seen in Table 1, which is represented above. The themes are: *Perceived struggle due to sensitivity to change and limited support, Emotions experienced due to academic and social disengagement, Relations with Peers, Lack of perceived fit into the common educational system, Lack of perceived support from schools and teachers, Increased psychological struggle due to academic pressures and expectations, Perceived differences in cognitive and emotional intelligence, and Perception of not being understood by others*. The codes found in each of these themes related to all the perceived experiences that these students recalled during this transition. Many codes regarding the secondary years referred to important perceived changes between primary and secondary that students felt significantly impacted by.

Perceived struggle due to sensitivity to change and limited support. A total of 49 codes emerged from the interviews, which related to the perceived struggles encountered by students from primary to their transition into the first year of secondary. Seven of the codes related to struggles experienced during the primary school years which came up when students talked about what they hoped would change in secondary, 6 of which had a negative valence and 1 which had a positive valence (—: 16x, +: 2x). Another eight codes related to struggles that were experienced in both primary and secondary, in other words, situations in which the student's didn't perceive significant change, 6 of which had a negative valence, 1 with a positive valence, and 1 with a neutral valence (—: 15x, +: 2x, 0:

6x). The most frequent codes had to do with the social struggle of not having many friends (6x) and struggles with concentration in class and often daydreaming (5x).

The remaining 34 codes relate to the perceived struggles students had as they were preparing to make the transition into and during their first year of secondary, 29 of which had a negative valence, 3 with a positive valence, and 2 with a neutral valence (–: 55x, +: 4x, 0: 4x). The most frequent codes relate to the overall experience of the first transition year being much worse than expected (8x) academically and socially (5x) and to some, the feeling that this experience has to do with gifted students being more sensitive to change and experiencing more complex emotions than normally developing peers (3x).

Emotions experienced due to academic and social disengagement. In this theme there was a total of 31 codes that emerged which relate to the emotional side of the experiences that students recalled from primary, to their transition into the first year of secondary. Six of the codes related to primary school, which students mentioned when asked to reflect on what they enjoyed about it. Of these 6 codes, 4 had a negative valence and 2 had a positive valence (–: 7x, +: 5x). Another 3 codes related to the shared emotional experiences in primary and secondary, all of which had a negative valence (–: 12x). The most frequent shared emotion was boredom, usually due to feeling that school was not stimulating enough (5x) which for some also led to academic underachievement (4x).

The remaining 22 codes relate to the emotions experienced as the students prepared to transition and during their first year of secondary, 18 of which had a negative valence, 3 had positive valence, and 1 a neutral valence (–: 31x, +: 8x, 0: 1x). The most frequent codes were about the transition period and related to the experience of contradicting emotions where there was a feeling of contentment about their chosen secondary school (5x) but feelings of worry and fear due to perceived academic expectations to perform (4x).

Relations with peers. In this theme there was a total of 28 codes that emerged which relate to the students' interactions with peers and how these changed as they transitioned into secondary school. Seven of the codes related to social experiences during primary school, 3 of which had a negative valence, 3 that had a positive valence, and 1 that had a neutral valence (–: 3x, +: 5x, 0: 1x). Another 4 codes related to the shared social experiences in primary and secondary, 3 of which had a negative valence and 1 which had a neutral valence (–: 10x, 0: 6x). The most frequent code in relation to peers for these two periods was the pattern of having few friends both in primary and secondary (6x).

The remaining 17 codes relate to the anticipated relation with peers before entering secondary and the actual social experience students had once they were in the first year of secondary. Of these, 12 had a negative valence, 3 had a positive valence, and 2 had a neutral valence (–: 26x, +: 6x, 0: 3x). The most frequent code was in the first year of secondary about students' perception that their social experience was worse than they had hoped or expected (5x).

Lack of perceived fit into the common educational system. In this theme a total of 26 codes emerged which related to students' perception of the education system they experience and how it fit them. Seven of the codes were commentary about education during their primary years, 3 of which had a negative valence and 4 which had a positive valence (–: 5x, +: 12x). Another 4 codes had to do with commentary about education that was present in both primary and secondary, 3 of which had a negative valence and 1 which had a positive valence (–: 10x, +: 2x). The most common code in these sections had to do with the feeling that academics were not stimulating enough and therefore it led to boredom (5x).

