Can the 'FRIENDS for Life' Programme Support Secondary School Transition in Ireland? A Longitudinal Mixed Methods Study

Eileen Devitt
NEPS
September 2016

Outline of Presentation

- **Theoretical framework** for research

- **Research design and methodology**

- **Results**

- **Implications** for research and practice

- **Conclusions**

Context: School Transition as a Risk Factor

- **Secondary school- the highest stressor in Young People's (YP) lives** (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012).

- School transition **concerns typically are interpersonal, academic and organizational/environmental.**

- **School transition concerns unaddressed can lead to a negative trajectory of school refusal or early school leaving** (Smyth et al., 2004).

- Research suggests that **children feel unprepared for school transition** (Evangelou et al. 2008). In an Irish study Nolan (2012) reports that students wish teachers would '*prepare*' them more.

- Making a **successful school transition is seen as one priority and a positive outcome** for CYP (Department of Children & Youth Affairs: *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, 2014).

Transition and an Opportunity to develop Resilience

- School transition can be viewed within a '**Risk and Resilience Ecological Framework'** (Fraser, 2011)

- **Resilience** is '*positive adaptation despite adversity'* (Luthar, 2006).

- Rutter (1987, 1990, 2012) suggests **protective mechanisms and processes** can mediate risk factors and are key **turning points** to **reduce the risk impact**, decrease **negative chain of reactions**, develop **self-esteem** and open up **opportunities.**

- This can be **applied to external school transition processes and practices.**

Resiliency Promoting Processes aligned to School Transition

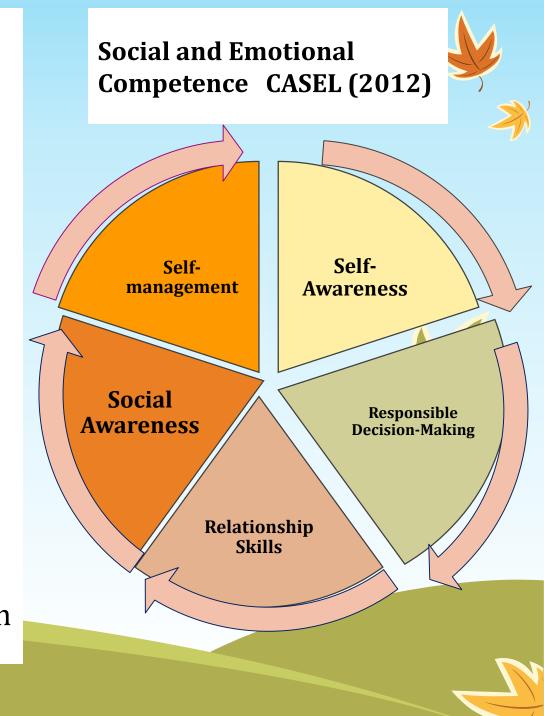|	
Decreasing the number of risk factors.	Sharing information, personal, social and academic about vulnerable children across both primary and secondary school to ensure supports are in place.
Developing self-esteem in order to increase a positive chain of reactions.	Developing secure attachments and positive relationships.
Opening up of opportunities to increase confidence and develop life skills.	Offering a range of teaching and learning approaches.

School Transition and Social and Emotional Competence (SEC)

- Rutter (2013) **internal mental features** in resilience promotion-planning, self-reflection and taking action.

- Resilience can be **promoted through developing competences.**

- Bailey and Baines (2012) **being supported** (social awareness, relationship management) and **in control of their own emotions** (self-awareness and self-management) were important factors to progress well academically in school during school transition

Social and Emotional Competence   CASEL (2012)

Self-management

Self-Awareness

Social Awareness

Responsible Decision-Making

Relationship Skills

School Transition Practices

- **Little research on *specific* programmes** aimed at school transition in the literature. INTO (2008) many interventions operate in an "*ad hoc*" basis.

- Systematic review of school transition literature for current study found only **seven peer-reviewed programmes in the international literature** that are sequenced, active, focused and explicit, thus replicable in an Irish context.

- **One based on effective treatment for anxiety**, i.e. Cognitive Behavioural Theory (Peterson et al. 2009). The Coping Power (Lockman & Wells, 2002)has 34 session and 26 parents sessions, therefore not sustainable for the current research.

