

POTENCY OF MUSIC TO EASE TRANSITION TO MIDDLE SCHOOL THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE OF CASE STUDY – FINAL RESEARCH REPORT

Eva Králová¹

¹ Faculty of Healthcare, Alexander Dubček University of Trenčín, Študentská 2, 911 01
Trenčín, Slovak Republic

* Corresponding author E-mail address: eva.kralova@tnuni.sk

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Abstract

The study explores the potency of music activities and background music to ease the transition from elementary to middle school. The transitive period is accompanied by emotional non-stability and low self-image of a child which are vital for his/her further personal growth and healthy development.

The target research group consists of 44 Slovak fifth graders from big urban, municipal middle school. The study summarises results of multiple case study of the potency of music intervention to ease transition to middle school. The results show that the potency was the most powerful in human bonding (interpersonal relationships); perception of social classroom climate; attitude toward school surrounding; reducing pupils' fear of subjects, examination, testing and poor academic results.

Keywords: music intervention, social classroom climate, attitude toward school, transitive period

1 Introduction

Problems of transitive period start to interest contemporary educators because in relation to middle school (1), scholarly monographs, articles and pedagogues allude to distribution of emotional imbalance. "Emotional imbalances occur when a person is not coping with life effectively, whether it is due to stress, depression, anger, feelings of negativity and so forth. Important is to balance these emotions to avoid further problems" (2). An emotional imbalance occurs within the transition when pupils who move from elementary to middle school are not coping effectively with the change. The reason could be due to grief, anxiety, stress, anger and it can lead into specific problems such as weariness, mental exertion, fear, emotional inconsistency and low self-esteem of a child (3 - 5).

Transition from elementary to middle school is experienced by great majority of public school students. In Slovakia it also represents transitive period from childhood to prepubescence. In most elementary schools, children are educated in individual classrooms with a group of peers and one or two teachers. Once pupils finish elementary and start middle school, they meet and cooperate with more teachers and peers (fellow students); they encounter intensified expectations for both performance and individual responsibility and are expected to accommodate to new settings and structures. For those reasons the period of transition has been often associated with losses in academic achievement, decreased performance and lack of pupils' motivation, social-emotional well-being and self-perceptions. Specifically, Mullins & Irvin (4) found that student motivation and academic achievement in English, math, science, and social studies, decreased with the transition to middle school. Diemert (6) points out that pupils' perception of school life declines after transition to middle school.

School transitive process is defined by Fthenakis (7) as the period of intensive and accelerated developmental demands which is socially regulated and is not finished until pupils are found in the state of mental and psychological balance. This complex period is full of mutual interactions which need to be thoroughly explored. It usually starts certain time before

pupils integrate into the new social environment, while school staff: teachers or school psychologists prepare children to it. Initiation phase: adjusting of students to new environment begins with the first school attendance and continues with new experiences, activities which pupils do and experience. It includes all the conditions and processes by means of which pupils are directed and encouraged by teachers and parents.

According to Ladd children successfully cope with specific problems of the period when they have positive attitude toward school and learning; positive relationships with peers and teachers; are satisfied and relatively happy within the class; are not frightened, lonely or distraught; show an interest in curriculum, take part in school activities and improve (8).

Within formal education in Slovakia the transition to middle school starts after pupils finish 4th elementary school class at the age of 10 (at the onset of puberty). ISCED (International Standards Classification of education) is the international norm for the classification of education. The new classification within our research focus includes the following types of schools: Elementary school (1st level of elementary school): ISCED level 1 and Lower secondary school (2nd level of elementary school): ISCED level 2.

In relation to the specific problems which exist during transition, transitive period should be included in contemporary school system in Slovak Republic so that to respond flexibly to changing needs and demands of our society. Even when the guarantor of methodical and legislative changes is the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, the main task of education is in the hands of teachers, educators and parents in the centre of focus which is a child.