The remaining 15 codes related to commentaries about education during the transition into secondary school, 11 of which had a negative valence, 2 that had a positive valence, and 2 that had a neutral valence (–: 15x, +: 3x, 0: 4x). The most frequent code for this period related to the feeling that the educational system experienced in secondary school simply did not fit them (3x) as gifted students. This came after the previously mentioned experience of not being academically stimulated, which occurred in both primary and secondary (5x).

Lack of perceived support from schools and teachers. In this theme a total of 24 codes emerged which relate to students' experience of support from teachers and the school during the transition into secondary school. Two of the codes were related to the support experienced during primary school, including their perception of being prepared by the schools for further education. Of these two codes, 1 had a negative valence and 1 a positive valence (–: 1x, +: 2x). Another 3 codes related to experiences of support felt in both primary and secondary, 1 of which had a negative valence and 2 which had a positive valence (–: 5x, +: 4x). The most frequently mentioned code had to do with the perception that the school did not have a preparation system in place to help students transition more smoothly into secondary (5x). This experience referred to systems in place in primary to prepare students and systems in place in secondary schools to help students more smoothly adjust to the changes.

The remaining 19 codes were commentary on the perceived support experienced specifically during the transition time and during the first year of secondary school, 12 of which had a negative valence, 5 had a positive valence, and 2 a neutral valence (–: 22x, +: 12x, 0: 4x). The most frequently mentioned code related to the perceived support students felt from family, which was emphasized by many as a crucial aspect of helping them deal

with the transition (6x). The second most frequently mentioned code related to the perception that there was not enough support from schools for neurodiverse students (3x).

Increase psychological struggle due to academic pressures and expectations. In this theme, there was a total of 13 codes emerged, which related to topics of psychological struggle experienced by the students. There was only 1 code that was mentioned as a shared psychological experience present in both primary and secondary, which had a neutral valence (0: 3x) and related to the frequent rumination students remember engaging in about how they differed from their peers and not really understanding why.

The other 12 codes related to the psychological experience of students mainly during the first year of secondary, but one of these related to the transition period before entering secondary. Of these codes, 11 had a negative valence and 1 had a neutral valence (–:19x, 0: 1x). The most mentioned code for this period was about the experience of stress due to the perceived drastic increase in pressure from self and others as they entered secondary school (3x).

Perceived differences in cognitive and emotional intelligence. In this theme, a total of 11 codes emerged that related to the constant experience of feeling different from peers. Six of these codes related to the years of primary and the combined years of primary and secondary, 5 of which had a negative valence and 1 which had a neutral valence (–: 9x, 0: 4x). The most common code had to do with the perception of having a different way of thinking and seeing the world from their peers (4x), a recurring feeling since primary school and into secondary.

The remaining 5 codes related to the perception of feeling different, experienced during the transition and into the first year of secondary, 4 of which had a negative valence and 1 which had a neutral valence (–: 9x, 0: 1x). The most frequently mentioned codes here

related to the feeling that, as gifted students, they were more sensitive and had more complex emotions than their same-age peers (3x) and the experience that the education system was not the right fit (3x), the second also being the most frequently mentioned codes in another theme within this group theme.

Perception of not being understood by others. In this theme, there was a total of 8 codes that emerged related to the perception of not being understood by others. Three of these codes related to this experience either in primary or in both primary and secondary, 2 of which had a negative valence and 1 which had a positive valence (–: 7x, +: 1x). The most frequently mentioned code here related to the consistent perception of struggling to be understood both in an academic and a social sense (5x) both in primary and secondary

The remaining 5 codes related to this perception of not being understood specifically in the transition period and in the first year of secondary, 3 of which had a negative valence and 2 that had a positive valence (–: 5x, +:3x). Most codes in this period were mentioned an equal number of times and related to the perception of being misunderstood by peers (2x), school mentors (2x), and feeling that their family were the only ones who understood (2x).

Group 2 Themes: Influences for choice of Secondary, Concurrent Reflections and Coping

Five themes emerged from the interviews that were categorized in this theme group. There were a total of 34 codes (with some codes appearing in more than one theme). All the themes within this group theme and the codes for each can be seen in Table 2, which is represented above. The themes are: *What would have been helpful, Influence and emotions when choosing secondary school, Perceived value of what is being learned and how its delivered, Engagement in deep reflections, and Coping activities that helped throughout transition.* The codes found in each of these themes related to post-transition reflections

that students recall having about their experience, emotions, and coping, as well as what they thought would have been helpful during this time.