- However, '*FRIENDS for Life'(FFL)* **based on CBT and SEC, addresses risk and resilience factors for successful school transition is a a more feasible and practical option.**

'FRIENDS for Life' and School Transition

- 'FRIENDS for Life' (Barrett, 2012) has been **used to help with school adjustment** *following* **school transition** (Rodgers & Dunsmuir, 2013; Henefer & Rodgers, 2013). **No research prior to or during school transition.** School transition has **been recommended as an area of future development in the FFL research literature** (Essau et al., 2012)

- Existing FFL **literature has concentrated on risk factors, such as anxiety and there are fewer in developing competencies and there is little published qualitative research.**

- A systematic review using a Weight of Evidence protocol (Gough, 2011) suggested **small to medium effect sizes for FFL to develop competencies**, however, the **'real world' significance has been large** in reducing anxiety and the potential to develop competencies (Weare & Nind, 2011).

Research Aims

- **To explore changes over time for Sixth Class students prior to and after their transition to First Year in secondary school in Ireland** following the FFL cognitive behavioural-based intervention. Specifically, in terms of the **programme's measurable effect in reducing school transition concerns, anxieties and improving social and emotional competencies (SEC).**

- To **explore how the students, teachers and parents experienced the programme process** in terms of **reducing school transition concerns** generally and improving SEC specifically.

- To **consider where and how the programme's skills are used longitudinally** at 6 and 12 months follow up for a subgroup of students following school transition.

Methodology

- **A concurrent study to the NEPS national study (**Rutledge et al., 2016)

- **N=51 sixth class students**, n=27 male), high percentage EAL and low SES, across two schools.

- **N=22 from NEPS study** (teacher led, FFL) and an **additional class of 29** students added for additional power (psychologist led)

- **N=6 teachers and 31 parents** also participated.

- A **Mixed Methods Explanatory Sequential Design** (Creswell & Planto-Clark, 2011)
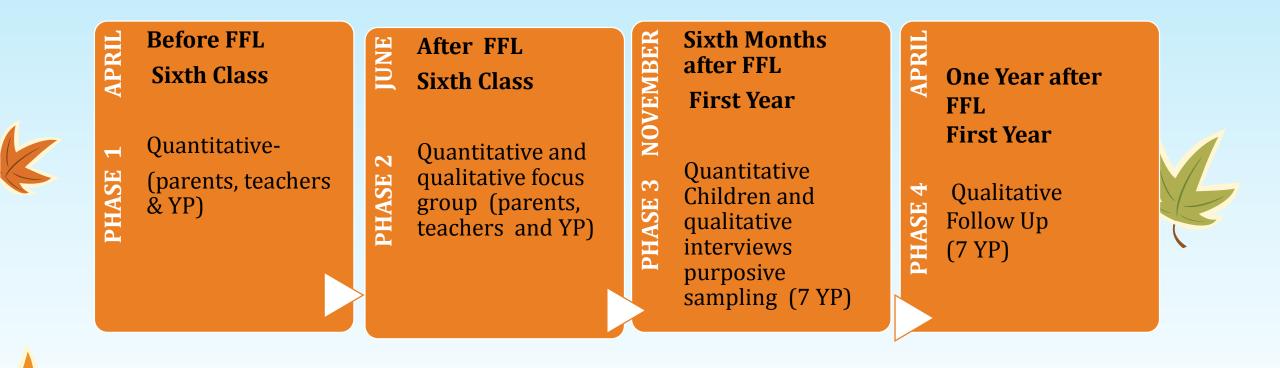
Quantitative Measures

Risk

- *School Concerns Questionnaire* (SCQ);
- *The Spence Anxiety Questionnaire for Children (SCAS-C).*

Resilience

- *The Coping Efficacy Scale* (CES
- B*eck Self-Concept Inventory for Youth* (BSC-Y)
- *The Behaviour and Emotional Rating Scale, Second Edition: Youth Rating Scale*: BERS- 2: YRS
- *The Devereux Student Strengths Assessment: (DESSA)*
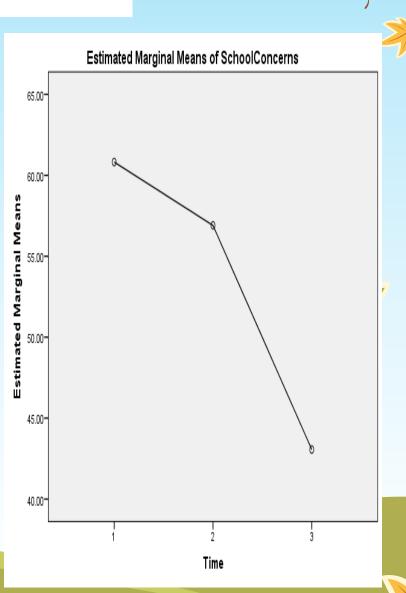- Ambiguous Situation Vignettes for Children (Barrett et al. 2000)