At schools the most important changes in the quality of offered services modify. Modification of the services requires transformation in the philosophy of education of elementary school system from directive to creative and humanistic with the emphasis on personality of pupils and their overall development. In this sense there is a need of curricular transformation.

According to Eady (9) curriculum is a way how to “get the world to school”. It codes social relationships and their effect on people and knowledge. “Music, known as universal language can be integrated in curriculum of each subject to encourage learning in all educational areas.” Integrating music in main school subjects is according to him the strategy of restructuralisation. Schlechty claims that restructuralisation refers to modification of social systems. If schools want to start more effective services for clients (pupils), they have to modify existing paradigms, tasks and relationships (4). This is not an easy task, however, somewhere here probably resides the essence of the fight of the pedagogues who try to establish transformation of school system.

Kodejška (10) observes that materialistic living and spiritualism of contemporary age leads to weakened educational function of the family (on the psycho-social level). In Slovak families there was revealed decreased contact of children with music. However, it is the family as a community with its functionality that needs to provide emotional and intellectual coherence between its members, to create conditions for their growth and development. The author found out that contemporary children suffer from emotional deficit and they are culturally undeveloped. He suggests that healthy development of a child personality should be protected by establishing the balance between intellectual and emotional constituents of personality. This emotional deficit could be improved by means of music activities: listening to aesthetic music, singing and dancing, or playing music instruments. For this reason great responsibility lies on schools and its staff.

During the field research as an English and music education teacher I decided to search, put together and use various materials, methods and forms of work which could help to ease transitive period from elementary to middle school. I took the inspiration from Bridges (8) who states that organizations cannot repeat yesterday’s practice if they want to succeed.

According to him success requires innovation and the innovation brings change. I realized that in this specific situation the biggest field for arrangement of a design depends on the initiative of teachers themselves. My intention was to create the design which would be able to ease the advancement of this strenuous period.

My previous positive experience with the application of music activities in educational process encouraged me to use their beneficial potency during the transition to middle school. Williams (11) inspired me to use music activities, for their potency to disperse negative events. According to him transitive period lasts quite a long period of time. Easier losses, where the transition to middle school can be included, last up to 6 months, difficult losses, such as the death of a close friend, can last 12 months. Seeing that significance of music lies in joy, delight, creativity, optimism, sociability, freedom and willingness to sense and experience beauty, in the contact with music the individual learns many different ways of how to look at the world. The new school law was formulated in similar spirit according to ideas outlined in Millennium (1). It promotes approach to interpretation of education more from the perspective of values and significance for pupil during the adaptation to new social environment.

The research was carried out in the school year 2009/2010. It took the form of music intervention. The aim was to ease transitive period by means of music activities: vocal (singing), locomotor (dancing), theatrical, perception, performance of instrumental activities. These were integrated in English lessons thrice a week and background music was used in Art lessons twice a week.

I did not presume that after application of music programme in education process specific problems accompanying transition period would completely disappear. My intent was to offer music programme as means to help pupils during their transition to middle school to adapt to new school environment.

