

# Transition Experiences of Maldivian Students: Moving from GCSEs to Advanced Level Studies

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## Abstract

The aim of this narrative enquiry was to explore the transition experiences of Maldivian teenagers as they transition from GCSE to Advanced Level Studies. Ten recent alumni of a higher secondary school in Male' were selected based on purposive sampling to represent a wide range of experiences and challenges. Data was collected in 2018, using one on one, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions with boys and girls separately. This paper chronicles their transition experiences in four inter-dependent domains (1) preparedness, (2) fitting in, making friends and belonging, (3) personal grit, and formal and informal support available to meet the higher demands of advanced level studies, and (4) intense pressures the students experienced due to the social structural forces and inequalities which underline their higher secondary education experience as they work toward competitive scholarships for higher studies. Poverty, living away from home communities, lack of effective communication between parents and children, and lack of supportive mentoring relationships between teachers and students negatively influenced the transition experience. Poverty, lack of time management and independent study skills were the most important factors in failure to succeed. The findings of this study have implications for policy level change to ensure higher secondary school students are provided the support required to succeed in their studies.

**Keywords:** Student transition, student equity, transition pedagogy, academic and professional partnership

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## Introduction

Completion of compulsory education in Grade Ten, at the age of sixteen, is a critical transition point for Maldivian students. They can either choose to join the labour force, attend a vocational training college, enrol in a foundation course in a higher education institution or complete two years of higher secondary education. Students who enrol in a higher secondary school are mostly high achievers with at least five passes in their GCSEs (Ministry of Education, 2019a). Education Sector Plan for 2019- 2023 indicates that the low enrolment in Advanced Level Studies is a national concern (Ministry of Education, 2019b). According to school statistical data published annually by Ministry of Education, only 45 percent of lower secondary school students enrol into the higher secondary level and only 32% sat the Advanced Level examinations (Ministry of Education, 2018).

There are currently only 59 schools in the Maldives that provide education from Grade 1 to 12 while there are 195 schools that provide lower secondary education (Ministry of Education, 2018). As students transition from lower secondary to a higher secondary school environment, they are not only confronted with the higher demands of Advanced Level curriculum and assessment; majority of the students have to make new friends, meet new teachers, adjust to new learning environments, and for those coming from other islands, also get used to their new host families, new homes and a new life away from parents, friends and the home island community. Some of the students work part-time to meet personal costs and to alleviate family poverty while studying (UNICEF Maldives & National Bureau of Statistics, 2018)

There are very few opportunities available in the Maldives to study for a Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics or Arts Subject at tertiary level. Thus, students are under extreme pressure to perform to a high standard in Advanced Level examinations, and compete for the few scholarships available to study abroad. The student loans available for tertiary education have very high interest rates. Even though, parents spend a considerable amount of their income to provide private home tuition to ensure students succeed, the very low household spending of 0.5% of GDP on education, in comparison to spending by most of the other countries (Ministry of Education, 2019a) indicate that many parents cannot afford to pay for their children's tertiary education. Hence, students and their families make significant sacrifices to enrol in higher secondary education. Failure to transition successfully can have significant impact on higher education opportunities, on future career choices and on health and well-being (Ministry of Education, 2019a).

The main objective of this research was to investigate the factors that influence Maldivian students' experiences of transition from lower secondary to higher secondary school. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the design of effective transition programmes in the Maldivian higher secondary school context through understanding the students' experiences and challenges they encounter in this critical stage of school transition.

## Literature review

Perry and Allard (2003) describe transition as a series of familiar or unfamiliar transformations, where someone moves from one stage to another or from the known to the unknown whilst facing cognitive and social challenges. Tate and Hopkins (2013) explained educational transitioning as a journey of small steps, as students transition 'into' school, 'through' school and 'out' of the school. They described transitioning as a continuum of experiences that enable students to succeed in their academic and life goals. Gale and Parker (2014) suggested three conceptions of transitions as (1) induction, (2) development, and (3) becoming. They consider these three conceptions as essential to develop the student's "capability to navigate change" (p.737). They also defined transitioning as developing capabilities of mobility, aspiration and voice.