Research Phases and Design

PHASE 1 · **APRIL**

Before FFL

Sixth Class

Quantitative- (parents, teachers & YP)

PHASE 2 · **JUNE**

After FFL

Sixth Class

Quantitative and qualitative focus group (parents, teachers and YP)

PHASE 3 · **NOVEMBER**

Sixth Months after FFL

First Year

Quantitative Children and qualitative interviews purposive sampling (7 YP)

PHASE 4 · **APRIL**

One Year after FFL

First Year

Qualitative Follow Up (7 YP)

Use of Mixed ANOVAs and t-tests for Quantitative Analysis and the Framework Method (Pope et al., 2000) for Qualitative Analysis.

Results: Risk Factors: School Concerns (SCQ) and Anxiety (SCAS-C)

- There was **no difference between the effectiveness of the two intervention groups** (teacher v's psychologist).

- There was **a main effect for time for school concerns** (Wilks' Lambda=.562, F(2, 32)=12.45, p=<.001, np^2 =.438

- There was a **significant main effect for time for anxiety** also (Wilks' Lambda = .724, F(2, 38)=.7.244, p<.005, np^2 =.276).

- **Post hoc t-tests** indicated significant reductions occurred between Time 2 and Time 3 for school concerns and from Time 1 to Time 2 and maintained for Time 3 for anxiety.   Small effect size calculated

Estimated Marginal Means of SchoolConcerns

Social and Emotional Competence

Child Measures: BERS

- **Children:**

  There were no statistically significant differences over time for the majority of subscales, with the exceptions of *'Intrapersonal'* and *'Interpersonal Strength'*. Contrary to expectations intrapersonal (within self) scores decreased significantly over time.
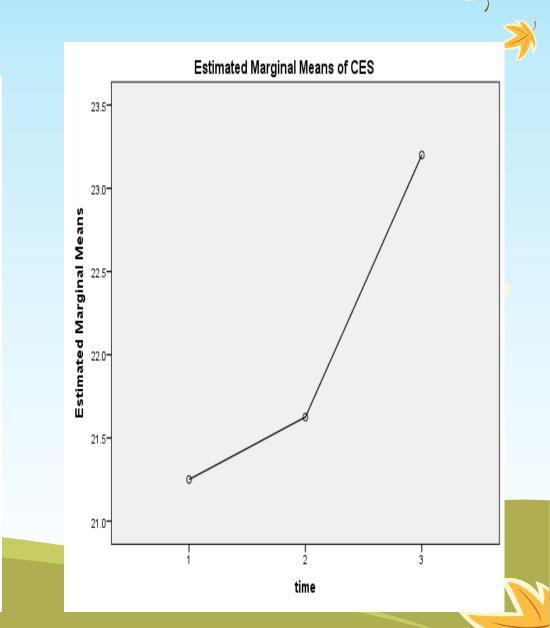
Parent and Teacher Measures: DESSA

Parents: Using paired sample t tests no statistically significant differences were found.

Teachers: Statistically significant results were found in the overall DESSA *'Student Strength'* score and more specifically in terms of *'Optimistic thinking, 'Social Awareness', 'Self-Awareness' and 'Relationship Skills'* and indicated small effect sizes overall (d=0.15-0.21).
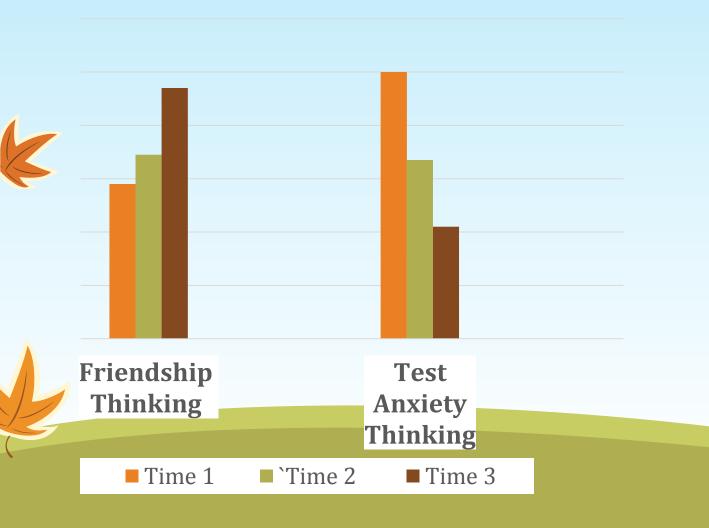
Coping Skills

- There was **no main effect for group but a significant main effect for time** (Wilks' Lambda=.746, F(2,37)=7.11, p<.005, np^2 =.254).

