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DOI:
10.1007/s11218-023-09759-1

Social Psychology of Education
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-023-09759-1

Children's perspective on fears connected to school transition and intended coping strategies

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Received: 7 December 2021 / Accepted: 4 January 2023

Abstract

The transition from primary to secondary school comes with major changes in the lives of children. There is a shortage of in-depth analyses of young people's perspectives concerning their fears and strategies to address these. This qualitative study aims to gain first-hand understanding of children's fears and the intended coping strategies used during school transition. Data from 52 workshops were analysed, with a total of 896 students (M *age* = 10.40, SD = .839) in lower Austria. First, in the classroom setting, a vignette story about a child facing fears about school transition from primary to secondary school was developed with pupils in a brainstorming session. This was followed by self-selected small group discussions, where pupils proposed strategies to help cope with these fears. A thematic analysis was carried out. Major thematic clusters distinguished between four types of fears: peer victimisation, being alone, victimisation by authority figures, and academic failure. Three additional thematic clusters described strategies for countering the fears: enacting supportive networks, personal emotion regulation, and controlling behaviour. In addition to these connected clusters, two further themes were identified: strategy outcomes and consequences, i.e., personal experiences with using specific strategies, and the discussion of participants about contradictions and questionable usefulness of identified strategy outcomes. In conclusion, the children in our study reported more social fears as compared to academic fears. Children seem reasonably competent at naming and identifying strategies; however, maladaptive strategies, as well as controversies within the described strategies may indicate a lack of certainty and competence at engaging with these strategies on a practical level.

Keywords Early adolescence · Fears · Coping strategies · Qualitative analysis · School transition · Victimization

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Published online: 22 January 2023

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

During late childhood and early adolescence, the potential start of puberty coincides with the transition from primary to secondary school, which comprises many challenging situations (Seifert & Schulz, 2007; van Rens et al., 2018). Maturing children must navigate changes in expectations and social norms, which often lead to confrontation and can subsequently influence restructuring of self-perception and identity (Mendle et al., 2007). Brain development during this time forms the basis for the development of critical cognitive and social-emotional skills, which impact immediate and future health and well-being (Patton et al., 2016; Ross et al., 2019). A key factor that influences this developmental process is related to children's interactions with their social environment (Patton et al., 2016), which can be especially challenging in the new secondary school environment. During this time, social fears become particularly differentiated (Bokhorst et al., 2008) and an important foundation is laid for the development of adaptive or maladaptive coping styles and strategies, which often stay with an individual throughout their lifetime (Compas et al., 2001; Valiente et al., 2015). Various reasons are proposed for the differentiation of social fears. Among these, (1) the increased capacity to verbalise fears due to their increasing cognitive abilities; (2) their increasing ability to take the perspective of others (i.e., teachers, parents, and peers) and being able to discern these different ways of thinking; (3) the shift and emphasis towards peer relationships and peer evaluations becoming more important and differentiated from the evaluations of adults, such as teachers and parents, and; (4) the increased academic demand from the new school environment can lead to fears of achievement evaluations (Bokhorst et al., 2008).

Many educators, families, and policymakers believe that school transitions from primary to secondary school can only be fully successful if the new environment matches the developmental abilities and needs of the children (Eskelä-Haapanen et al., 2017). However, even if these needs and abilities are matched, school transition is considered to be one of the most challenging periods for early adolescents (Evans et al., 2018; Lester et al., 2019), as students are confronted with a variety of challenges. New friendships must be established, friend groups have to be managed, and students must cope with a new school environment and requirements (van Rens et al., 2018). Further, early adolescents have to adapt to a new system of rotating classrooms and teachers, and the former oldest students in primary school have to cope with their status reverting to being the youngest members in the new secondary school environment (Grills-Taquechel et al., 2010). On top of this, socially anxious children report struggling with everyday school tasks (e.g., reading aloud in front of their peers, seeking help from the teacher, participating in physical education classes, and test-taking). It is therefore important to gain a better understanding of children's perspectives around fears which can be pertinent to the school move in order to facilitate a school environment that furthers social-emotional well-being, especially for children with fears (Coyle et al., 2021).

There is no consensus on how children experience the transition from primary to secondary school. Most children appear to overcome this transition with little difficulty, for others, it appears to be stressful (van Rens et al., 2018). Longitudinal studies have shown that children who anticipate issues with the transition or feel less prepared, feel more anxious about it and appear to experience poorer transitions and more problems in secondary school (Jindal-Snape and Cantali, 2019; West et al., 2010). Failure to cope with challenges arising from school transitions can have long-lasting negative impacts on academic success (Coelho & Romão, 2016), as well as physiological and psychological well-being (Evans et al., 2018; ter Bogt et al., 2010). Short- and long-term repercussions can include poor school adjustment and performance (Coelho & Romão, 2016), a decrease in self-esteem (Evans et al., 2018), a general sense of well-being (Copeland et al., 2013; Eskelä-Haapanen et al., 2017) and can ultimately result in mental health problems (Copeland et al., 2013). Failure to cope does not only affect the immediate school life but can lead to long-lasting negative consequences into adulthood (e.g., Evans et al., 2018; Lester et al., 2019; Vassilopoulos et al., 2018). However, if these challenges are overcome in a positive and constructive way, it can represent an opportunity for growth (Mowat, 2019). To ensure that this period becomes an opportunity where positive behaviour can be established that improves well-being throughout life (Clark et al., 2020), a better understanding of children's perspective on fears and the ways they intend to cope with these is needed in order to inform relevant interventions.

One factor that influences a positive school transition could be the availability of internal resources, such as verbal skills, emotion regulation skills for effective and adequate coping (Markovic et al., 2013), and external resources, such as social support from teachers and parents (Jindal-Snape et al., 2019). Adequate coping strategies facilitate positive adjustment and support in dealing with the many challenges children face in the new context, such as peer conflicts or finding new friends (Markovic et al., 2013; Voight & Nation, 2016). Coping can be described as "conscious volitional efforts to regulate emotion, cognition, behaviour, physiology, and the environment in response to stressful events or circumstances" (Compas et al., 2001, p. 89). The range of available coping strategies and the consequent reaction to stressors differ between individuals and can impact the success of the outcome (Brouzos et al., 2020). The type of coping strategy chosen in a certain context depends on the specific situation (Murray-Harvey et al., 2012) as well as on the individual's cognitive, biological, emotional, and social development (Compas et al., 2001). Thus, coping describes a person's specific approach to managing emotional triggers provoked by context-specific stressors. To gain a better understanding of the consequences of stress on mental health and well-being, as well as possible physiological consequences, understanding the structure of coping is essential (Stanisławski, 2019). The lack of agreement concerning this structure and coping nomenclature, with at least 100 different scientific classifications and additional 400 subcategories described in the literature (Skinner et al., 2003), hinders concrete classification. Due to this dissent, we refrained from committing to one concrete classification but used a combination of classifications to better reflect our data and gain a better understanding of the children's perspective on fears and the intended coping

strategies described to overcome these. This appears especially necessary considering the potentially stressful event of school transition.

Individual differences in social-emotional development in late childhood and early adolescence influence individual availability of resources to cope. Data show important shifts towards more active coping for children between the age of 9 and 11 years (Eschenbeck et al., 2018), which coincide with school transitions in most countries. These active coping styles, such as seeking social support, adopting a positive frame of mind, or problem-oriented coping (Zammuner, 2019), rapidly develop as children strive for greater independence from caregivers, and are confronted with a wide range of difficult situations and possible stressors (Valiente et al., 2015). Compared to active coping styles, avoidant coping, which includes strategies such as denial, behavioural, and mental disengagement from stressors, has been linked to lower emotional well-being (Zammuner, 2019). Understanding which coping strategies children report and intend to use to deal with fears at school transition will provide valuable insight when planning future interventions. This is especially relevant when planing interventions, as coping strategies, compared to other individual difference variables, such as temperament, can be altered through interventions (Compas et al., 2001). A meta-analysis has shown that early adolescence is a promising time to set social interventions, as this is a time when more complex social skills, especially skills related to peer interactions, are learned at a fast rate and are recognised as important by early adolescents themselves (January et al., 2011). Thus, a better understanding of the specific contexts requiring the engagement of coping strategies, and of which coping strategies are intended to be used by children is needed (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Murray-Harvey et al., 2012; Quy et al., 2019).