What would have been helpful. In this theme, a total of 22 codes emerged related to aspects that students thought could have helped them experience a smoother transition into secondary school. Three of these codes related to aspects that could have helped during primary or both primary and secondary. The most frequently mentioned codes were about schools providing more opportunities to meet like-minded peers (3x) and providing support with learning coping skills to deal with the structural changes in secondary (3x).

The remaining 19 codes related to what students felt could have helped specifically during the transition period, including the first year of secondary. The most frequently mentioned codes here were related to the desire for there to be different curriculum options for gifted students (4x), as well as for the schools to set up support groups for gifted students (4x) to have opportunities to bond with like-minded peers.

Influence and emotions when choosing secondary school. In this theme, a total of 7 codes emerged related to the main influences and experiences of choosing a secondary school. The most frequently mentioned codes were about peers and relatives being the most influential factors when choosing a secondary school to attend (5x) and the feeling of being content with the choice and their participation in the decision made (5x) in the period before entering.

Perceived value of what is being learned and how it is delivered. In this theme, a total of 6 codes emerged related to what gifted students perceived as valuable in terms of education. Two of these codes were mentioned for primary education or for both primary and secondary education. The most frequent code dealt with programs tailored to gifted

students' needs (4x), where students who experienced it felt more stimulated and challenged.

The remaining 4 codes dealt with experiences specifically during the first year of secondary school. Three of these had equal frequencies related to gifted students being heavily motivated and influenced to learn when they were interested in the subjects (2 codes, 4x) and the importance of the way in which these subjects were being taught as important motivation factors (2x).

Engagement in deep reflections. In this theme, a total of 5 codes emerged related to gifted students engaging in deep reflections about their experiences. Two of these codes were experiences that were either present in primary or in both primary and secondary. The most frequent code related to the constant rumination about not understanding why they are different from peers (3x), which was previously mentioned in another theme of Group 1 as an aspect that caused significant struggle.

The remaining 3 codes dealt with common deep reflections during the transition period and first year of secondary. The most frequently mentioned code dealt with students spending a significant amount of time reflecting on what they experienced (2x).

Coping activities that helped throughout the transition. In this theme there was a total of 5 codes that emerged related to coping, which students used to deal with the struggles they experienced as gifted, and the changes involved when transitioning into secondary school. Two of these codes related to coping used in primary or in both primary and secondary. Both had equal frequencies, one being the habit of journaling to release and make sense of experiences (2x) and the other about the importance of having friends to help cope with changes in the social environment (2x).

The remaining 3 codes dealt with coping used during the first year of secondary school. The most frequently mentioned code was about the role of non-academic activities (3x) and how these helped the students cope with the increased academic stress and the social struggles many experienced.

Group 3 Themes: Expectations for Secondary Education before Transition

Lastly, three themes emerged from the interviews that were categorized in this theme group. There were a total of 21 codes (with some codes appearing in more than one theme). All the themes within this group theme and the codes for each can be seen in Table 3, which is represented above. The themes are: *Positive expectations*, *Negative expectations*, and *What They Looked forward to*. The codes in each of these themes relate to all the expectations and anticipations that the students recall having before making the transition. Within each theme, the codes were further divided into academic, social, or academic and social codes.

Positive expectations. In this theme, a total of 11 codes emerged related to the positive expectations students had before entering secondary school. Seven of these codes dealt with academic expectations, and 4 dealt with social expectations. The most frequently mentioned positive expectation was about academics and related students hoping and expecting to be more challenged academically once they entered secondary (6x).

The most frequently mentioned social expectations, with equal frequencies, related to having similar social experiences as in the past (3x) and an expectation to meet more like-minded peers (3x).

Negative expectations. In this theme, a total of 12 codes emerged related to the negative expectations students had before entering secondary school. Seven of these codes dealt with academic expectations, and 5 dealt with social expectations. The most frequently

mentioned code was academically related and dealt with a worry of not being able to deal with other's expectations of them (4x). The most frequently mentioned social expectations, with equal frequencies, related to fears of how others would perceive them (3x), continued struggles with being understood (3x), and having a hard time making friends (3x).