2 Methodology

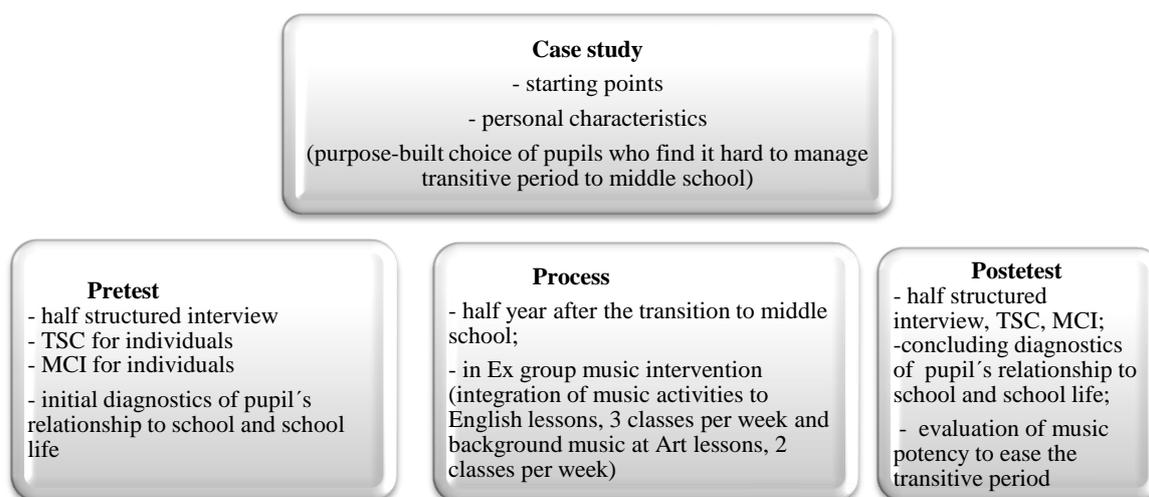
Qualitative research was outlined as a form of pedagogical experiment and was a part of my dissertation research. Music intervention was applied in 2009/2010 at urban elementary school in Banská Bystrica, middle Slovakia. I started the terrain research in the beginning of September 2009 as an English language and Music education teacher. Simultaneously I informed the headmaster of elementary school about the aim and brief layout of the research. After she approved it, she obtained permission from parents of control and experimental class pupils for the research. Within the scope of middle school teacher pedagogical activity I was allowed to use specific methods during the lessons of English language with the goal to decrease 10-11 year old pupils' fears and negative emotions during their transition to middle school.

Research sample: Two middle school classes (5th B and 5th C) were selected in the beginning of school year 2009 by the headmaster for the sake of homogeneity of the group. Twenty-two pupils from experimental class participated in half year music intervention and all of them concluded it. The number of pupils varied till the beginning of November 2009: Two pupils left control class. One of them with instructional problems was included in special school for pupils with special educational needs due to severe learning difficulties, physical disabilities or behavioural problems. The other one was reclassified by the headmaster to experimental class, 5th C. Originally there were twenty-one pupils in both classes. The number of pupils from experimental class increased in November 2009, as one pupil moved her house and was included within this class. The following abbreviations are used in the paper: Ex for experimental and K for control class.

I used the qualitative method of semi-structured interview to investigate the answers of pupils to the question: "How do pupils perceive middle school?" The interview was

consecutively evaluated with the qualitative research strategy of multiple case studies. The typical cases of the respondents from K and Ex classes are described at length by Králová (12) in her dissertation thesis *Music Activities in English Lessons and Background Music in Art Lessons as Means of Easing Transitive period*. Only so called typical cases are described in the paper. It means the pupils who had more than three negative attitudes toward school. The cases of pupils with less than 3 problems were not introduced, because the posttest results confirmed that those pupils dealt with the transitive period relatively peacefully.

By means of a multiple case study, I examine the potency of music activities with selected respondents, so called “typical cases”. The goal of the intervention was to decrease negative attitudes of pupils to school environment and interpret changes which emerged during the experiment. The descriptive interpretation of results relates to research question focused on problems of transitive period: “How can music programme contribute to easing transitive period?”



*Fig. 1 Design of case study: easing transitions to middle school by means of music programme
(Source: Own research)*

Abbreviations: TSC – Test of Semantic Choice; MCI – My Class Inventory; Ex – experimental group

Collection and analysis of results: To obtain relevant data I used the following research instruments: *semi-structured interview*; projective technique *Test of Semantic Choice* (TSC) and Lašek’s *My Class Inventory* (MCI) (13). The author of *Test of Semantic Choice* is Prague biochemist and psychiatrist, associative professor, Vladimír Doležal (14) and MCI was constructed and examined by Fraser & Fisher in 1981 and tested in our living conditions by Jan Lašek in 1988 (13). The design of *case study* is depicted in Figure 1. To describe the typical cases I was influenced by Yin (15). Every typical case was described in its complexity as the part of whole system. In the paper there are reported back final results of the research.