There has been a lack of in-depth analysis of children's perspectives on what they fear, how these fears manifest, and their strategies to cope and overcome these (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Taking into account the situational component of coping strategies, the lack of qualitative data exploring students' personal perspectives withholds important information, useful to inform future interventions (McKeering & Hwang, 2019; Quy et al., 2019). Without a better understanding of the pupils' own knowledge related to transition, intervention attempts for this period can only be considered incomplete and shallow (Bagnall et al., 2020). Qualitative research has the potential to uncover and expand knowledge of varying life circumstances of children during late childhood and early adolescence by focussing on different cultural and social environments (Aitken & Herman, 2009). As children and early adolescents spend large amounts of time in their school environment (Pooley et al., 2008), and since the subtle nuance accompanying interpersonal relationships of children during late childhood and early adolescence ought to be better understood, qualitative research in schools and classrooms is essential (Patton et al., 2016).

1.2 Research question

In this study, a qualitative approach is applied, with the aim of developing an in-depth understanding of children's perspective on fears related to school transitions; and find which kind of coping strategies children during late childhood and early

adolescence intend to apply to overcome these fears. In the future, we hope this knowledge can be used to develop interventions that support a smooth transition to try and increase children's social-emotional competencies and ultimately their well-being.

2 Methods

2.1 Study participants

Overall, 54 workshops in 29 Lower Austrian schools (26 public, three private schools) were conducted with a total of 916 students. Of those, 52 workshops from 27 schools with a total of 896 students ($M\ age = 10.40$, $SD = 0.839$; 45.6% girls and 51.9% boys) produced data used in this study. In the sample, 2.5% of students did not provide information on age and gender. Due to the lack of school transition in two schools for students with special education needs, the data from these workshops were not used. The overall sample included 23% primary schools and 74% secondary schools. In the Austrian school system, children have different choices as to how to continue after primary school. These choices include secondary schools (Neue Mittelschule or NMS) or grammar schools (Allgemeinbildende Höhere Schule or AHS; Weiß & Tritscher-Archan, 2011). Children with special education needs can continue their education in schools for students with special needs at the secondary school level. Therefore, 74% of secondary schools are split between 58% in secondary schools, 15% in grammar schools, and 4% in schools for students with special education needs on a secondary school level. Overall, 48% of the schools were in rural areas and 52% in urban areas.

2.2 Recruitment

The aim was to include various schools to reflect a wide spectrum of views and experiences. Hence, the sampling frame included all school types, rural and urban areas, sociodemographic backgrounds, and different percentages of pupils with immigrant backgrounds. Schools' participation was voluntary. Some schools signalling interest were referred directly by the department of education in Lower Austria ($N = 47$). The project also attracted schools' participation through flyer distribution, media presence, and contacts made with teachers during training events. Interested head teachers and teachers received written information about the study. If the school agreed to participate, parents received detailed information about the study objectives, workshop content, and subsequent data management. If parents agreed to their child's participation, parents provided written informed consent. Children were informed about the study in the classroom and provided workshop leaders with verbal consent. In the final sample, 29 schools participated. The study received ethical approval from the ethics committee of the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna (EK-Nr. 10/2018) and all data were anonymised for analysis.

2.3 Workshops

To collect data in a safe environment and to allow all children to participate, a school-based data-collecting workshop was created. The workshop aimed to determine the knowledge and views around several aspects of social and emotional well-being. All workshops were conducted by two main workshop leaders, who were joined by between two and four supporting team members, depending on class size, cognitive abilities, and special education needs of the class (determined by pre-interviews conducted with the teachers). The responsibilities of the supporting team members included observation and note-taking using structured surveillance sheets, as well as leading and documenting small group discussions.

2.3.1 Methodological background and workshop development

The methods of linking experiences or advice to fictional characters have their roots and a longstanding tradition in the therapeutic setting. It is used to elicit information about subjective experiences, objectifying issues or problems, and thereby safeguard against adverse effects (Butler et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2021; Papouli, 2019). By using a third-person stimulus, refraining from actual occurrences, the participants can assume a distanced perspective, which allows a certain level of detachment from potentially difficult situations and ensures a layer of protection (Frost, 2011), whilst still allowing to reflect on their own experiences separate from the self (Barbosa et al., 2017). Distancing is therefore considered to be a productive perspective, as it allows for safe communication of negative experiences (Barbosa et al., 2017). The use of a narrative allows sharing of negative feelings, without implicating oneself (Barbosa et al., 2017; Ruini et al., 2014). This method of questioning was designed to encourage participants to provide honest and genuine answers (Anderson, 2010); after the establishment of trust, children were asked to remember their experiences and how they could be shared by use of the imaginary character.

To maximise fidelity and limit the influence on data collection (Bahn & Barratt-Pugh, 2013), a comprehensive workshop manual was developed based on participatory design literature (e.g., Horgan, 2017; Jackson Foster et al., 2018), and researchers' personal experience from previous workshops, and was refined in collaboration with adult stakeholders (Austrian teachers, psychological practitioners, and education workshop facilitators). The equipment, time schedule, procedure, aims, methods, and wording of questions were defined in the manual to ensure consistent workshops and data collection (Krammer et al., 2021b). Workshops were consequently tested and refined with children. To maximise fidelity, all workshops were supervised and overseen by at least one of two members of the manual's core development team. Workshop leaders and team members were trained and supervised on a regular basis.

2.3.2 Workshop procedure

The data collected and analysed for this study includes pupils' perspectives on fears at school transition (i.e., brainstorming data and observation sheets) and the

connected strategies, which they intend to use to overcome these fears (i.e., letter and verbatim quotes). Using a vignette stimulus (comic picture and introduction), the team leader and the entire class discussed fears. This vignette story was used to collect data on children's perspectives on fears at school transition (Krammer et al., 2021a). For this exercise, a stimulus card was used, a concealed card was chosen at random revealing a comic-style picture of a child. The team leaders asked the children to choose a name and then continued to explain the task: "The character has just changed from primary to secondary school and is now joining a new class. S/he is a bit scared. What could s/he be scared of?" (Krammer et al., 2021b). The main fears were written on a flip chart by the workshop leaders while supporting team members wrote down comments in the structured surveillance sheets.

Following the vignette stimulus, the workshop leaders introduced the next exercise, instructing the participants to advise the character on how to overcome the earlier gathered fears, drawing on their own experiences. This advice was gathered, jointly by all group members, in the form of a letter to the stimulus character. For this, pupils were instructed to gather in self-selected small groups of three to six. Each group was led by a team member, who would repeat the instructions and answer any questions. The children's advice was written down by the small group facilitators, as well as verbatim quotes (Krammer et al., 2021a). If the children struggled with the letter, the discussants were instructed to ask non-leading questions, address the fears from the previous exercise, and note all the children's ideas in verbatim quotes.

2.4 Analysis

Qualitative data from both exercises were separately analysed with QSR International's NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the data, enriched with methods drawn from grounded theory, in particular line-by-line coding, eliciting explicit negative cases, iterative inductive and constant comparative coding, using memos throughout the coding process, and the keeping of a summary table to organise clusters (Willig, 2013). Themes and clusters were found to be stable throughout workshops conducted in different classes and school types (Anderson, 2010). To achieve familiarisation, the data set was carefully read before starting the coding process. In an inductive, data-led manner, line-by-line coding was used to extract as much information as possible. No pre-existing coding structure was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006), making this analysis an inductive, data-driven process. These specific themes and categories (Simons et al., 2008), as well as similarities and differences (i.e., negative cases) in the manifest data, were iteratively identified and clustered accordingly (Neale, 2016). After the first round of line-by-line coding, the identified coding frame was discussed with four trained team members, reframed, and expanded where necessary. Following this, the data were reread and restructured according to the discussed coding frame. During this process, coding was continuously discussed with trained team members until full consensus was reached. The analysis was carried out by a researcher familiar with the proceedings, however not present at most

data collection workshops, and guided by the theoretical background and exploratory analysis of children's perspective on fears at school transition. Generated codes and themes were continuously discussed with at least one researcher present at the data collection workshops.

The sample consisted of children who visited the last year of primary school, about to face the transition to secondary school, as well as secondary school children who just experienced the transition. The sample, therefore, included slightly different voices, as well as different biases present in the slightly different age groups. Primary school students may fantasise about the upcoming change and their possible fears, whereas secondary school children may display memory biases. The different data sets were compared and no differences between expected and experienced fears, or strategy knowledge were found. The data sets were therefore combined.