Bridges (2009) categorises the process of transition into three distinctive stages: (1) ending, losing, letting go of the old, comfortable and the familiar; (2) the neutral zone: students are in between the old and new ways confronted with unfamiliar and challenging experiences. At this stage, students can find it hard to accept the change and the new change can subject them into confusion, uncertainty, low motivation and vulnerability to negative influences unless they are prepared and supported to make the adjustment to the new changes. (3) The new beginning: students begin to accept the change and look forward to a new beginning. Here social influences of parent, teacher and peer relationships, support and communication can lead to development of self-esteem, motivation and willingness to be open to new academic challenges.

Higher secondary students are entering late adolescent stage of development where they develop their own identity, independence, and autonomy as they explore vocational goals and values (McLeod, 2013). Several factors influence successful transition at this age: students' developmental stage, academic perception, self-esteem, gender, adjustment, preparedness, motivation, students' attitude towards study behaviour, teachers' expectations and support (Waters, et al, 2012). Other factors include the influence of peers (McLeod,

2013; Symonds, 2015) and family perceptions, choices, involvement, support and expectations (Chen & Gregory, 2009; Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Young people engage in heightened sensation, novelty seeking and look for acceptance from peers, as they negotiate a successful transition from a natal dependence stage of life to independence as an adult (Steinberg, 2008). While many adolescents navigate this transition successfully, some engage in harmful, dangerous and reckless risk taking as they seek approval and acceptance of peers. They can also be prone to impulsiveness, and outrageous decision making since the part of the brain for executive functioning, the prefrontal cortex, is not fully developed in adolescent to young adults (Freeman, Dirks & Weinberg, 2020).

It can be expected that some of the students who are making this critical transition may also have experienced adverse childhood experiences and stresses such as abuse, neglect, parental illness, parental divorce or incarceration of a parent which can increase their vulnerability to health risk behaviours, bullying and victimisation. Even those young people who may not have borne adverse childhood experiences can experience significant stress from academic, social and economic pressures encountered during higher secondary education. Ongoing academic and life stresses can cause serious long-term mental health issues including anxiety, and depression (Pescoe, Hetrick & Parker, 2019).

Significant stress can be caused by social pressures of moving away from home, living without parents and sharing living space with strangers (Sungkok et al., 2017) and juggling social demands which are highly influenced by adolescents desire to form social identity and their need to belong to social groups and obtain peer recognition. Students with weak social support networks are at higher risk for mental health issues (Freeman, Dirks & Weinberg, 2020).

Additional to child-family connection and conflict, the support available to the child from parents, siblings, extended family, and friends; school characteristics; peer characteristics; socio-cultural expectations and norms can influence school transition experiences (Steinberg & Morris, 2001, Waters et al, 2015). Since adolescent brain is developing and plastic, adolescents are at a dynamic age for brain training and therapy for health promotion to overcome mental health issues and to prevent risky behaviours (Chung & Hudziak, 2017). Provision of education to develop skills and capability to cope with academic-related and other stresses have shown to improve academic achievement and decrease health risks (Perry, et al., 2017; Pescoe, Hetrick & Parker, 2019).

## Research Methods

Using purposive sampling techniques, ten alumni (four female and six male students) of a higher secondary school, who attended the school in 2017 were selected for this qualitative research. Ethical approval was obtained before the study and informed consent for the research was obtained from the students, parents and the school prior to data collection process.

The main sources of data for this study were semi-structured individual interviews of 45 minutes duration each and focus group discussions of similar duration which were conducted bilingually in English and Dhivehi. I have drawn on insider knowledge (Edwards, 2002) of the research school and of the Maldivian higher secondary education context for interpretive phenomenological analysis of data. While direct quotations from the students have been used extensively in the results section, student names have been anonymised. A qualitative data analysis (QDA) approach using NVivo 12 software was combined with a narrative mode of analyses to identify emerging themes based on Polkinghorne (1995), to produce narratives of students' actions, experiences and events which defined their transition journeys.