- Post hoc t-tests revealed no significant changes occurred between Time 1 and Time 2 (t(43)=-1.013, p=.317). **However significant changes occurred between post intervention at Time 2 and at 6 months follow up, at Time 3** (t(40)=-2.64, p<.05) and also from Time 1 to Time 3 (t(41)=-3.85, p<.001).

- Calculated **effect sizes were small** (d=0.15-0.27).

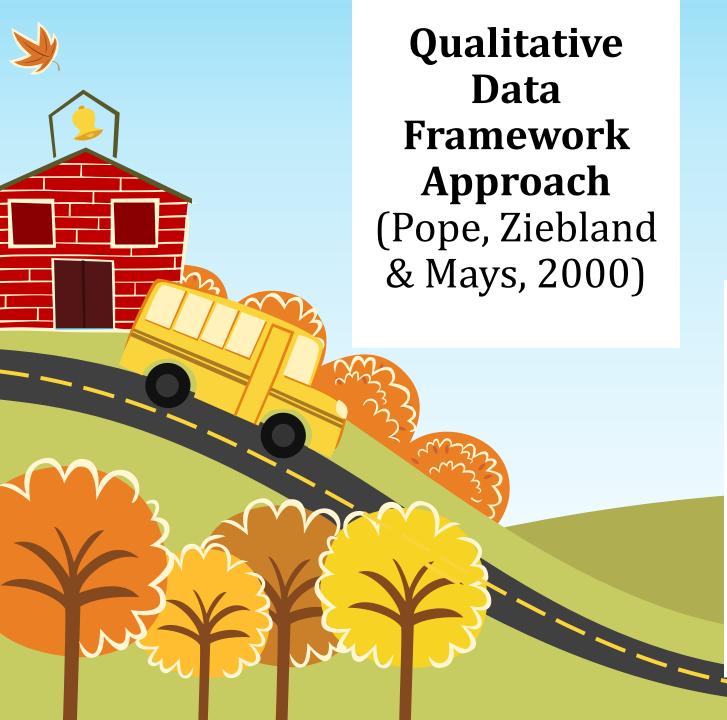Estimated Marginal Means of CES

Changes in Thinking and Behaving: Vignettes

- Two scenarios using vignettes, regarding friendships and test anxiety thoughts and behaviour.

- Changes in positive thinking from Time 1 to Time 3.

- **Friendships more positive, Test situation less positive.**

Friendship Thinking

Test Anxiety Thinking

Time 1   `Time 2   Time 3

Qualitative Data Framework Approach
(Pope, Ziebland & Mays, 2000)

- **Familiarisation**
- **Identifying a thematic framework**
- **Indexing**
- **Charting**
- **Mapping and Interpretation**

Data
- Focus Groups, Interviews and Open-ended question on Social Validity Questionnaire (SVQ)

Qualitative Data

What are the perceptions of children, parents and teachers of the FFL programme, specifically in relation to transition?
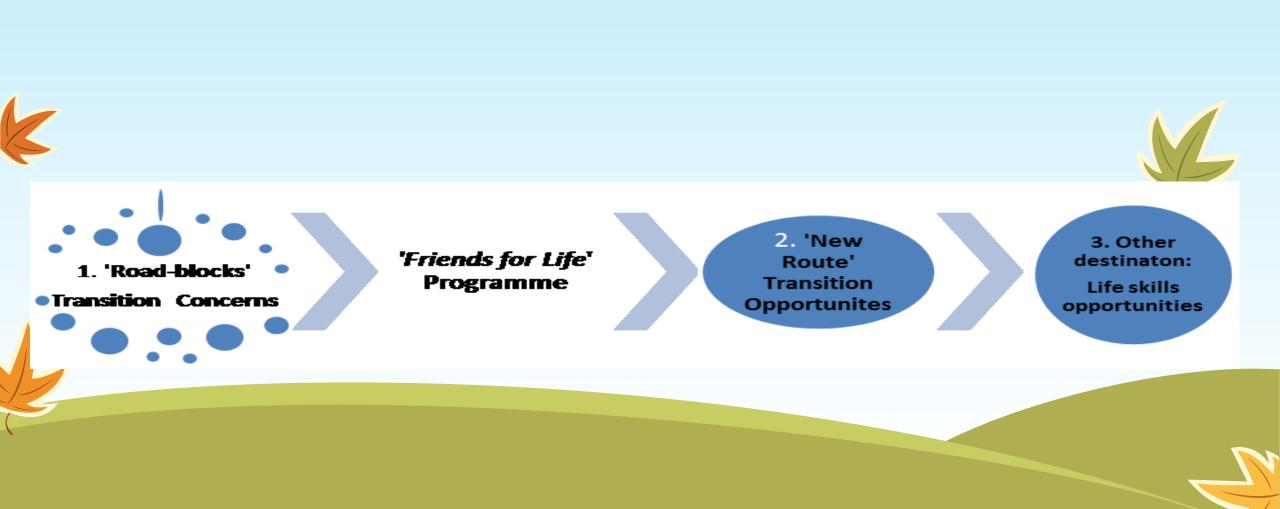
1. 'Road-blocks'
Transition Concerns