As described earlier, exercise one produced data describing children's perspectives on fears at school transition, and exercise two aimed to gather information on participants' intended strategies to overcome these fears. As the data covered different topics and different methods for the collection were used, the two exercises were analysed separately to provide a better overview. Due to the methodological change reflected in the data, the first 16 workshops for the second exercise were excluded, leaving 137 small group discussions from 36 workshops subject to the second part of the analysis. Data included are letters written to the character including verbatim quotes from children.

After a first rough grouping and discussions, identified codes were reread and grouped according to their underlying fears (see Fig. 1, Table 1). After a thorough discussion with the trained team members, the lowest level of analysis comprised specific experiences that participants were fearful of (e.g., hitting, not being liked, not keeping secrets, and being singled out; see Fig. 1, Table 1). These were grouped into clusters

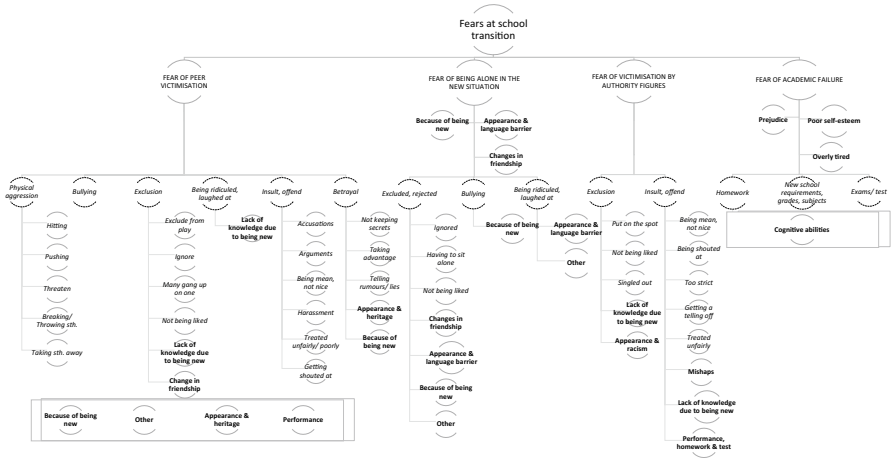

Fig. 1 Fears at school transition. Block capitals equal higher level/general fears, what adolescents are afraid of; cursive represent lower level, more specific aspects, what adolescents are afraid of; the dotted lines show main clusters; bold print are reasons why general fears or fear evoking behaviour are assumed to happens – all reasons in boxes relate to all of the specific aspects directly above

Table 1 Coding structure−fears

Higher level themes (general fears)	Mid-level cluster	Lowest level coding (experiences)
Fear of peer victimisation	e.g., physical aggression; being ridiculed/laughed at; insult/ offend	e.g., hitting, pushing, threatened; accusations; getting shouted at
Fear of being alone in the new situation	e.g., exclusion/rejection; ridiculed; bullying	e.g., being ignored, having to sit alone; being made fun of;
Fear of victimisation by authority figures	e.g., exclusion; insult/offend	e.g., being put on the spot; being shouted at
Fear of academic failure	e.g., new school requirements; homework	e.g., too much homework, exams too difficult

according to the associated *type* of underlying fear (e.g., physical aggression, exclusion, betrayal; see Fig. 1, Table 1). These fear types were then further grouped into four *general*, higher-level themes of fears (i.e., the fear of victimisation, fear of being alone in a new situation, fear of victimisation by authority figures, and fear of academic failure; see Fig. 1, Table 1). Although not specifically asked, participants volunteered reasons why certain fears or fear-evoking behaviour would occur. These reasons were grouped separately and analysed alongside the fears. Thus, reasons could pertain to both fear types and general fears (e.g., because of being new, cognitive abilities; see Fig. 1). For a quantitative overview, the occurrence or absence of higher-level themes within workshops was counted.

In the second exercise, three levels of analysis were identified, low-level coding of strategies, combined into mid-level clusters and high-level themes (for themes and examples, see Table 2). The lowest level of analysis consisted of low-level coding of strategies described mainly on a behavioural level by the participants. These lowest levels of intended strategies could be divided into seven mid-level clusters (see Table 2). Due to the structure of the questions within the exercises and low-level coding of strategies within these mid-level clusters, strategies mainly related to specific objectives and were linked to specific fears. However, most strategies (e.g., emotion regulation, social support, and communication) were described in connection with several of the fears mentioned in exercise one (see Fig. 2). Thus, grouping these mid-level clusters directly with corresponding fears leads to repetition and overlaps. Therefore, five higher-level themes were identified for the second exercise. These include three thematic themes distinguished between different types of strategies identified by pupils as being relevant to the fears (i.e., enacting supportive networks, personal emotion regulation, and controlling behaviour). In addition to these connected themes, two further themes were identified broadly related to children's use of strategies. One consists of strategy outcomes and consequences, that is, personal experiences with using specific strategies, and the last theme encompasses the discourse around contradictions and questionable usefulness of identified strategy outcomes, which encompass the negative cases identified in the data. We differentiated between the first three mentioned strategies, which were named without application, and the latter two themes, where children self-disclosed the actual use of strategies or discussed different views regarding used strategies in the small groups with their peers.

By collecting brainstorming data on spreadsheets and notepads in different settings (full class and self-selected small groups), the data set consisted of single words, shorter and longer phrases, as well as short conversations between participants. Although these data are limited in depth at the individual participant level, in the large sample the information power is large and provided a holistic understanding of children's fears of school transition and their strategies to overcome them.

Table 2 Coding Structure – Intended Strategies

Higher level themes (strategy outcomes)	Mid-level cluster Activities	Lowest level coding (intended strategies)
Enacting social networks	Activities and reach; communication; social support; avoidance	e.g., saying hello, asking for hobbies; lending things; not get involved in other people's business
Personal emotion regulation		e.g., ignore hurtful comments, think positive thoughts, distract yourself
Controlling behaviour	Demeanour; planning and preparation; physical defence	e.g., be nice not mean; always do your homework; go to fitness studio and hit back
Strategy outcomes and consequences		e.g., it is easier if you change school with friends; receiving a letter from the teacher
Discourse – contradictions and questionable usefulness of identified strategy outcomes		e.g., at the start talk a lot, no you need to be quiet and have a look first; hit back

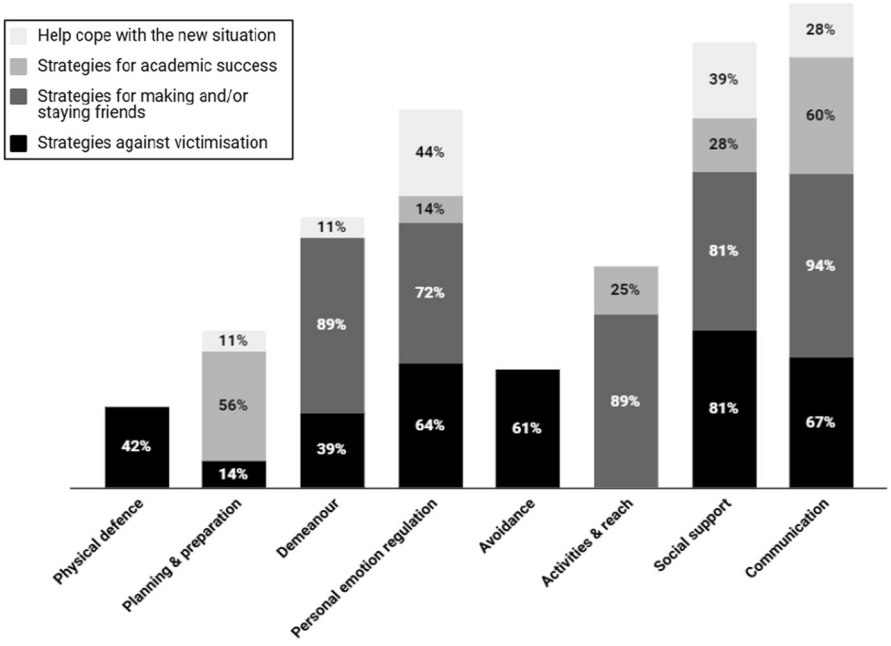

Fig. 2 Strategies used to combat specific fears. Percentages describe the amount of mentions on a workshop level

3 Results

3.1 Fears at school transition

For the higher-level fears, four general fears were identified (in order of most to least mentioned): (1) fear of peer victimisation; (2) fear of being alone in the new situation; (3) fear of victimisation by authority figures and (4) fear of academic failure (see Table 1; Fig. 1).

