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School transition and mental health among adolescents: A comparative study of school systems in Denmark and Australia



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ABSTRACT

This study explores the influence of transition from primary to secondary schools in Australia versus no transition in Denmark by comparing age trends in students' school connectedness, emotional symptoms and conduct problems. Survey data from 5067 students in Australia and Denmark were used to compare 11–12 (prior to transition in Australia), 13–14 (during transition) and 15 year-olds (post-transition) in each country. In Australia, no statistically significant age group differences in emotional symptoms, conduct problems or school connectedness were observed. In Denmark, low school connectedness, emotional symptoms and conduct problems increased with age. A continuation of efforts to support students through transition and beyond in Australia, and a stronger focus on mental health and school connectedness in Denmark is recommended.

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1. Introduction

Most mental disorders begin during adolescence and early adulthood (10–24 years of age) and poor mental health is associated with negative educational, health and social outcomes (Patel, Flisher, Hetrick, & McGorry, 2007). It is therefore important to gain a better understanding of how different school systems may impact on mental health among adolescents. This paper focuses on emotional symptoms and conduct problems in two countries with differing school systems, Australia and Denmark. In Australia students transition from smaller primary to larger secondary schools in early adolescence, while students of the same age in Denmark usually remain within the same school and class of peers.

The mental health of young people is a growing public health issue (Patel et al., 2007). Social and emotional difficulties in childhood increase the risk of developing psychiatric disorders, depression, anxiety and substance use in later life (Costello, Egger, & Angold, 2005; Stansfeld, Clark, Rodgers, Caldwell, & Power, 2008), and it is therefore essential to promote positive

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social and emotional learning (OECD, 2015) and prevent mental health problems among children and adolescents (Viner et al., 2012). With respect to children and adolescents' mental health the World Health Organization states that "... an emphasis is placed on the developmental aspects, for instance, having a positive sense of identity, the ability to manage thoughts, emotions, as well as to build social relationships, and the aptitude to learn and to acquire education, ultimately enabling their full active participation in society" (WHO, 2013: 6). Much of the literature on mental health distinguishes between two dimensions: The hedonic dimension covering the way in which people feel about themselves and their life, and the eudaimonic dimension which is about the way in which people function in life (Huppert, 2014). In line with this, the present paper focuses on two aspects of mental health among adolescents: feeling (measured as emotional symptoms) and functioning (measured as conduct problems).

Children and adolescents' mental health is affected by family, peer, community, societal and cultural influences (Viner et al., 2012; Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009; WHO, 2014). The socio-ecological model of mental health promotion stresses the interdependence of individuals, families, communities and societies, and recognizes that mental health is embedded in, and influenced by, a wider social, economic and cultural ecology (Barry, 2007; Zubrick & Kovess-Masfety, 2005). From this perspective mental health is seen as patterned by the settings where people live, work, play and learn. It is in these everyday settings that mental health can be promoted (Barry, 2007). School is a significant context for the promotion of positive mental health and prevention of mental health problems (Weare and Nind, 2011). However, there is a lack of knowledge on how different school systems affect mental health among adolescents, and cross-cultural studies may provide new insight.

One such difference in school systems is evident in Australian and Danish schools and relates to transition. In Australia, students transition from primary school to secondary school and are typically exposed to a new social and structural environment, whereas students in Denmark mostly remain in the same school and class all the way through primary and secondary school. Australian primary schools are typically smaller than secondary schools (approximately 200 students in total, maximum about 800 students) and the students usually learn in intact classes (approximately 25–30 students) throughout the day with one main teacher. During the transition to the larger secondary schools (approximately 550 students in total, maximum about 1850 students), which typically occurs when students are 12–13 years of age, students experience a new social environment with teachers, classrooms and classmates changing throughout the day. In Denmark, there is no transition from primary to secondary school as the public school system consists of an integrated primary and lower secondary school (average school size around 400 students) with one year of pre-school, nine years of primary and lower secondary education and an optional one-year 10th form (Danish Ministry of Education, 2016). The students are organized in classes with a maximum of 28 students at the same age, and they remain in the same class from preschool to year nine (Bjerg et al., 1995).

School transition in Australia marks a time of significant change for young people, as they adapt to a new social environment as well as increased responsibilities and greater emphasis on self-directed learning than occurs in primary school (Hanewald, 2013). Although some children cope positively with the upcoming challenges and opportunities (Lucey and Reay, 2000; Sirsch, 2003), for others it can be a time of anxiety and stress as they need to develop new friendships and define their place in a new social hierarchy (Pellegrini and Bartini, 2000). The transition period is also an especially vulnerable time as it coincides with developmental and socio-emotional changes associated with becoming adolescents (Hanewald, 2013) as well as with the onset of many depressive and anxiety disorders (Hankin and Abramson, 2001).

If mental health outcomes are impacted by school transition, or lack thereof, a possible protective factor may be students' school connectedness. Research from Australia and elsewhere has reported students experience a reduced sense of school connectedness and perceived quality of school life during the transition from primary to secondary school (Lester, Waters, & Cross, 2013; O'Brennan & Furlong, 2010; Pereira & Pooley, 2007). School connectedness has been defined, operationalized and measured in numerous ways using terms like school attachment, school bonding, school climate etc. (Libbey, 2004). It describes a student's feeling of relatedness to significant others at school and a general feeling of belonging at school (Lester et al., 2013; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Rasmussen, Damsgaard, Holstein, Poulsen, & Due, 2005). Existing research indicates that school connectedness is an important protective factor for a number of adverse mental health and related outcomes like emotional distress (Lester and Cross, 2015; Resnick et al., 1997), depression (Mcgraw, Moore, Fuller, & Bates, 2008; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006), conduct problems (Loukas, Roalson, & Herrera, 2010), risk behaviour (Bond et al., 2007; Dornbusch, Erickson, Laird, & Wong, 2001) and suicidal ideation (Langille, Asbridge, Cragg, & Rasic, 2015; Resnick et al., 1997). Further, school connectedness is related to positive social and emotional development of children (Kidger, Araya, Donovan, & Gunnell, 2012; Lester et al., 2013; McNeely et al., 2002; Monahan, Oesterle, & Hawkings, 2010). Given this relationship between school connectedness and mental health outcomes (Langille et al., 2015; Lester et al., 2013; McNeely et al., 2002; Mcgraw et al., 2008; Monahan et al., 2010; Shochet et al., 2006), decreases in school connectedness resulting from school transition may be expected to impact on students' mental health.

The overall purpose of this comparative study is to explore how the structure of schooling offered during early adolescence may affect students' mental health. More specifically the aim is to assess the potential impact of transition from primary to secondary schooling by examining age trends in emotional symptoms, conduct problems and school connectedness among students in Australia and Denmark. Based on existing research it seems that, irrespective of school transition, connectedness to school may decline (Holstein et al., 2011; Klem & Connell, 2004; Loukas, Cance, & Batanova, 2013; Monahan et al., 2010) and mental health problems may increase from childhood to adolescence (Lawrence et al., 2015; Patel et al., 2007). Based on these developmental trends, and due to differences in the school systems in the two countries, we expected declines in connectedness and increases in mental health problems to be more marked in the Australian than

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