'Friends for Life'
Programme

2. 'New Route'
Transition
Opportunites

Roadblocks and New Route

Academic
- Tests and study
- Homework
- Specific subjects

Organisational/ Environmental
- Locker
- Size of school
- The timetable
- Being late

Interpersonal
- Making new friends
- Losing old friends
- Being bullied

- *"It taught me to get ready for secondary school….Not to panic if I can't read the timetable or if I don't know what I have for homework just ask somebody. I'm more confident going in now and when I thought of FRIENDS for Life, it helped me relax and calm down " (FGC.1)*

- *"Say if you have a test coming up and you're like 'oh no I don't want to learn', just use FRIENDS for Life and you just say to yourself 'I can do it' and I will do good in my test" (FGC.1)*

- *"If you go to secondary school, with FRIENDS for Life you will cope with bullying" (FGC.2)*

- *"Coping with lockers, being bullied, changing subjects, not getting on with teachers, finding the work too difficult, doing a study timetable, managing tests" (T.3).*

- *"My son found this programme very beneficial and he feels it has helped him transition into secondary school in September, and also he has an idea what to expect" (SVQP).*

What are the perceptions of children, parents and teachers on the FFL programme in relation to other areas of their lives?

Life Skills Opportunities

| Microsystem	Source	Illustrating Quote
Child	**Teacher** **(focus group)**	*"She was afraid of water so she wouldn't go in, so I walked her down, eventually she said I don't like boats. I said to her how can we switch that round? She said I hate water, but at least I'm near the water." (T.3)*
Family	**Parent** **(focus group)**	*"I was looking forward to Thursday 'FRIENDS for Life' night and I used to flick through the book, I really enjoyed that book" (P.1)*
School	**Teacher** **(focus group)**	*"I think that had a knock on affect at the graduation last night. They knew that what they were doing was going to be appreciated and respected by the people around them. Friends transferred from the class room context to a different context which is a huge thing". (T.3).*
Community	**Child** **(Interview)**	*"It was funny 'cause my friend, before a big football tournament in the bus, he brought in the FRIENDS for Life breathing before he went on the bus, he was telling everyone about the pizza massage and everything. (C.1)*
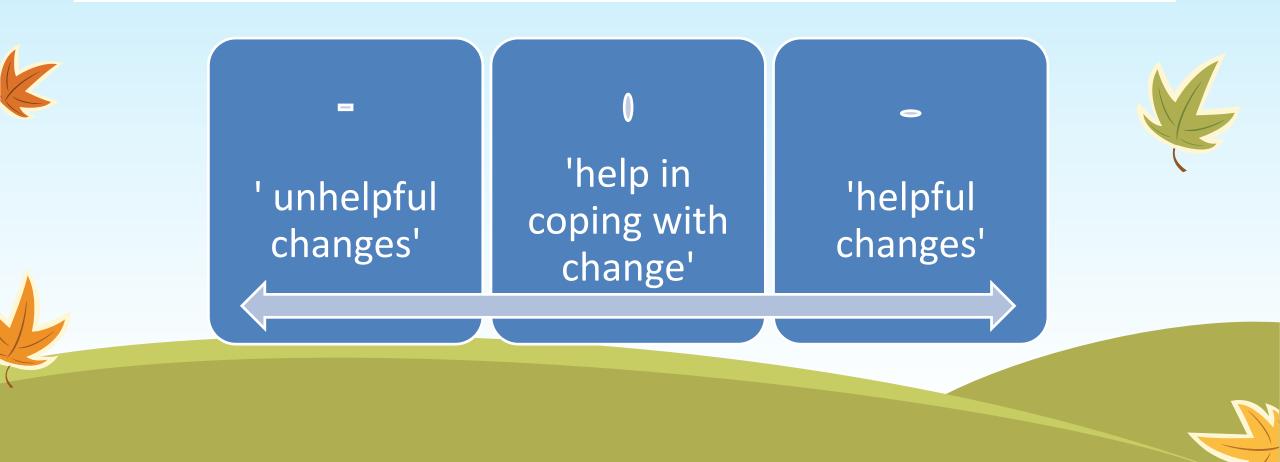
Life Skill Opportunities for the Future