3.1.1 Fear of peer victimisation

Fear of peer victimisation was mentioned in all 52 workshops. The behaviour most frequently mentioned leading to peer victimisation was exclusion. Participants described the action of "being excluded" or "excluding" someone in itself, but also the feeling of "not being wanted" was reported. The word "bullying" was used as an umbrella term and if asked to specify, the participants responded by listing all other victimisation behaviours, for example, "being ridiculed", "made fun of", "hit", "being laughed about", "saying something bad about someone else" but also the frequency, that "this happens on one day and then also the next" and possible group dynamics, that "several target one". Participants described specific insults, among others concerning appearance, being "ugly", "too small", "too big", as well as ability, being "useless" and/or "stupid", but also described the fear of the "insults" and

"verbal attacks" themselves. Physical aggression was mainly described as the fear of being "hit" or "pushed" by others, such as "classmates" or "older children". Participants also described the fear of being ridiculed and laughed at by others. Reasons volunteered by the participants relating to these behaviours were "appearance", "stupid name" or "skin colour". Finally, the participants reported a fear of betrayal which contains behaviours such as not "keeping a secret", but also "pretending to be someone's friend", "taking advantage" and "using someone".

According to participants, the two main reasons that lead to peer victimisation have to do with appearances, such as "looking different" or being perceived as "ugly" and because the child is "new", "unknown" and therefore "unwanted".

3.1.2 Fear of being alone in a new situation

The fear of being alone in the new situation was mentioned in 39 of the 52 workshops. This fear encompasses several aspects. Participants described that a new situation can be daunting due to the uncertainty associated with the unknown situation and the unknown people with whom they shared it. The not knowing "how it is going to be", arriving at the "new class, everything is new" and not knowing "who the others are and how they are going to be". This "scary" situation is magnified if it must be managed with "no friends" or "not knowing anybody". However, even if the transition is or was undertaken with friends, the status of the friendship could change, one party could find new friends, abandoning or "excluding" the old friend. "Not finding any friends" or "losing old friends" are connected to adverse consequences, such as becoming an easy target that "others gang up" on or "laugh at", because they "have no friends". Similarly, to the reasons for victimisation, the reasons for not "finding friends" were connected to appearance, "because of her looks" and again merely because of "being new" and "unknown".

3.1.3 Fear of victimisation by authority figures

The "fear of victimisation by authority figures" was mentioned in 34 of the 52 workshops. Participants expressed this fear by describing the unknown entity that encompasses teachers and the head teacher. These could potentially be "very" or "too strict", or "mean and not nice". More specifically participants described that the teacher might be "against" the students, "insult" or "shout at them". This behaviour was described with and without context. The context in which teachers could react adversely were possible mistakes, such as not "bringing anything" to class, "being late" or related to unrealistic expectations towards pupils' abilities, for example, "tests that are too hard" or "too much homework".

3.1.4 Fear of academic failure

The fear of academic failure was mentioned in 23 of the 52 workshops. Participants reported that the unknown academic requirements of the new school could be fear-evoking as they could be too "difficult" and "complicated" in general. More specifically the "new subjects", "workload" and "homework" could be "too difficult", "too

much to cope with" or children would have to "study much more" in order to keep up. These were coupled with accounts of the fear of receiving "bad grades". The fear of failure was also connected to the fear of possibly "not being smart enough" or being perceived as the "most stupid" in class.

3.2 Strategies to overcome fears

Strategies derived from exercise two related largely to the fears identified in exercise one. However, here fears were grouped according to the overlap of the strategies described. The strategies pertaining to the fear of being alone in the new situation warranted a split into two separate clusters, that is, strategies to cope with the new situation and strategies for making or staying friends. The lack of strategies to combat the fear of victimisation by authority figures and their overlap with strategies to cope with peer victimisation warranted a combination of these two clusters, that is, strategies against victimisation (see Fig. 2). Figure 2 shows the overlap of strategies, as well as the number of mentions connected to specific fears in the workshops. For example, communication as a strategy (e.g., saying stop; asking them, why they do it) was mentioned in 67% of the workshops as a strategy against victimisation. Thus, grouping these mid-level clusters directly with corresponding fears led to repetition and overlaps. Therefore, five higher-level themes were identified for the second exercise. Three thematic themes distinguished between different types of strategies identified by pupils as relevant to the fears (i.e., enacting supportive networks, personal emotion regulation, controlling behaviour; see Table 2). In addition to these connected themes, two further themes were identified. One consists of strategy outcomes, that is, personal experiences with using specific strategies, and the second theme encompasses the discourse around contradictions and questionable usefulness of identified strategy outcomes (see Table 2).

3.2.1 Enacting supportive networks

The intended coping activity of enacting supportive networks contains: (i) communication strategies, (ii) seeking social support, (iii) outreach strategies, and (iv) avoidance of negative contacts. Although there is an obvious overlap between communication and the seeking of social support, as communication is a need to provide or receive social support. We have separated communication from seeking social support, as in our data communication refers to all forms of communication (e.g., saying hello, instigating a conversation), whereas the seeking of social support aims at acts and/or communication in relation to help provide support or help-seeking endeavours. Effective communication must therefore be considered a core element of strategies combatting a range of fears. Participants perceived communication as both facilitating the receipt of social support for themselves, as well as it being a way to provide social support to others. Alongside appropriate communication, the opportunity to spend time with someone engaging in activities that represent shared interests is a way to engage in positive contact and can ultimately lead to friendship among peers. On the other hand,

avoidance of negative social interactions, mainly in the context of victimisation, was also seen as necessary, perhaps reducing any unsupportive social ties. These components facilitate the enaction of supportive networks that help early adolescents overcome fears, worries, and adverse situations.

3.2.1.1 Communication As a key strategy, communication was mentioned as useful to combat all the above mentioned fears. The participants described rules of conversation, such as to "listen first and then talk", and "tell the truth, don't lie". It is a strategy to engage with others and to find friendships by "introducing oneself", "telling them about your hobbies", "asking about others' hobbies", and "exchanging information" in general, but also to "arrange playdates". It can also be used to create a light atmosphere by "telling jokes" or "complimenting someone". If there was a conflict it is important to "apologise", which can make the friendship stronger and maybe become "best friends".

Communication is used to self-disclose issues, such as fearing the "new situation", "tests", or "getting bullied". Intentions behind self-disclosure varied, sometimes it appeared that "talking about it already helps", but also actively asking for help from "teachers", "parents", or "their friend" when "struggling with the new situation" or when being "victimised". "By admitting fears to other children, they might then better understand". Further, communication was reported to being used to ask for "additional help", "practice sheets", upcoming "tests", and "test questions" when struggling with schoolwork.

Communication as a strategy to cope with victimisation, to stand up, engage, or challenge bullies, by asking them "why they are mean", "why they pick" on them, or tell them – teachers and peers who bully – "to be nice" or to "stop being mean". Participants also described strategies to appeal to children's perspective-taking when asking them to "cut it out" as "it wouldn't be nice for them either if they would be laughed at".

3.2.1.2 Social support Participants described communication as a strategy to facilitate the receipt of social support, by "talking about a difficult situation" or actively "asking for help". In the context of communication, support can be given in different forms, such as "tips". Parents and teachers can reassure children who fear the new school environment or requirements "that this is normal", that they "don't need to be scared", "it will be ok", and "other children will be nice". Parents can also comfort their children by assuring them that the teacher will be "nice" and not "too strict". Parents can encourage their children by telling them "that they will be fine" and that "they can do it".

Support can be shown through small acts of kindness, such as "sharing", "lending something", "sitting together", and "hugging". If a child is scared of a "test" or "homework", "friends" could "study together", or "cheer them up before the test", by telling them "you can do this". Children could also "tell a joke" to distract others from their fears. Receiving or providing social support without necessarily being asked is "a way to become friends" and this is why children have "to be very helpful at the start". For example, if distress is observed, "if

someone cries", children "should comfort" them, "for example, hugging and asking why that someone is crying and then maybe helping to solve the problem". Social support can be provided by including children, for example by "greeting them", "introducing" them to "their friends", "voting [them] into the sports team first" and "not avoiding" them. Participants advised children to "ask for help" or "tell someone" about being victimised. Social support strategies against victimisation included "defending each other", "settling", or "interrupting" an ongoing argument between others. Participants suggested the advantage of strength in numbers, such as belonging to a "friend group" that outnumbered the "group of bullies", or working on a "good class community" that can then "collectively stand up to the bullies".