## Results and Discussion

The students who participated in this study achieved highly in their lower secondary school examinations and were proud to have enrolled in the higher secondary school. Most of the participants completed school successfully meeting the distinct social and academic demands, making new friends, becoming independent learners and obtaining the grades they needed for higher education. However, without personal willingness, adjustment and academic preparedness to meet the rigor of upper secondary curriculum; transition was extremely difficult for some of the students. Furthermore, high levels of anxiety and stress from failing grades, damaging peer interactions, and unfulfilling interactions with parents, guardians or teachers indirectly contributed to unsatisfactory transitions, and academic failure.

Many students shared their experiences of transition as an academically challenging journey because of the demands and pressure from teachers and the new curriculum. Some of the students stated that they did not receive enough support from teachers to cope with the academic demands. The students were hesitant to approach for help. When they asked for help, teachers used the excuse of time constraints and told them to address gaps in

learning by themselves. Students spoke emotionally about unresponsive and unhelpful teachers and the negative impact on their academic achievement, health and well-being. A single, consistently supportive adult figure in the school together with active social and academic support provided within a structured framework can make a huge difference in enduring and overcoming negative experiences (Tinto, 2006).

Thematic analysis of data showed that the students' narratives fall into four broad categories: pre-entry preparedness, identity and belonging, positive coping strategies, and negative socio-economic and academic stressors. Direct quotes with interpretation have been included to enable for student voice, while highlighting the emerging issues which are relevant to the Maldivian higher secondary education context.

### 1. Preparedness for entry into higher secondary education

Under this theme, students talked about a) lack of career guidance and career education, b) orientation and induction programmes and c) the need for academic preparedness.

#### a) Career Education and Guidance

*I joined A' level not because I wanted to... Maldivian mind set is, it has to be primary, lower secondary and then to higher secondary, and then higher studies, come back and work, it's like a template but I am somebody who doesn't like this template... (Man, IN)*

*I actually had no idea what the A' levels were going to be like, I didn't have much interest to do A' levels... I actually wanted to skip A' levels and do a foundation for degree but my family forced me into it, because one of my brothers did A' levels and got first place, and he even got a scholarship... A' level was really crucial for me to get a scholarship because my family would not be able to financially support it or send me abroad. (Samaah, IN).*

*I actually went to high school because my mom wanted me to go and the biggest thing that was always in my head was, I had to do this for my mom... my mom came to Male' and spent three years begging her parents to let her go to school... but, her parents didn't let her go, she*

*can't even speak English, so I always thought it was my duty, as her daughter to make up for things that she couldn't, I wanted to show her that I was going to live the life that she wanted for herself. (Anju, FGD).*

*Even though, my parents insisted on studying, I couldn't do it, because, I am not the studious type, I can't sit in front of a book and study... I failed in two subjects, that was really bad...I really regretted...because I didn't get good results and I knew that with those results, I can't get into university, I can't be successful, I can't get the job I wanted. (Maan, FGD)*

Young people's wishes for self-determination and independence were often incongruent with parents' aspirations for their children's futures and their employability. Since, parental involvement, and support can positively impact on young people's education and entry into the workforce, both lower and higher secondary schools need to provide parents access to career fairs, employer/sectoral events, expert presentations on labour market, employability skills, apprenticeships, vocational pathways, etc. (Lynch, Sims, & Wespieser, 2015). These sessions need to focus on developing parents' knowledge, skills and ability to promote children's autonomy, agency, career self-efficacy and the education and training options available to make sound decisions (Chen & Gregory, 2009). Career guidance sessions need to be designed for collaborative learning and for times when parents can attend. Since adolescents seek separation from family, they need non-familial adults including teachers, career advisors and experts from different disciplines to provide guidance and insight into the adult world as they transition to full independence (Eccles, 2004).