What They Looked forward to. In this theme, a total of 13 codes emerged related to aspects that students were excited about experiencing when they entered secondary school. Nine of these codes were related to either purely academic aspects or about aspects that would equally affect academics and social experiences. The most frequently mentioned code from these had to do with students looking forward to the expected academics being challenging and stimulating (6x). The second most mentioned code related to the experience of growing up (5x) and, therefore, being treated more seriously by teachers and interacting with older students. The remaining 4 codes dealt with aspects students looked forward to, specifically in the social sense. The most frequently mentioned code related to looking forward to making more friends (5x).

Summary of Results

Rating Scale

In general, a documented pattern observed in most students was a sense of feeling generally positive right before the transition due to the excitement of the expected increase in academic challenge and new opportunities to make better social connections. This can be seen in the students' ratings on the 5-point Smiley Face Likert scale. The majority, 6 out of 10, rated their pre-transition emotions on the "green side" (three rated it 4 out of 5, light green smiley and three rated it 5 out of 5, green smiley), with the rest rating slightly below neutral (rate of 2 out of 5 indicated as the orange smiley).

Main Takeaways per Group Theme

The themes found in *Group 1: Students' Perceived Struggles*, were the ones that gave a strong overview of the overall perceptions that these gifted students had of the transition experience. All 8 themes found here relate to a common experience of struggle, which students felt spanned most of their years in school but which many noted become more pronounced during their transition into secondary school. Six of the themes in this group described a majority of negatively valenced experiences related to both academic and social aspects. The themes with more positively valenced experiences were found in the primary years, many of which belonged to students who had experienced more tailored academic programs or specific gifted programs. As these students transitioned into secondary school, many no longer had access to these more tailored programs, which is apparent in how most experiences became more negatively valenced.

The themes found in *Group 2: Influences for choice of Secondary, Concurrent Reflections and Coping* mostly discuss aspects related to academics. Overall, most of the students recalled needing more support with learning how to adapt and cope with the changes that occurred in secondary school. They expressed a desire for teachers to have more open conversations about aspects such as coping skills and study techniques. Many also expressed a need for teachers and schools to have more awareness and knowledge of giftedness and neurodiversity to be able to provide the needed support and guidance to this population of students.

Lastly, the themes found *Group 3: Expectations for Secondary Education before Transition*, encompassed the experiences of anticipation that students had right before transitioning into secondary school. The general pattern that emerged relates to most students feeling relatively positive about their transition. Most aspects discussed were related to academic matters. Many students recalled not struggling academically during

primary school, leading to expectations of things either staying the same or improving. Some topics mentioned included a perception that a higher academic level would mean more academically stimulating opportunities and feeling more valued due to growing up and being treated more seriously. Most of the negative expectations students had, were related to academics but not to the fear of being unable to handle the load. Rather, many worried that the teachers would not be stimulating or that the classes would not be challenging enough. Some also worried about being unable to meet the high expectations of others if they struggled to be motivated. Regarding the social aspects, most students recalled low feelings of belonging among peers and struggling to make friends in primary. They therefore held high expectations for this positively changing once they entered secondary school.

Discussion

In this qualitative study, an exploratory analysis was done of how gifted children perceive the transition from primary to secondary education regarding their well-being during this period. Participants shared experiences from the entire transition period, that is, the period before entering secondary school up to the first year of secondary school. This allowed the opportunity to see how they viewed the start of secondary education compared to their previous experiences as gifted students during primary school.

The perceptions discussed during the interviews led to the identification of 16 themes, which could be grouped into 3 main groups of themes that overarchingly summarized the transition experience of these 10 interviewed gifted students. The three group themes, along with the rating scale results, overall showed an experience in which gifted students are met with unexpected difficulties and struggles after carrying high positive expectations for their transition into secondary school.

On Students' High Expectations for Secondary

Many of the students had a perception that secondary education would look different than primary education in that the issues they struggled with would improve once they entered higher levels of education. This aspect may have contributed to the overall negative experiences that students recalled from when they began secondary school. While there is limited research on why many gifted students tend to struggle as they progress in their education, two points appear in most meta-analyses about giftedness. One of these points is how, given their higher cognitive abilities, many students tend to advance through their schooling quicker during their early years, making it harder to gain the self-managing and executive strategies needed to succeed in later years. Many skip grades or follow a different curriculum from the rest, which seems easier to implement in primary school when teachers notice gifted students in the classroom (Siegle & Mccoach, 2005). A second point relates to the pattern of asynchronous development that occurs in most gifted students, which describes the juxtaposition of these students' cognitive development being higher, but them being less emotionally mature than their same-age peers (Winsor & Mueller, 2024). This interplay can, therefore, play a bigger role as they grow up, and this difference becomes more apparent. These students might have outgrown primary school academically and feel ready to move on, but in reality, they might not be ready for the changes that occur.