Different sources of social support, that is, "friends", "families", and "teachers" were described in connection to specific fear-evoking situations. Figure 3 shows the frequency of the sources relating to those situations. In a school setting, participants reported that they depended most on their peers for social support in general, with the new situation, to help with academic success, as well as when finding or staying friends. Teachers are named as the most common source of social support when it comes to victimisation.

3.2.1.3 Activities and reach The cluster *activities and reach* includes suggestions about which children were a good choice to spend time with, where and when to spend time together, and what to do during this time. Participants advised others to approach or talk to specific groups of children that match their interests, personality, or status. These include "nice students", "someone who is also alone", "someone who is similar to you ", that is, also "anxious", also gets "bullied" or to try those who are "not so cool". If children cannot find friends in their own class, they might want to consider joining a "club", a "WhatsApp group", looking in a "different class", hanging out with "old friends", or with friends "made online", for example, while gaming.

To make friends, the participants recommended that after "getting to know each other", the children "increase contact". Time could be spent "in school", by "sitting next to each other"—"during class", "during breaks", or outside of school, but also

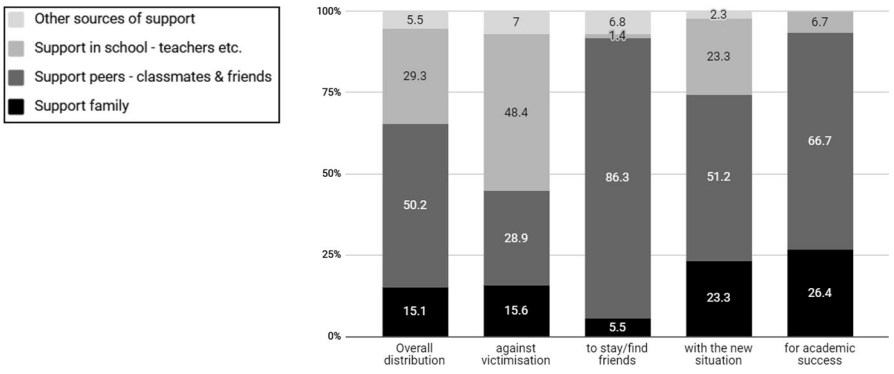

Fig. 3 Distribution of sources of social support for different strategy objectives

writing via "WhatsApp". Participants suggested to "find something in common" or generically describing "playing together". They also mentioned more specific activities, such as "sports", for example, "football", "hiking", or "cycling", as well as "playing on a computer", "listening to music", watching "YouTube videos together", "going out for a meal", or "shopping". Participants also mentioned the importance of "having fun" and "laughing together". Lastly, they also suggested "doing homework" or "studying together".

3.2.1.4 Avoidance This cluster encompasses recommendations on how to avoid negative social interactions or "bad people", such as "bullies", "mean classmates", or "older mean children". This can be done by "avoiding" the situation by trying not to run into "them" in the "hallway", the "classroom", the "yard" or "on the way to school", by for example "changing their route to school". Children are also advised to "stay away and not get involved in the fights" of others. For severe problems, children recommended more extreme forms of avoidance, such as "staying away from others altogether", "calling in sick", or ultimately "changing schools".

3.2.2 Personal emotion regulation

Emotion regulation can be interpersonal (McRae & Gross, 2020) and is highly interconnected with social support. However, we were able to clearly differentiate strategies in our data that describe the advice for children on how they could influence fears, worries, and external stressors. We term these strategies *personal emotion regulation*. Interpersonal emotion regulation was coded under *enacting supportive networks.* Among others, participants describe methods on how to influence their thinking or attitude, how to avoid, suppress, and change certain behaviour through emotion regulation, how to alter certain thoughts and accept seemingly unchangeable circumstances. These personal emotion regulation tips were given in order to achieve a mindset that allows children to cope with all the previously mentioned fears and worries and better their chances of making friends, coping with the new situation, academic requirements, and victimisation.

Participants described ways to influence emotions in connection with specific situations, but also in more general terms. The participants recommended regulating by avoiding "overthinking", "worrying too much", or "being scared". Participants described these behaviours in connection to several situations, such as "being scared of the teacher", of the "new situations", and being "shy" towards other children, but also in connection to victimisation. In order to achieve a more "relaxed" inner attitude, participants advised to give "it time", "wait and see", and "think positive". If a child does not make "friends immediately" participants recommended "not to worry" and be aware that it "takes time". Additionally, to boost "self-confidence", which participants highlighted as important in combating fears, participants consider it helpful if children would tell themselves that they are "going to do alright in the exam" or imagine a "good outcome". Humour was described as a way to regulate feelings; participants recommend trying to "see the funny side" of things if, for example, "something embarrassing happened" to them. In relation to victimisation, participants recommended regulating emotions and not letting "others get to them".

Children should rather "listen to their gut", "decide what is true" for themselves, "rise above" the insults, and not take things "too seriously". "You can be angry on the inside, but don't show it", under no circumstances should children "cry", otherwise they are perceived as "a weakling", proving the bully right. Instead, they must "keep it together" and "get on with things". If things get too much, participants advised children to "breath" and "distract themselves", for example, by playing with a "fidget spinner", with their "mobile phone", or doing "homework".

3.2.3 Controlling behaviour

Strategies related to children controlling their own behaviour address the manner and demeanour in which children 'should' behave around others in specific situations to combat several fears. It also incorporates actions around preparation and planning, most pertinent to securing academic success and physical defence, which only combats victimisation.

3.2.3.1 Demeanour—generous and polite By describing someone's demeanour, participants repeatedly identified behaviours that should be avoided, such as being "naughty", "bad", and "disrespectful", but also being "shy". Participants pointed out that if someone "is mean to others, one could understand why the others are mean" to them. Participants perceived children who are "too shy" in danger of not finding friends. Instead, they advise children to be "good", "nice", "kind", "friendly", "brave", and "open to new experiences". These behaviours could lead to gaining others' "trust", becoming "popular", and making others feel "comfortable" with them, but also becoming "more self-confident" themselves. If someone is "shy" the participants advised children to ask "someone if they want to be friends" or "say yes, not no", if asked to "join their game". Children should even "be nice" to those who "are mean" to them, in the hope that they will match this behaviour and "will be nice" to them in return. When asked to specify "being nice", participants described behaviours, such as "always smiling" and "helping others" by, for example, "lending things". Participants also included recommendations for what not to do, such as "lying", "giving telling offs", "making a sad face", "being sad", or "telling on others". In the classroom context participants advised to "always raise their hand" when they want to say something, not "shout out the answer". Participants also recommended "giving gifts" to "classmates" and "teachers" to get on their good side and make the teachers more amenable to them. The participants advised that another way to improve the relationship with their teacher is if the children always do their "homework and only get excellent grades". However, if a"mistake happens", the participants recommended "apologising" to the teacher and telling them that they "will get it right" next time.

3.2.3.2 Planning and preparation Planning ahead and preparing accordingly is recommended by participants. Children can do this by "acquiring information" about the new "school", their "teacher", and the "other children". To be on time, participants recommended "downloading a bus app". Participants considered it important to have

their things in order, for example, bring "their pencil case", as it is "irritating" if children always forget something and others "have to lend" them things. Preparation and planning are further considered essential to, for example, cope with academic requirements. Participants mentioned the need to "continuously study" and "practice", by, for example, "always doing their homework". Children should also find out about different study styles, by looking at "how other children study". Participants also recommended asking the teacher about upcoming "tests", specifically "when" they will be and "what questions" will be asked. If studying and information fail or prove insufficient, participants also described the possibility of getting "tutoring", asking classmates "to study with them", or finding "study games online". If children are getting victimised, participants recommend "gathering evidence", by, for example, "filming what happened" and then presenting it to the "teacher" or "head teacher".

3.2.3.3 Physical defence This cluster includes recommendations on how to physically defend oneself. Participants recommend "going to the fitness studio" to "gain muscles" or learning "self-defence" to "hit back". Hitting back is both mentioned as a preventive measure, to avoid a future victimisation, by establishing a certain standing, as well as a strategy to "not put up with" being victimised and to not being perceived as weak.

3.2.4 Strategy outcomes and consequences

In this section, strategies that have already been experienced by participants and that were described as helpful are depicted. These strategies reportedly eased the transition process for participants.