3 Results and Discussion

The goal of multiple case studies was to answer the research question: “In which way can music programme affect transitive period?”

The answer is organised in four areas in which the potency of musical programme was the most demonstrated:

1. Building relationships and emotional bonds;
2. Reduction of pupils’ fear of school subjects, examinations and marks;
3. Positive perceptions of school relations and school environment;
4. Positive social class climate perception.

The potency of music programme was proven effective in Ex class. It was verified that music has impact on *building mutual relationships and emotional bonds with classmates*: Five pupils moved at semantic web (Figure 2) from fear to delight and close relationship with peers; one pupil showed happiness to make friends with one new classmate. The data obtained from *Test of Semantic Choice* were located in “semantic web” which was defined with reference concept, in our case it was “joy / fear”. At the same time these concepts form axes x and y of two-dimensional array. The semantic web defined in this way can be divided in 4 quadrants: I. Indifference, II. Joy, III. Ambivalence, and IV. Fear. However, after music intervention there was not proven improvement in relationships between pupils and teachers and in relationships between classmates in Ex class. The attitudes towards classmates remained unchanged.

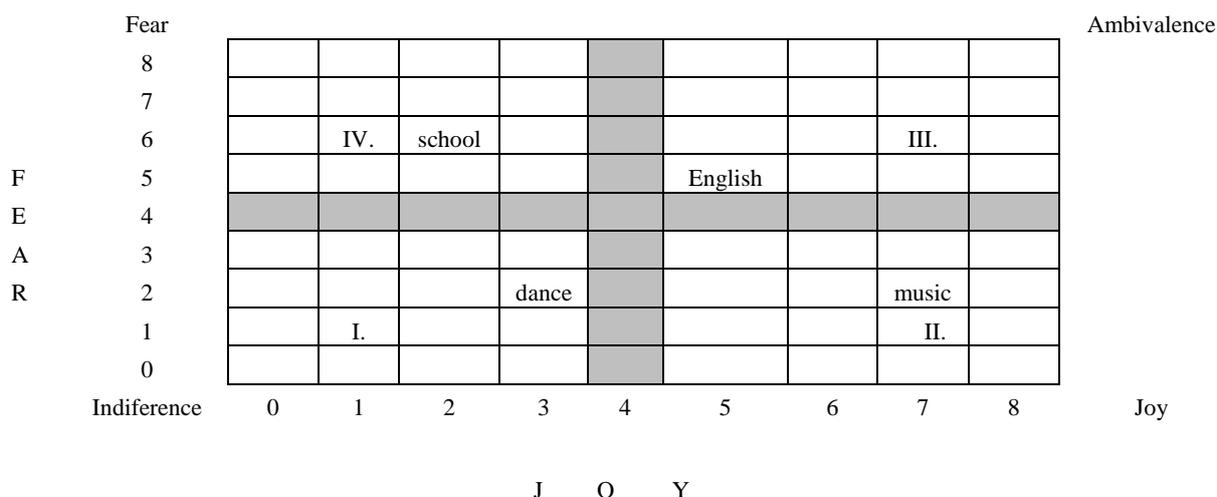


Fig. 2 Psychological significance of stimulation words (music, school, English language, dancing) for pupils within the context of reference concepts “joy and fear” – in the semantic web (12).

One pupil from K class reported improved relationship with his classmates and there was found improvement of three pupils in their relationships with teachers. Three pupils reported disturbed relationships with their classmates and three pupils moved from delight to indifference on the semantic web.

The research findings about the need to have good relationships with peers in transitive period to middle school are in accordance to findings of Vágnerová (16) who believes that peer acceptance and integral incorporation of a child in the class represents significant social area for this age.