On Struggles of the Gifted in Education

The recurrent sub-themes that emerged mainly related to the education system not being the right fit, lacking school support, and struggling with peer interactions. All these factors are aspects discussed in literature about common difficulties in the gifted population. Research done on the topic of the educational fit of gifted students has highlighted this clash between typical educational systems and the way in which gifted individuals prefer to learn.

As mentioned by Renzulli (2012) typical educational systems tend to follow a more deductive model of learning, which places the learner in a more passive learning role, making it difficult for gifted students to remain engaged and motivated. This structure of teaching often becomes more standardized in secondary education. However, this is a complex issue to discuss, given how research on defining giftedness has shown the difficulty in establishing a prototype student for this group. This is due to the diversity of gifted profiles that have been observed to be quite unique and complex (Baccassino & Pinnelli, 2023; Snyder & Wormington, 2020). Throughout the interviews for this study, most students recalled doing well academically and not doubting their ability. However, many also noted that the struggle was felt emotionally as they battled with a lack of motivation, not feeling understood by peers and teachers, and feeling pressured to perform, with other needs being disregarded. The aspect of motivation often comes up in research on gifted underachievement, and there seems to be some debate on how motivation affects gifted students. Current research on the topic seems to agree that this might be difficult to understand because gifted students are generally motivated to learn and be challenged. However, their specific intellectual gifts might not be adequately stimulated (Hornstra et al., 2023; Krneta, 2023), or they might not find value in what they are learning (Siegle & McCoach, 2005). Whichever the reason, this is an important factor to further study since, as the Three-Ring Model of Renzulli states, giftedness occurs at the intersection of above-average ability, motivation, and creativity (Renzulli, 2021). Therefore, motivation might be an important factor in gifted students' transition experience.

Lack of knowledge about Giftedness

Many themes that emerged in this study show the importance of awareness in teachers, given how many students appeared to be sensitive to the teaching methods used

in schools and the perceived value they saw in what they were learning. The misconceptions that exist in educators about the complexity of giftedness are a major point to address in both research and in the classroom or schools. Many interviewed students mentioned feeling ignored by teachers because they weren't perceived as students struggling academically. Some meta-analysis research on teachers' role in gifted education and possible struggles points to the big aspect of there being a lack of teacher understanding and training in giftedness (Winsor & Mueller, 2024). This, in turn, leads to unintentional neglect of the specific needs of these students and a hyperfocus on their misguided perception of giftedness (Piske & Collins, 2024). Furthermore, this can also influence students' perceived valence of experiences due to teacher and peer assumptions about giftedness and the concurrent pressures and expectations that come from these, as a study on student's perception of being labeled gifted showed (Berlin, 2009).

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

There were many unique aspects of this study that can be seen as strengths. One of these was the open inclusion criteria which did not require gifted students to have an IQ test to participate. Due to the diversity in gifted profiles mentioned earlier, selecting students based only on IQ might have limited the generalizability of this study to a wider variety of gifted students (Baccassino & Pinnelli, 2023). This point, however, brings up the ambiguity of identifying who belongs to the gifted group. An IQ test cannot be expected to consider the interacting factors that contribute to the score achieved (Renzulli, 2012). Therefore, at this point, having trained professionals who know about giftedness evaluating students is a much more inclusive approach.

A second strength was that most participants had followed their education in different countries. While this can also be seen as a limitation (discussed below), as a strength, it might have also increased the generalizability of the results compared to having a subject pool only from one region or country. A third strength of this study is the advantage of interviewing adults over children. Given the higher maturity level, adults may be able to reflect on experiences more in-depth. Many students had also attended gifted support groups recently, which helped them understand their experiences growing up and therefore gave more insight to this study than might have been possible from interviewing children. A fourth strength to note is the semi-structured nature of this study, which gave participants the liberty to share a wide array of experiences and perceptions. This led to being able to map the different experiences in a more in-depth manner.