The elimination of unknown factors, by, for example, transitioning with friends, having information about the new school and the new teacher, as well as being supported in getting to know the new classmates are described. When asked, what helped or could help with the school transitions, one repeated reply was "friends". Some transitioned with friends, others tried to actively "convince" friends to go to the same school or selected their new school "because of their friends". Getting to know the school, by visiting their "open house" before starting was described as helpful. The same concept seems to apply to the main teacher. Participants reported it as helpful when they received a "letter from the teacher" before the start of the school year, as they then knew that (s)he was "nice". Starting the "first day" with a group assignment that facilitated and supported the children in getting to know everyone was described as "very nice". Teachers changing the seating arrangement was also described as helpful, as this gives pupils the chance of getting to know others within their class.

Creating classroom rules, defining which behaviour is expected, and establishing a framework for support appear to help settle in the class setting. The establishment of "classroom rules" was mentioned as helpful against victimisation. Participants described the existence of peer "arbiters", who offer low-threshold support with difficult situations before having to approach a teacher also as helpful. Another way to discuss problems was the establishment of a "post-box" where children could

deposit problems. The post-box should be "emptied once a week" and consequent "meetings" to discuss these are "arranged".

3.2.5 Discourse—contradictions and questionable usefulness of identified strategy outcomes

The classification of strategies described above relates to *what* participants suggest can or should be done to combat fears. However, the data also includes direct references to the usefulness and feasibility of these strategies. Furthermore, contradictory perspectives on strategy use are apparent from negative cases within the data and when participants were asked to further elaborate on specific strategies, this sometimes led to self-contradictions, which call into question strategies' usefulness or feasibility.

Participants generally agreed on the importance of communication. However, they disagreed on the pace at which to approach others and the boundaries of conversation. Some participants recommended "finding friends fast" and "talking a lot". However, other participants advised to "not talk too much" or "take time", "listen first and then decide" who is nice and who to be friends with. "Having fun together" and "laughing together" was described as helpful, however, the perception differed between the importance of making others laugh, by behaving like the "class clown" and being perceived as "ridiculous" and being "laughed at" and not "laughed with". Friends are named as a main source of social support; others described friends as a hindrance when trying to make new friends or described the betrayal when "losing friends" because they are "taken away" by other children. Participants described situations in which peer support can only go so far, even though getting "comforted" by a friend is nice, sometimes the only thing that helps is changing the reason why a child is getting bullied, for example, by buying new "glasses".

Participants described ways to engage or confront bullies verbally, by being "brave" and asking bullies questions concerning "why they are mean" or telling them "to stop". Other participants however recommend "not confronting" bullies, as this can be "too dangerous" or that "defending oneself" could make the situation "even worse". To minimise danger, participants recommended verbalising the need for support, by "asking"—peers, teachers, or parents—"for help". This however might lead to further "exclusions" as they could be perceived as a "tell-tale". Although participants suggested that children could tell their parents and teachers who could subsequently solve their problems, when asked to specify what teachers could do, participants responded with "teachers don't help", they "don't do anything", and that some "don't take problems seriously". Parents as a source of support are also described as questionable, as they sometimes "make it even worse" when they get involved. Participants described it as helpful if their peers or friends would just recognise victimisation and "react" in a supportive manner, without necessarily being asked. Children could, for example, approach the victim and tell them that they "shouldn't listen to what everyone was saying" or tell the bullies "to stop". Social support, such as "being kind" and "lending" things to others was named as a strategy for finding friends. However, if children are perceived as too disorganised and "constantly forget" something and need

the support of others, this is perceived as "annoying" and ultimately could hinder friendship. Unorganised children are also more likely to get into trouble and "shouted at" by teachers.

Instead of communication, some participants recommended "learning self-defence", "threaten", or physically "hitting" or "hitting back" when being victimised. However, when asked if "hitting" was a good strategy, participants acknowledged that it wasn't, while others advised against physical "fights" from the start. Further, instead of addressing victimisation, participants recommended "always staying close to a teacher", "calling in sick", "not going to school", or trying to "change school". Participants mentioned that it would be possible to "avoid others altogether", however, they also remarked that this would make it impossible "to find friends" and leave them "all alone".

There are conflicting reports concerning children's personal emotion regulation strategies. For example, when it comes to children's inner attitude towards challenging situations. Some participants recommended, "thinking good thoughts", "imagining the outcome" they "want", and avoiding "bad thoughts". Other participants recommended "always expect the worst", as then children could "be happy" if something "turns out better than expected". To cope with conflict, for example, when a child has been acting in a "nasty" way or an argument between friends, some participants mentioned, that it was important "not to endlessly harp on about it" and just "forget it". Other participants reported that it is hard to "forget everything" after a fight and to rather "sit down together" and "talk about what happened". Further participants reported that they are told – by teachers and parents – to ignore victimisation, however, participants explained that to "ignore something really bad" is often not possible.

Participants disagreed whether children should try and find lots of friends, by "saying who they are", "saying what they think", and "not changing for others", or to create a persona, by "adapting" behaviours and looks "to fit in". Some participants mentioned that children should "say what the others say", as "saying the wrong thing", "being the only one who doesn't like something", or "having the wrong haircut" could lead to a loss of "friendship" or that a child could "become an outsider". However, others mentioned that they needed to find friends "who like them as they are". Further, children should change, by, for example, "buying new clothes", "make up", "changing their hair colour", "having an operation", looking "stylish", and wearing "nice" age appropriate "clothes", which are not "childish"- "don't be ugly". It was described as important that children "always smile", always "be happy", and "not make a sad face". Participants further described that children should come across as "cool" and "show off" to make friends, at the same time others adviced to not overdo the "showing off" and "not act too cool" as that could put people off. Children should "study" and be "good in school", but also get "bad grades" on purpose and "cheat on tests", otherwise other children might laugh at them and they might be perceived as "eager beavers".

Some participants recommended trying to approach the "good students" first, however other participants advised being careful not to be friends with the "teacher's pet", as this could increase their chances for victimisation.

4 Discussion

In this study, a qualitative approach is applied, aiming to develop an in-depth understanding of early adolescents' perspective on fears in connection to school transitions and find which kind of coping strategies early adolescents intend to apply to overcome these prospective fears. In our opinion, this knowledge is highly relevant for the development of future interventions that aim at supporting a smooth transition, to try and increase early adolescents' social-emotional competencies and ultimately their well-being. So far, there is a shortage of in-depth analyses of young people's perspectives concerning fears and intended strategies to cope with these fears during school transition. In the present research, we collected qualitative data in 52 workshops with 896 students participating to examine early adolescents' perspectives on fears at school transition and their intended coping strategies to overcome these. We found four major fears among participants, that is, the fear of peer victimisation, the fear of being alone in the new situation, the fear of victimisation by authority figures, and the fear of academic failure. Connected to these fears three clusters of coping strategies identified by children were derived, that is, those that lead to the enaction of supportive networks, those that pertain to personal emotion regulation, and those that pertain to controlling one's own behaviour. Distinct from these strategies was a theme that identified strategy outcomes and consequences, encompassing personal experiences that were described as helpful. Finally, a cluster consisting of discourse around contradictions and questionable usefulness of identified strategy outcomes.

Transitions in general often cause emotional restructuring and most transitions are accompanied by fears (van Rens et al., 2018). Research has shown that children who were involved in bullying incidents previous to their transition from primary to secondary school, worried about the new school requirement (e.g., varying teachers), or worried about how and if they will find friends in the new class, experienced transition as more difficult (Evangelou et al., 2008). Similar to other studies, our results show that, although participants mention the fear of academic failure, the frequency of these mentions is lower compared to the more prevalent social fears, such as the fears of peer victimisation and being alone in the new situation (Zeedyk et al., 2003). Therefore, social fears, especially the fear of victimisation, which was mentioned in every workshop, appear to outweigh academic fears. Similar to other research, children believed that reasons for bullying are related to appearance and ethnicity (Mischel & Kitsantas, 2020). This may raise a concern for minority groups distinguished by their appearance, such as those with an immigrant background. Therefore, it may be essential to address prejudice in future anti-bullying interventions (Caravita et al., 2020). Literature has shown that being a bully, a victim, or both has a major negative and adverse impact on physical and psychological health (Moore et al., 2017), as well as on academic achievement and economic outcomes (Biswas et al., 2020), which can continue into adulthood (Brendgen & Poulin, 2018; Copeland et al., 2013). Most children who experienced and feared bullying subsequently struggled to make

or expand their circle of friends, which in turn had negative consequences for their self-esteem and confidence (Evangelou et al., 2008). Thus, a main focus of future interventions has to be on preventing bullying and breaking the cycle, by, for example, creating a supportive class environment that promotes acceptance and tolerance (Hajovsky et al., 2020), as well as supporting children not to be bystanders, but interfere in bullying (Voight & Nation, 2016).