Child	Focus group 1	*"It will help me how to cope when I'm feeling stressed in the future, how to overcome it in small little baby steps. (FGC.1)*
	Social Validity Questionnaire Child	*"If I hit a rough spot anywhere in life the 'FRIENDS for Life' coping step plan will help me cope"(SVQC)* *"FRIENDS for Life is going to help me in finding a job"(SVC)*
Parent	Social Validity Questionnaire Parent	*"He may well have learnt skills that he may use in the future"(SVP)*
Teacher	Social Validity Questionnaire	*"It is education for life" (SVQT)*

What changes are reported by children, parents and teachers attributed to the FFL programme over the course of school transition?

' unhelpful changes'

'help in coping with change'

'helpful changes'

Helpful Changes - Development of Social and Emotional Competence

Self –Awareness	*Even one of the mothers was like; I can't believe how much she has come out of herself this year. It was just for her to be able to go, well 'I don't like that, I'm good at that'. A few people that came out of their shell"* (T.3).
Social Awareness	*"For me it helped very much, now I know what to do if I'm in a tough situation or if someone else is in a tough situation and helping them in all".(C.5).*
Relationship Skills	*"Yeah, I felt at the end of the class, that my class were getting on so well and they were a class that would have been having a lot of ups and downs. But, they all helped each other along…"(T.3).*
Self-Management	*"I'm less aggressive" (SVC)* *"To stay calm and not lash out at your friends if they do something wrong, you can just take deep breaths".*
Responsible Decision Making	*"Six months ago I would have fought back in a fight""I use the coping step plan to start buckling down because of the study" (C.2)*

Other Changes

- **Unhelpful Changes**

Following school transition, some children reported using the FFL skills in some unhelpful ways,

"*When my friend fights, like I said the last time cause we always fight where I'm from cause usually I'm a 'hot-head' but I relax and I take breathers and it helps me fight like that*" (C.3).

- "*Am, when we were running I got caught running in the gym and I had to kind of get out of it like, so I use the programme trying to make myself innocent*" (C.4).

- **Coping with Change**

Some '*turning points*' or '*steeling effects*' for children after school transition were reported

"*Yeah so like coming into school I didn't realise half the stuff that would be happening... so I got an awful fright .... it all came down on top of me one day but I coped with it eventually using breathing, coping step plans and green thoughts*" (C.1)

"*Before the programme it would be everyone else was wrong....The first thing he said was 'Mam, I lost the head' and he was so disappointed in himself.... I thought it was a good thing that he was becoming more mature and responsible about it like*". (P.1).

What aspects of the FFL programme are used immediately after the programme and how do a subgroup of students continue to use in secondary school at 6 and 12 months following the intervention?

SVQ Question			
Coping	58%		
Relaxation	75%		
Breathing	67%		
Helpful Thoughts	58%		
Changing Negative to positive thoughts	46%		
Step Plan	46%		
Five block problem solving	33%		
Recognising feelings in self	42%		
Recognising feelings in others	38%		
Help others feel good	**50%**		

Specific strategies from FFL used for School Transition (reported immediately after the programme)

You could use a coping step plan for tests and if you wanted to try something new but you were afraid" (FGC.1)

Maybe if I'm stressed with a load of homework I might get my Mom to give me a pizza massage" (FGC.2).