Limitations

This study also has some important limitations that must be considered when examining the results obtained. A major limitation that comes with the retrospective nature of this study is the fallible aspect of memory. The recorded and analyzed experiences rely solely on how accurately the participants remembered their years during this transition, which for many had been more than 5 years ago. This affects the reliability of the entire study. Many students sometimes mixed the experiences from their transition with experiences in the later years of secondary due to them reporting that these years were sometimes even harder. A second and important limitation related to the reliability of the study had to do with the fact that participants were from various countries. This might also negatively affect the reliability because it made the data analysis more complicated, given that every student followed a completely different educational system. Therefore, the process of coding and deriving themes might have been over-generalized to combine

experiences and provide clearer themes. A third and important limitation was the overall reliability of the method for collecting the participant data. While an ethics committee approved the interview scheme, only one researcher conducted the interviews and analyzed the data for this study. This means that research observer bias could have been introduced since there was no established inter-rater reliability.

A fourth possible limitation had to do with the semi-structured nature of the interview scheme, which could have affected the construct validity of the study, given the degree of subjectivity possible in these types of interviews. The course of each interview could vary based on the state of the researcher or participant and the type of participant-researcher rapport that can be established, affecting how much information can be obtained for data analysis. Lastly, another limitation was the small-scale aspect of this study. Since the participant pool was only 10 students, this limits how generalizable the results can be to a wider population of gifted students.

Implications for Future Research

The results of this study provide preliminary insight into how gifted students perceive the transition experience into secondary school and the unique aspects in which they might differ from their neurotypical peers. However, there is an array of opportunities for future research that might further expand our knowledge about how gifted students experience their school years. For example, it would be interesting to do a similar study but with a more homogenous group of gifted students and directly compare them to non-gifted students so that the differences in experiences, if any, can be better captured. Another important aspect to investigate is the experience of gifted students currently going through this transition. While there were added advantages to this retrospective study, as mentioned before,

interviewing students currently going through this period may provide a more accurate representation of their experience during this educational transition.

Furthermore, many participants in this study mentioned struggles with feeling misunderstood and feeling that they had more complex thinking and emotional experiences. While there is limited research on this, a few small-scale studies have looked at this possible complexity as related to higher sensitivity tendencies (Groman, 2023). Therefore, studying this aspect further might also be relevant to better grasp why gifted students might feel this way and what can be done to lessen this struggle.

Lastly, a valuable point to consider when conducting studies about transition experiences is the manner in which the interview is conducted and the time span it covers. In the current study, there was an additional advantage to including some reflections about primary school. It made it possible to see what most gifted students perceived as important changes that came with the transition. In general, most students had more positive perceived experiences in primary school, an aspect that changed once they transitioned. Including this period in the interview allowed them to reflect on the aspects that helped them in primary school, which were not present, or less so, in secondary school, which many mentioned they took for granted, such as the more exploratory nature of learning and the lack of pressure.

Implications for Educational Practice

A final point that can be useful for schools and teachers to consider in practice is the positive effect that even minimal support from schools, such as from mentors and teachers, can have on students. A study by Lee et al. (2015) looked at the influence of a special accelerated program for gifted students. It was found that the biggest influence of such a program was the students' perceived school and social support, which led to a more positive

perception of school experiences. In the current study, many students emphasized that they felt there was a lack of people who cared about students' struggles during this time and understood gifted students' differences from their neurotypical peers.

If teachers know more about how their gifted students learn best, it can allow them to design a more inclusive curriculum. Most research on giftedness has established that while all students might struggle at different moments in their educational journey, gifted students might have needs with dimensions that reflect their higher cognitive ability (Peterson, 2021). While gifted students might not necessarily have more challenges than their neurotypical peers, their challenges are different, and teachers might not always be as knowledgeable and aware of them (Baccassino & Pinnelli, 2023). For example, many students in this study mentioned how much more stimulating it was to learn in a project-based style, which a few experienced in offered advanced classes or in gifted primary school education. Many mentioned that this type of learning engaged their creativity and felt highly applicable to reality. This contrasted with the traditional manner of learning involving memorization for the purpose of tests, which for many was de-motivating. This study highlights the importance of not putting all students into one box and the added benefit of exploring how different types of students experience this educational period to better understand how to create a smoother transition experience for all students.