The fear of being alone and not finding any friends was a fear also mentioned in every workshop. Supporting the relevance of our findings, a recent literature review has described the importance of positive relationships with peers during the transition to secondary school (Jindal-Snape et al., 2019). Further, our data highlights the critical role of peer relationships for young adolescents (Lyell et al., 2020; Mitic et al. 2021) in coping with adverse circumstances such as bullying or coping with a new situation. Just one friend, even if this friend is later lost, acts as protection against negative physiological and emotional repercussions caused by adverse social experiences (Adams et al., 2011; Lessard & Juvonen, 2018). Our findings underline the importance of good peer bonds, as they appear to increase resilience towards change, which contrasts the increased mental health issues and lower educational achievements that have been reported if the transition and bonding are experienced as negative (Jindal-Snape et al., 2019). Thus, a main focus of future interventions has to be the support of children to experience a positive transition process, by facilitating positive relationships (Boulton et al., 2011; Jindal-Snape et al., 2019). In our data, children reported that low threshold interventions, such as starting the school year with a group assignment, was helpful, facilitated and supported the children in getting to know their peers.

Participants did not only report the fear of peer victimisation, but also the fear of victimisation by authority figures. In the PISA assessment of students' well-being by the OECD (2017), one in five students reported several occasions in which they were treated unfairly by their teachers during the course of a month. Similar to our study, participants reported that teachers would ridicule or offend pupils in front of others and that they were worried about harsh discipline. There are very few recommendations on what children or parents can do if children experience victimisation by teachers. Research has shown that teachers' social and emotional skills and own well-being are directly linked to classroom atmosphere and teacher-student relationships, which consequently influences students' social, emotional, and academic outcomes (Jennings, 2015). As teachers are essential in helping children find their place by providing a positive environment (Coffey, 2013), it is essential to support and train teachers to work on their own social-emotional skills, their own well-being (Jennings, 2015), and learn to understand their own impact and the consequences of their actions through the eyes of their pupils (van Rens et al., 2018).

As reported earlier, the fear of academic failure was mentioned by participants, however, these mentions were far fewer than those describing social fears. Similar to other studies participants reported worries concerning cognitive adequacy, workload, and time needed to cope with the new workload, as well as subsequent fears of negative evaluations, feelings of inadequateness, and bad grades (van Rens et al., 2018). When considering the theory of social comparison (Festinger, 1954), which describes peoples' inert desire to evaluate their abilities relative to those of others,

it is not surprising that, especially in the school context, low academic achievement has been connected to lower self-worth and low self-esteem, which in turn is linked to internalising problems (Metsäpelto et al., 2020). Studies have shown that school transition is commonly followed by an academic dip, however, some pupils are in danger of poor academic progression and consequent disengagement (McGee 2004; van Rens et al., 2018). These findings are important, as children still appear to be ill-equipped when it comes to learning strategies and therefore should be supported in acquiring self-determined study approaches and self-directed learning (Kamenetz, 2010).

Young people's fears might be paramount for the development of adequate and effective coping strategies (Lucey & Reay, 2000). Adequate and effective coping strategies are of great importance when wanting to overcome obstacles connected to school transition constructively (Voight & Nation, 2016; Zammuner, 2019). Inadequate coping mechanisms are associated with detrimental consequences for future mental health and well-being (e.g., Copeland et al., 2013; Gini et al., 204), as well as poorer academic achievements (Pandey et al., 2018) and may lead to far-reaching adverse repercussions into adult life (McGee , 2004; Moore et al., 2017).

In order to gain a better understanding of the consequences of stress on mental health, well-being, and possible physiological repercussions, a comprehension of the structure of coping is essential (Stanisławski, 2019). The lack of agreement concerning this structure and coping nomenclature, with at least 100 different scientific classifications and additional 400 sub-categories described in the literature (Skinner et al., 2003), hinders concrete classifications. Due to this dissent, in the present study, we refrained from committing to one concrete classification but used a combination of classifications to better reflect our data. Participants were asked to describe intended coping strategies in the context of addressing the fears linked to school transition. However, participants voiced controversy and uncertainty about the usefulness of some of the intended strategies. The type of coping strategy chosen in a certain context depends on the specific situation (Murray-Harvey et al., 2012) as well as on the individual's cognitive, biological, emotional, and social development (Compas et al., 2001). Some of this dissent may be attributed to personal preferences or characteristics. Such differences have however been connected to difficulties in forming positive peer relationships and in coping with challenges associated with the new school system (West et al., 2010). The dissent identified in our data may indicate that, although children appear to possess some knowledge of and are capable of articulating specific strategies, they may still lack the ability to practically apply the named strategies adequately. In the following, strategies, controversies, and implications are discussed.

Participants described strategies on how to enact supportive networks. This cluster of strategies consisted of communication, social support, activities and reach, as well as avoidance of negative contacts. Communication skills were mentioned repeatedly, which have been described as essential for children's everyday life, as they influence social success and the quality of peer relationships during adolescents (Reed & Trumbo, 2020). Similar to other research, participants described the use of communication skills to convey ideas and described the ability to listen as important (Mancuso, 2008). Further, skills pertaining to friendship formation described in our

data were in accordance with friendship skills named in literature (e.g., introducing oneself, sharing and exchanging information; McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997; Öztürk & Kutlu, 2017). However, participants also repeatedly voiced uncertainties in connection with specific aspects concerning communication skills, especially in the context of friendship formation (e.g., how much information sharing is considered ok, when does it become too much) and victimisation (e.g., is verbally confronting a bully a good strategy or too dangerous). Therefore, in the context of victimisation instead of communication, participants advised avoiding bullies or situations in which bullying could happen. Considering the importance of communication skills for the social and emotional success of adolescence (Reed & Trumbo, 2020), these findings indicate that better communication strategies and individualised training in basic communication skills to support early adolescents to form positive relationships and feel able to negotiate in adverse situations may be needed (Tuttle et al., 2006). School-based mentoring relationships have been shown to have many benefits for the mentees, as well as the mentors. Youth mentors and mentees report to profit from the relationship, it furthers prosocial behaviour, communication skills, and better connections with school and teachers (Coyne-Foresi & Nowicki, 2021).

Similar to other studies, providing and receiving social support from different sources (i.e., peers, friends, family, and authority figures) was described as important in our data (van Rens et al., 2018; Voight & Nation, 2016). Participants appear aware of the positive consequences of peer support, as it was described to be a way to form friendships, as helpful against victimisation, to generally help cope with the new situation, as well as helpful for academic success – whereas the absence of friendship was connected to fear. Participants were vague when asked about specific support strategies (providing or receiving), which hints at awareness and ability to name and identify strategies. However, children seem less competent at engaging with these strategies on a practical level. This uncertainty might influence children's ability to interfere or help in bullying situations. Results of a previous study showed that almost half of the participating pupils stated that they would not interfere with ongoing bullying (Wachs et al., 2018). Further, the feeling of lacking the ability to cope with victimisation themselves may be a reason why pupils said they relied on support from others (e.g., teachers or parents) when confronted with victimisation. However, when further asked, this strategy appears also flawed in the participants' minds. As similar to other studies, participants were uncertain concerning the helpfulness of teachers' support (de Leeuw et al., 2018) or voiced worries about potential adverse consequences of parents' involvement when being victimised by peers or teachers (Camara et al., 2017). Therefore, adult intervention might only prove helpful, if the consulted adult is well-trained and has the ability to intervene in an effective way (Bauman et al., 2020). These findings could indicate that children lack confidence in their own support skills or question the abilities of their peers, teachers, or parents to support them. Hence, better training for teachers and parents on how to effectively support children (Bauman et al., 2020), as well as interventions for children on strengthening their own competencies to support their peers are urgently needed (Voight & Nation, 2016).