"The red and green thoughts especially and a coping step plan with lockers, being bullied, changing subjects, not getting on with a teacher, finding work too difficult, doing a study timetable, managing tests "(T.1)

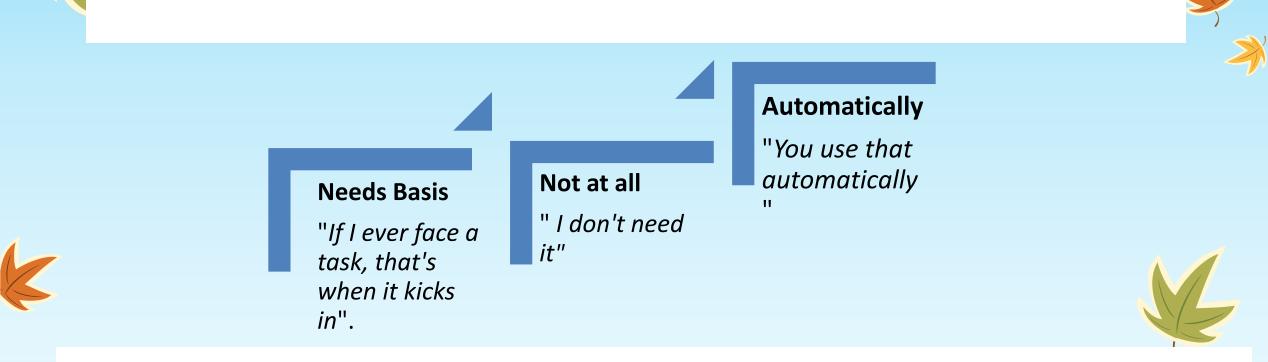# Specific Strategies used for School Transition

- **At Six Months**

- *"The coping step plan is a big one for me and always with my other friends, I always used the pizza massage, cause they love it especially my parents, they love the pizza massage, they're the two main things"* (C.1).

- "The green thoughts, 'I can do it, I won't fail it', 'I'll try my best' and just tell myself that 'I did study for them so I'll do what I can'" (C.5).

- "Well this month is the toughest cause of all the tests and I'm thinking I'm going to fail them so I'm doing a thought challenger and turning that into a green thought" (C.3).

- **At 12 Months**

- *"Recently studying for a test, just breaking down the study really- what to study and when to study" (C.1)*

- *" Like instead of saying 'I can't do it, I'm going to fail, change that to a green thought and say 'I'm not going to fail", I studied, I can try my best" (C.5).*

- *"I just breath in and out and calm down" (C.7).*
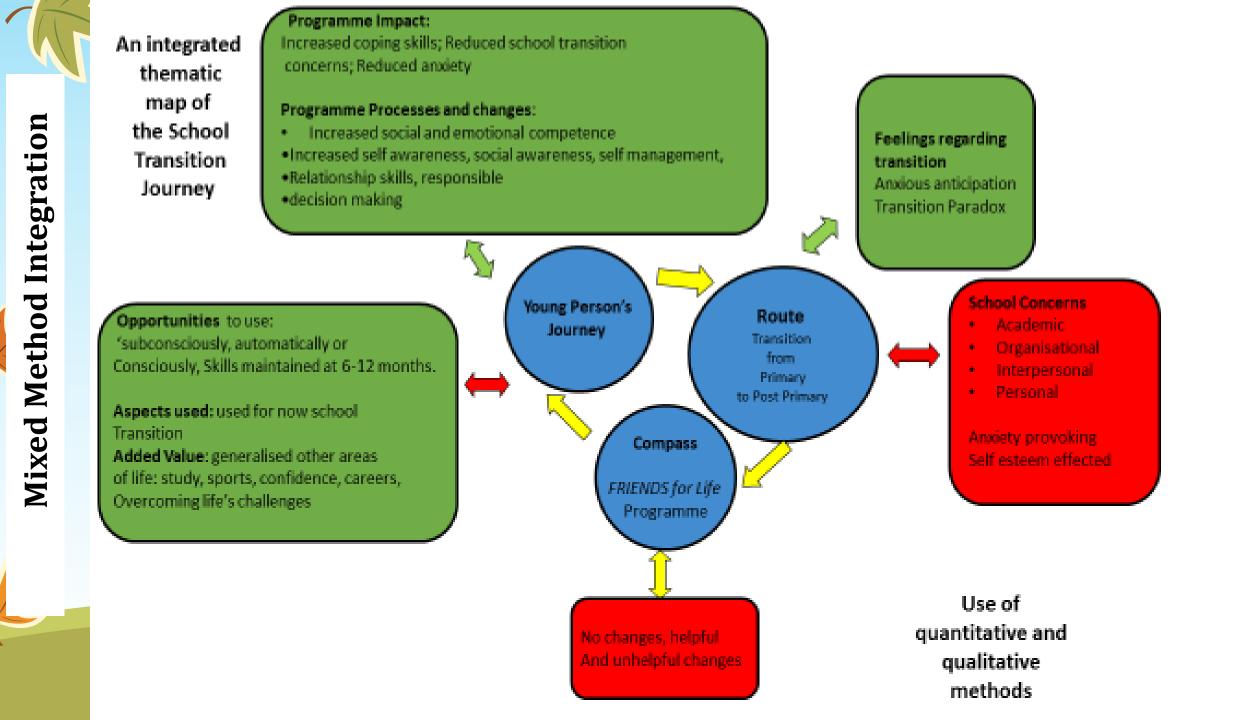
How the FFL programme was used over school transition

Needs Basis

"*If I ever face a task, that's when it kicks in*".