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Appendix A

Child Interview Guide (Bochane et al., 2024)

(Adapted for Adult Participant)

Purpose interview: have participant tell about: experiences with transition + what went well + what could be better.

Probes: To be used only when a child cannot think of anything at all about a topic.

Follow-up questions:

- What do you mean by...
- Are there any other things?
- You said earlier
- If I understand correctly...
- Can you give an example of
- Dropping silences.

Informed consent must be signed before the start of the interview.

Introduction:

- Briefly introduce each other.
- Introduce purpose of the conversation.
- Thank them for agreeing to participate.
- Ask if they have read the information letter and if they have questions.
- What the interview is about: Your experience as a gifted student during the school transition from primary to secondary regarding wellbeing.
- Importance of Research: By retrieving experiences of students before, during, and after making this transition, it may be possible to see factors that are important to students like you during this period and how to better support them.
- Introduction of specific target group: Gifted Students
- Practical matters:
 - Confidentiality and anonymity
 - Permission to record conversation
 - Conversation will last between 15 and 30 minutes.
 - Are there any questions?

Opening Questions

- What did you like most about your primary school years (where they in this same school)?
- A few questions about period right before entering secondary school:
 - Did you do primary school here as well?
 - If not...Is this the school you wanted to attend for secondary school?
 - What is the reason you chose this secondary school?
 - Is there anyone you talked to about your transition into secondary school? (probes: dad/mom, friends, teacher/teachers)
 - If so...What did you guys talk about?
 - What in those conversations did you find most helpful?



Main Questions

When you think about the transition into secondary, what smiley (#) fits that? (Show smiley scale to participant) What else comes to mind when you think about the transition to high school?

First ask questions from the side that the student points to, then also ask questions from the other side.

RED: What did you look forward to / worry about beforehand when thinking about (starting) secondary school?

Probes: retaining friendships primary school, making new friends, bullying, new teachers/masters, school size, amount of homework/assignments, course load.

Q&A:

- When you think back to before you started secondary school, how did you view those concerns once you were in secondary school?
- What helped make that less of a problem?
- What do you think could be improved so that students like you, worry less beforehand?

GREEN: What did you look forward to beforehand, when you thought about (starting) secondary school?

Probes: greater independence/autonomy, clean slate / "new beginning," growth opportunities

Q&A:

- How did you view the things you felt like doing beforehand once you started secondary school? (Were the expectations you had accurate, what matches, what is different?)
- What helped to look forward to this?
- What do you think could be improved so that children can look forward to the transition?

Closing

- Are there things we haven't discussed that you think are important to still say?
- What did you think of this conversation (What did you like most about what we talked about?)?

I would like to thank you for participating in this study! If you have any questions you can send me a message. In addition, if you are interested, I can send you feedback of the results.

Appendix B

Guide for Coding

Data Collection:

Data collection involved conducting each interview following the interview scheme: *Child Interview Guide* prepared by Bochane et al. (2024) (Refer to Appendix A). The interview was recorded using the transcription software Otter.ai (reference). Each interview was then listened back, and the transcript generated by the software was edited accordingly. Once the transcripts were complete and accurate, they were downloaded, anonymized, and the copy was saved under the name: Interview #_raw transcript.

Coding Phase - 1st transcript:

Round 1: Interview was read through once without any changes made and saved under the name: Interview #_coded transcript. A second read through was done and sections of interest (according to the research question) were marked with a yellow highlight to indicate possible codes of interest.

Round 2: A third read through of the transcript was done and the sections of interest previously highlighted in yellow were assessed and assigned a specific color. On a separate document, these colors were noted, and a general topic title was assigned to each based on the different topics being discussed in the section (Refer to *Color-Coding Category* table below). This was followed by a fourth read through where each colored section was analyzed, and a specific code given which summarized the experience mentioned. This code was documented in an excel sheet titled *List of Codes*. Also noted in this excel sheet, next to each code, was the color highlights they were assigned and whether the code referred to the primary (1), transition (0), or secondary (2) period. On the transcript, a comment was made on the highlighted section indicating the topic it represented.

Coding Phase – Rest of Transcripts:

Round 1: The steps taken for “Round 1” of the first transcript were followed for the rest of the transcripts.