Even though, currently academic pathways lead to better chances of achieving desired career goals for high attaining students than by following vocational pathways, government policy needs to ensure availability of alternative career pathways that value work based learning, training, apprenticeships, vocational qualifications and successful transitioning into further vocational training or academic qualifications to meet the needs of a diverse youth population (Lynch, Sims, & Wespieser, 2015). Career advisers need professional training in career guidance to ensure students' aptitudes, talents and learning/training pathways are well matched to ensure there is no negative impact on future life chances.

#### **b) Orientation and induction programmes for students**

Students highlighted how vital friendships and knowledge of their new teachers was for adjusting successfully to the new school setting. Setting up an older–

peer or buddy programme online for pre-entry transition can enable for social connection, and peer mentoring and support.

Furthermore, short video clips can be made by current students to describe the challenges they face and how to solve problems, with advice on how to seek help. Similar videos can be made by current students introducing school staff and student council members to newcomers before they arrive at the school. These can be uploaded onto the school website (Mann, 2020).

*I was with the same batch for 10 years in the island and I was just mentally preparing myself to meet new people. (Ram, FGD)*

*I felt like crying, I didn't have any friends, no one I was familiar with, I was the only student there from my island. (Minnu, IN)*

*I was with the same people... so we knew whom to not mess with, not to hang out with, so, everyone came with labels. It was really easy to navigate...because we had guideposts there, telling that, this is what you have to do, these are the teachers you have to look out for. (Zaan, FGD)*

*We had a Viber group with everybody going to the same high school, and it was needed because, rather than going into a class with all strangers, it would make us acquainted with each other, so when I went into the class first day itself, I knew there would be people I know. (Maan, FGD)*

### **c) Induction and academic preparedness**

Students had no pre-entry transitioning preparation for the challenging demands of advanced level studies, and the extensive academic workload including homework. Lack of preparedness resulted in achieving low grades during the transition which in turn decreased the motivation towards performing well at school. Students described the high school transition period as a fragile time of doubled academics, which demand students of exhaustive preparedness in order to cope with the change.

The students need to have planned pre-entry transition support during the last six months of their final year in lower secondary education, to mediate the transition to the higher cognitive demands of A Level studies and to prepare them for living away from parents and the home community. These can be



weekly after school online virtual classroom lessons and experiences, access to online and offline learning resources, access to online social resources for students and families and on campus orientations and lessons.

Induction activities can be designed to teach students advanced reading skills, mathematical skills, academic research skills, independent study skills, organizational skills, task management and time management skills, soft skills including leadership, communication, team work, critical thinking and problem solving; and non-cognitive skills such as attentiveness, decision making, seeking help, and self-discipline (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, Hearon, 2015).

Regular close monitoring of progress and early targeted intervention are needed to prevent dropping out.

*I felt that in O' level, it was so much spoon-feeding; and pushing in A' levels, they (teachers) were like you can do it by yourself... It was sort of like a race, we were trying to keep up with the teachers and teachers were keeping up with the time and we were all running... teachers were trying to hold our hand and drag us (Anju, FGD).*

*In O' level, teachers were teaching very relaxingly, but in high school as there was little time, teachers would force a lot of content into a single period, so, as the days went on, it started to become very tiring. I had to learn a lot of content at once, and, even though the quantity of subjects decreased in A' level, I didn't feel anything was less, because a single subject would have a lot of content (Samaah, FGD).*

*I was overwhelmed with the huge content, I didn't have a sister or brother figure in my life who told me this or that, so I was basically on my own and I didn't know what to expect so when the time progressed, I was very overwhelmed and because of that I just started declining academically (Anju, FGD).*

*I couldn't keep up with what was going on at school because they taught really fast...I didn't want to study, why bother when I can't keep up, then I started to sleep in the class a lot. I didn't pay attention, I used to scribble in my own book, or listen to the songs using headset, and in my own world, and finally, I had to drop out (Faiz. IN).*

## 2. Identity and belonging

Under the theme of identity and belonging, students talked about a) fitting in, and making friends, and b) impact of peer influences on academic achievement.