Not at all

" *I don't need it*"

Automatically

"*You use that automatically*"

" *See it depends on how often I face tasks, I'd say at least once a week-it depends on how many tasks I face, and if I ever face them that's when it kicks in*" (C.1).

"*It's really whenever I need them, whenever I have a problem like, that's when you use it*" (C.2).

"*I did at the start of the year, like your red thoughts and your green thoughts but now I'm just so used to it, I've made so many friends and I don't think about it anymore*" (C.2).

Mixed Method Integration

An integrated thematic map of the School Transition Journey

Programme Impact:
Increased coping skills; Reduced school transition concerns; Reduced anxiety

Programme Processes and changes:
• Increased social and emotional competence
• Increased self awareness, social awareness, self management,
• Relationship skills, responsible
• decision making

Feelings regarding transition
Anxious anticipation
Transition Paradox

Opportunities to use:
'subconsciously, automatically or Consciously, Skills maintained at 6-12 months.

Aspects used: used for now school Transition
Added Value: generalised other areas of life: study, sports, confidence, careers, Overcoming life's challenges

Young Person's Journey

Route
Transition from Primary to Post Primary

School Concerns
• Academic
• Organisational
• Interpersonal
• Personal

Anxiety provoking
Self esteem effected

Compass
FRIENDS for Life Programme

No changes, helpful And unhelpful changes

Use of quantitative and qualitative methods

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

- **Strengths**

- Study of impact and process

- Focus on competencies as well as risk factors

- Teacher and psychologist as leaders

- Longitudinal

- Treatment fidelity and little attrition

- Linking of theory to research questions

- Mixed-methods and integration piece

- Breadth and depth

- **Limitations**

- Lack of quantitative follow up, particularly in relation to SEC questionnaires

- Lower SES higher EAL than average

- Parent participation

- Demographic detail lacking in part

- Number of measures

- Lack of control group

- Limitations of a concurrent study to a larger NEPS study

Study Implications

- Coaching and consultation role of EP for successful school transition using FFL programme

- Use of programme for different developmental ages and transition points

- Differentiated for specific populations

- School bullying intervention

- School refusal behaviour

- Mentoring: teaching children as FFL coaches

- School connectedness

- Synergising effect of adult resilience programme

- Impact on school attainments

- Short course for Junior Cert

- Need for more qualitative studies

- Implementation Science and scaling up: Need to determine school readiness, planning, implementation and sustainability.

- EP unique role and contribution

Added value of FFL 'real world impact'

Macro-system -Society

- Supports aims of the Government's aims for children and young people (DCYA, 2014) and Wellbeing Guidelines (DES, 2015), including school transition.
- Dissemination of FFL research findings to the peer-reviewed community (Educational & Child Psychology)
- Potential Reach: 50 FFL teacher training delivered annual by NEPS psychologists, have the potential 1250 teachers and 25, 000 children

Micro-system Child

To reduce school transition concerns and anxiety (risk) to increase social and emotional competencies and resilience universally

- Developing confidence,
- Generalising to sports, bullying, studying situations.

Micro-system Teacher, Parent, School

- Developing parents' and teachers' own resilience
- Developing relationships with child, parent and teachers
- Supports aims of schools' SPHE plan
- Developing mentoring *'peer to peer'* mentoring programmes within schools

Key Messages

FRIENDS for Life can help with the school transition journey and it has the '*added value*' that skills learnt can be generalised to other areas of life and the lives of others.

While '*effect sizes*' may be small in statistical terms the, the **real world impact can be large**.

Psychologists in NEPS are in a unique position to train teachers and promote the FFL programme which is based on strong psychological theory and research across all developmental ages and transition points.

To conclude with a participant's view:

"I think that this programme, giving them the tools that they can use, helping them realise that it is within their capability to cope with school transition, they have to know that they have it within themselves" (T.5).

Thank you

More info:

Eileen_devitt@education.gov.ie