Round 2: For the third reading, the sections of interest highlighted in yellow were assessed and assigned a color from the *Color-Coding Categories* table created from transcript one, if the section did not match one of these categories, a new category was created and a different color assigned. For the fourth reading, each colored section was analyzed and matched with the codes already identified and documented in the *List of Codes* created from transcript one. If the highlighted segmented matched an existing code, the frequency of this code was increased and noted in the *List of Codes*, next to after the school period noted, on the code. If no existing code matched with the highlighted segment, a new code was created and added to the *List of Codes*.

After all the transcripts were coded and a full list of Codes was obtained, the codes were organized based on the main color-coding category they belonged to. The *List of Codes* was further prepared for easier theme analysis, by re-arranging each color category based on the school period it refers to, the codes referring to the primary school period listed first, followed by those referring to the transition, and at the end those referring to the first year of secondary.

Theme Phase

Round 1 – Theme Identification: During this round, the codes in each color-coding category were read and analyzed. Each section was first inspected to see if a valence could be assigned to the codes in the category, if so, this was noted next to the frequency of each code in that category. If a color-coding coding category

could not be given valances, the codes received a label of whether they refer to an academic or a social aspect (only if relevant). Following this, the codes in each category were further analyzed and a common theme derived which adequately summarized the codes in this section.

Round 2 – Theme Categorization: Once a theme was derived from each color category, all the themes were read and analyzed for grouping. Based on topic similarities between the themes, larger group themes were created and a theme title assigned.

Table 1: Color- Coding Category

Color text or highlight	Coding Category: General meaning
Light Grey highlight	Commentary about education
Teal highlight	Being understood
Red highlight	Being Different
Yellow highlight	struggle (or not) in school
Light green	Other years of schooling (not transition period)
Turquoise highlight	Emotions
Pink	Deep thinking / Reflection
Orange	Emotion before making transition (FACE)
Dark yellow	Negative Expectations
Green	Relations with others
Purple	Perceived support
Highlighter green	What would have been helpful
Pink text	Positive expectations
Dark grey	Coping and distraction
Pale blue highlight	Value of Academics
Orange highlight	Psychological struggle
Plum highlight	Choice of secondary school
Lavendar highlight	Looking forward to...

Appendix C






Code Book - List of Codes (Excerpt)

Code	highlight (1)	highlight (2)	highlight (3)	Frequency	Primary (1) / transition (0) / Secondary (2)	Comments Made
Friends gave protection & recognition	green		dark grey	2	0	
worry about being accepted	dark yellow	green	orange	2	0	
scared of not meeting / making friends	dark yellow	turquoise		3	0	
Afraid or worry about other's expectations of me	dark yellow	turquoise		4	0	not being good enough
negative expectation of struggle	dark yellow			3	0	that the level would be too hard
few friends	green	yellow		1	2	
no deep friendships - floating b/w groups	green	turquoise		1	2	"didn't make me feel great"
making friends has always been hard	green	red		3	1 and 2	
orientation academically	highlighter green text			2	2	to feel better prepared
needed more diversity in challenges	highlighter green text	light grey		1	2	not just from course but also stimulating activities
have less assign at once/take less classes	highlighter green text			3	2	choose your own path to an extent or adapt own way of doing something
helping understand themselves & coping	highlighter green text	red	teal	1	2	explaining you could be different also in emotional maturity.

Code Book – Codes by Color Categories

(Excerpts from two color categories)

Category	# mentions	1 ^o or 2 ^o or transition (0)	valence of comment:
Light Grey highlight = Commentary about education			
GE within other schools not good	1	0	-
higher levels = more work not more adv	2	1	-
primary edu no pressure	4	1	+
primary school prepared me well	2	1	+
reg. school: too much structure	2	1 and 2	-
academics not stimulat- felt bored	5	1 and 2	-
universal system that must fit everyone	3	1 and 2	-
Category			
Category	# mentions	1 ^o or 2 ^o or transition (0)	
Dark yellow = Negative Expectations			
Afraid or worry about other's expectations of me	4	0	
worried of how others perceive me	3	0	
worry about not managing workload	1	0	
no exciting courses (not interested)	1	0	
worry about being accepted	2	0	
worry about being bullied	1	0	
sensitive to changes to routine	2	0	
struggle being understood socially	3	0	

Guide for Codes Labels within each category:	
	= Comment about Academics
	= Comment about Social Aspects
	= Comment applied to both Academics and Social
	= Most Frequent
	= Second Most Frequent