Despite of attention of the headmaster to continual education of teachers, the research findings indicate ongoing *pupils’ fear of examination, marks and some subjects*. After music intervention, six pupils indicated decreased fears of school subjects. The wordings of two pupils from Ex class refer also to declined troublesome feelings after they received bad marks. However, in K class the same phenomenon was worsened. Potency of music programme in Ex class was further proven in reduction of pupils’ sorrow for poor academic results (two pupils) and examinations (three pupils). However, within the class problematic memorisation of too many facts was discovered.

The research results of multiple case studies show that in K class the attitude toward examination, exams and preparations of pupils for lessons was not improved. Other two pupils proved fear of examinations and one pupil unpleasant feelings during examination.

Anxiety and troublesome feelings during examination or for bad marks could be prevented by adequate promotion of the conception of creatively-humanistic education in

educational process which emphasises activity and responsibility of personality. The State Educational Programme (1) emphasises creative activities of middle school pupils as the starting point to learn effectively and to develop their competences. The research findings of Strenáčiková (17) inform about giving preference to school intelligence prior to upbringing in Slovak elementary schools. However, upbringing as the part of pedagogical psychology is the source of necessary experience for pupils. Children need an environment in which they will experience success (or if they cannot avoid failure, it is necessary to compensate it in other activities). Such environment can contribute to decrease of negative feelings connected with failure at school lessons. Music programme aimed to contribute to such an environment.

Concerning changes in *perceptions of school environment*, in Ex class there were not proven any new negative changes. Six respondents confirmed positive effect of music to their attitude towards school: stronger effect (two pupils) and mild effect (four pupils). The potency of music programme was proven more efficient with those pupils who often listen to music, play music instruments, perform a dance in modern/folk groups in their free time, or within their families. The improvement of pupils' attitude toward school environment was expressed by pupils by the following: "better sleep, disappearance of initial fatigue at school" (2G4); "travelling to school doesn't annoy me" (2O7); "I can follow tempo and reduced time caused with shifts to specialized classrooms" (2F7); "school does not mean evil for me, I feel quite o.k. here" (2K5); "morning sickness passed away" (2M6); "I am happy at school and look forward when I go to school. However, in the beginning of a school year I couldn't sleep as I was afraid of quite a big school area and teachers" (2M6); "I enjoy new relationships at school. School changed to a place where I have new friends, that's why I started to dress up for school (2A1).