Participants mentioned self-regulation strategies as a way to cope with all of the fears mentioned in our data. This appears beneficial as a systematic review and

meta-analysis described positive effects of self-regulation-based interventions on health and behavioural outcomes, as well as a positive influence on academic outcomes in children and adolescents (Pandey et al., 2018). Further, greater competencies in self-regulation are connected to better social skills, healthier behaviour, better physical and mental health, and improved academic achievement, including math, literacy, letter naming, reading, and vocabulary, as well as fewer behavioural problems, conduct disorders, suspensions from school, and less substance abuse (Pandey et al., 2018). However, participants' comments revealed uncertainties concerning the use and effectiveness of self-regulation strategies. Participants reported strategies, such as changing school or hitting back when being victimised, which might indicate a lack of adequate coping strategies. Further, participants were critical of simplistic adult advice, (e.g., to just ignore victimisation). Such advice might even be connected to the earlier mentioned feeling of not receiving support from adults when experiencing victimisation (Bauman et al., 2020). Considering the positive impact of good personal emotion regulation strategies, instead of merely advising children to ignore or avoid adverse situations, children should be supported in developing better personal emotion regulation skills (Hinduja & Patchin, 2017; Pandey et al., 2018).

Participants described strategies aiming to control their behaviour to avoid negative outcomes, such as victimisation by teachers or their peers. As described by the social ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the classroom context is of great importance during this time, as time spend in this context has a major effect on adolescents' adjustments, development, and health risks. Thus, similar to other studies our data shows that positive and negative interactions with peers and teachers influence adolescents' social and personal evaluations (Bjärehed et al., 2021; Gini et al., 2014, 2018). Further, our data underlines adolescents' wish to fit in, belong to a peer group, and make friends at the time of school transition (van Rens et al., 2018). Some of the strategies mentioned in our data, such as the importance of always being nice or to always do what the other person wants, were connected to the fear of otherwise being rejected or losing friends. Further, adolescents describe ways to cope with negative evaluations, such as appearance teasing, (i.e., name calling or appearance-based rejection), which were identified to be common in this age group by other researchers (Schmidt & Martin, 2019). The strategies named in connection with changing their look and behaviour were voice the necessity of showing off, behaving like the class clown, getting a new haircut or colour, or buying new clothes and make up to better fit in. These suggestions may be linked to adolescents' focus of gaining and protecting a positive identity since adolescents consider it acceptable to refuse inclusion in their social group due to someone's perceived unattractiveness, especially in connection to their appearance (Leets & Sunwolf, 2005). Considering these findings, suggestions in our study advising "unattractive" children to have an operation in order to better fit in are unsurprising. The lack of strategies becomes further obvious when children advocate hitting, pushing, and fighting the bully to avoid future bullying. These findings are important, as they underline the preponderance of maladaptive coping strategies during this time of uncertainty during children's identity formation (Bauman et al., 2020; Leets & Sunwolf, 2005). It is therefore of great importance to support

children in developing personal and social skills, which can develop resilience (Gillison et al., 2008) and increase acceptance and tolerance. By improving the class climate (Voight & Nation, 2016), negative social and personal evaluations and possible moral disengagement could be reduced (Bjärehed et al., 2021).

Some of the strategies mentioned aiming to fit in with peers directly contradict participants' strategies to cope with the experience or fear of being treated unfairly by teachers (Gini et al., 2018). The strategies to create a positive teacher-student relationship included unrealistic suggestions such as always being on their best behaviour, always doing their homework, and always getting good grades. Children appear to struggle to reconcile the role of being a good student, avoiding confrontation with teachers, and the need to fit in with their peer group. Thus, raising teachers' awareness of children's struggles and individual differences (Evans et al., 2018), as well as supporting teachers and pupils in establishing positive relationships, could enhance the overall class climate and consequently create a sense of school belonging (Hajovsky et al., 2020). Such a feeling of support and belonging has been linked to students' persistence and engagement towards their academic work, and has been shown to reduce bullying, victimisation (Hajovsky et al., 2020; Voight & Nation, 2016), and loneliness among students (Morin, 2020). Better socio-emotional skills have many benefits for the current class climate and children's achievements (Pandey et al., 2018) and are linked to well-being and economic success in later life (Biswas et al., 2020; Brendgen & Poulin, 2018).

4.1 Strengths and limitations

An important strength of the present study was that our methods increased participants' willingness to engage and provided a holistic picture regarding fears and intended strategies via the triangulation of the different inquiry methods that were used in child-friendly workshops. Collecting brainstorming data on spread sheets and notepads in different settings (full class and self-selected small groups) was appealing and engaging for the participants. The methods of linking experiences or advice to fictional characters has its roots and a longstanding tradition in the therapeutic setting and are used to elicit information about subjective experiences, objectifying the issues or problems, and thereby safeguarding against adverse effects (Butler et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2021; Papouli, 2019). By using a third person stimulus, the participants can assume a distanced perspective, which allows to reflect on their own experiences separate from the self. Distancing is a productive perspective, as it allows for safe communication of negative experiences (Barbosa et al., 2017). The use of a narrative allows sharing of negative feelings without implicating oneself (Barbosa et al., 2017; Ruini et al., 2014). Self disclosure, large groups may hinder the elicitation of entirely honest reflections, as peer influences within the groups may skewer responses. Although the small, self-selected groups were intended to further open communication, this setting does not guarantee that all participants share personal experiences and opinion and therefore might be unable to capture all views.

We recognise that the directions provided in the workshop, that the character in the story "is a bit scared", was a leading question. However, as one aim of the study was to identify and understand prospective fears of the target population, we framed it like this. We are aware, that this question might suggest that all children experience fears, and although we understand that not all participants experience "own" fears around the time of school transition, we recognise school as a social context, in which it is very likely that participants without own fears will have witnessed fears among their peers. We find the perspective and advice of participants without fears relevant, especially considering their input in the strategies section, on how to avoid and cope with prospective fears, as well as on how to support peers who experience fears.

The sample consisted of children visiting the last year of primary school, as well as secondary school children, who just experienced the transition. We wanted to include different voices, as we are aware of different biases present in the slightly different age groups. Primary school students may fantasise about the upcoming change and their possible fears, whereas secondary school children may display memory biases. We did compare the different data sets but did not find differences between the expected and experienced fears or the strategy knowledge, and therefore combined the data sets.

The described methods led to a data set consisting of single words, shorter and longer phrases, as well as short conversations between participants – which has limited depth at an individual participant level. The way data was collected did not allow a gender specific effect or effects of other individual differences to be examined, but instead provided a holistic understanding of early adolescents' fears of school transition and their strategies to overcome these. Lastly, although the depth of responses was limited by the methods, the methods also allowed us to sample from a very large number of young people, increasing our confidence that the issues identified are important for young people of this age in Austria.

4.2 Conclusion

In conclusion, children in our study reported more social fears compared to academic fears about changing schools. Children seem reasonably competent at naming and identifying strategies, however, maladaptive strategies, as well as the controversies and uncertainties within the described strategies may indicate less competence in engaging with these strategies on a practical level. As these competencies are important for children's social-emotional well-being, physical and psychological health, as well as for their academic success, future interventions need to support children in learning how to enact effective coping strategies, considering their individual predispositions and preferences.

Acknowledgements The D.O.T. (Die Offene Tür—The Open Door) team of co-investigators—Adam Barnard (playwright and theatre director), João Dias (computer scientist), Marija Mitic (medical doctor), Beate Schrank (practicing & research psychiatrist) and Kate Woodcock (research psychologist)—grew during a sandpit event organised by the Open Innovation Center of Ludwig Boltzmann Society and facilitated by Know Innovation. The team would like to thank these organisations for their role in its formation. D.O.T team work is jointly conceived and led by the co-investigators. The team sees this

as a fully meaningful interdisciplinary collaboration. The authors would also like to acknowledge Sylvia Dörfler and Anna-Lena Mädge for supporting the data collection procedures and organisational collaboration with schools. We want to thank all workshop assistants, Lower Austrian schools, children and adult stakeholders who supported the workshop activities.

Funding Open access funding provided by Karl Landsteiner Privatuniversität für Gesundheitswissenschaften. This research was supported by the Ludwig Boltzmann Society Open Innovation for Science and Karl Landsteiner University of Heath Sciences.

Data availability Data analytic methods are available in the results section of the manuscript, including identified themes and subthemes, sample citations and coding tree. The original data and workshop manual are availabe at a repository (https://osf.io/avtw2/ and https://osf.io/2u7r4/).

Declarations

Conflict of interest We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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