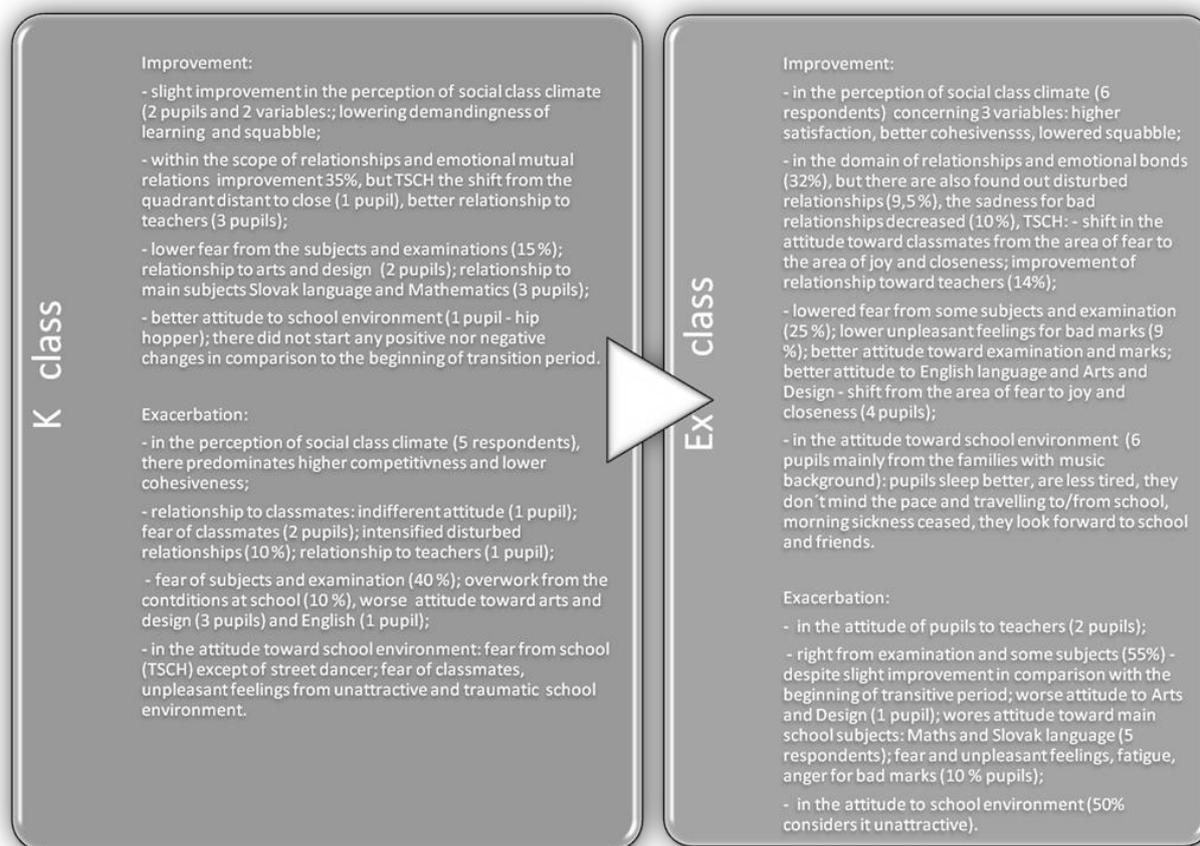


Fig. 2 Easing transition to middle school with music intervention (Source: Own research, 12)

In K class there were not proven any new positive nor negative changes.

The results of multiple case studies indicate that the potency of music programme in Ex class was most effective in pupils' *social class climate perceptions*. Overall improvement was demonstrated in the following variables:

- Satisfaction within the class;
- Class solidarity;
- Decreased disputes among pupils;
- In Ex class respondents did not show worse perception of social school climate.

In K class there was verified improvement in two variables with two respondents. One respondent confirmed easier acquisition of knowledge and decreased disputes within the class. The other respondent proved greater satisfaction and decreased competitiveness in the class. However, five respondents from K class complained about social school climate.

There was proven overall decline in two variables:

- Competitiveness;
- Very low cohesiveness of the class.

Aforementioned evidence about the improvement in social class climate perception is important, because it reflects inner arrangement of social organisation, quality of relationships between its members, coordination of its activities and cooperation.

4 Conclusion

To establish new school interventions teachers need to plan innovations carefully, consult their implementation with experts from the field of developmental psychology, and prepare properly for their realisation. I believe that interventions which are put into practice based on good knowledge of scientific literature can have, in the hands of erudite teacher, power to ease transitive period. I don't believe in the existence of single proper programme which would be a simple "answer" to this problem, because children are not able to manage transitions without any help. I suppose that pupils should be professionally guided by pedagogues, school psychologists and parents. Cultivation of human sociability in this sense depends on humanistic education based on the respect for children to grow through creative learning which uses creative intelligence. Creative intelligence is a prerequisite for human socialisation, thus the most important task of education is an integrated individual who is capable to deal with life in its entirety (18).

After successful implementation of half-year music intervention in English lessons and background music in Art lessons, music activities can be recommended as a tool which can be used during transition from elementary to middle school.

Music intervention affected above all:

- Building positive relationships and emotional bonds;
- Positive social school climate perceptions;
- Positive perceptions of school relations and school environment;
- Reduction of pupils' fear of school subjects; and finally
- Reduction of pupils' fear of examinations and poor academic results.

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