### a) Fitting in, and making friends

Students spent a considerable amount of energy and time forming friendship bonds at the start of new school. With the right support and guidance, moving to a new school is also an opportunity to form new relationships among peers who have similar interests and goals. Support from friends and family can also act as a buffer against stressful experiences of transition. However, new friendships can also cause additional stress (Evans, Borriello & Field, 2018).

*I had this lonely bubble around me...I thought I would live with it and then at high school, I somehow accidentally got friends and I started talking to people (Ithu, IN).*

*My first priority here was to feel normal again, so part of feeling normal was finding friends...finding friends was the most important thing (Anju, IN)*

### b) Peer influences and impact on academic achievement

Maldivian parents and or guardians tend to do less monitoring of adolescents social behaviour or discontinue monitoring their behaviour when they complete Grade Ten, at an age when most of the adolescents will begin to initiate sexual activity.

*My best friend and I applied for the same subjects ..., it was very exciting to be in the same class as him because I left an all-girls school in Ninth Grade and I went to a very strict school later, so when I came I was like 'aaaaah boys', not boys like in the sense of sex but wow I can talk to boys and I was really excited to be with him because I hadn't been around with friends a lot (Anju, FGD).*

*During my 11th Grade, I went to a relationship with someone who was older than me. That was the very first time I had that kind of a relationship. I was not at all open to that in my lower secondary. So, I think it was peer*

*pressure that made me to get involved in it...I think that he was a bit controlling...I was kind of distracted and couldn't give much importance to my studies...in Twelfth Grade we broke up... I was prepared, but was not able to show my potential during the exam (Minnu, IN).*

*In Grade Eleven, I had a friend...we really bonded well and that ended up in dating...and actually she helped me in studies, I was not a studious one, but she guided me to study (Maan, IN).*

A single, formal or informal, supportive interpersonal relationship with a peer, a teacher or a caregiving adult can enable a student to be more committed and achieve scholastically, develop resilience, and achieve social and emotional wellbeing (Tinto, 2006).

Parental influence can mitigate peer influence by making risky behaviours less attractive. Parents trained on effective parental communication about sexual risks and how to avoid them, can thereby, delay adolescents' sexual initiation, promote use of protective measures and prevent adverse health outcomes. Sexuality education also needs to be provided by schools and by children's paediatricians to ensure children receive medically and technically accurate and unbiased education (Breuner & Mattson, 2016). Some school based sexuality education needs to be given online to ensure privacy and anonymity (King, Burke, & Gates, 2020).

Social acceptance is one of the paramount factors influencing adolescents' transition experience. Since health behaviours are influenced by students' beliefs about peers' experiences, and young people spend six to nine hours a day online, health promoting behaviours can be taught online, using a private, anonymous viewable format with information on positive peer relationships, problem solving skills, recognition of risky behaviours, and avoidance strategies.

### **3. Coping Strategies**

Among positive coping strategies, students identified a) self-directed learning and grit, b) teachers' high expectations and support, c) private tuition, and d) stress relieving activities.

### a) Self-directed learning and grit for academic achievement

Self-directed learning (SDL) is described by Knowles (1975, page 18), as “a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes”.

*In Grade 12, I enjoyed the studies better. Because of that I studied more, I paid attention in class and I made sure to clarify my doubts every week... I struggled with physics at grade 11, so, I started tuition and by tuition, I didn't mean go there and waste time, I actually tried to put an effort and try to understand what is being taught to clarify my doubts (Zaan, FGD).*

### b) Setting high expectations and encouragement

Students' attitudes and attributes of independent study skills, determination, autonomy, motivation, taking responsibility for own learning, self-discipline, resilience, inquisitiveness, together with teachers' high expectations and support can enable for self-directed learning and academic achievement (Du Toit-Brits, 2019).

*I worked hard, but in my final year, Mathematics exam, I scored a B. This was the first time I had scored a 'B' in a subject excluding Dhivehi. ...I vowed to myself that I would show my Mathematics teacher that I refuse to accept a 'B' and will go above and beyond, to show him how good I really am at Mathematics. So, I ended up doing one mathematics past paper every single day, sometimes even two until I had attempted every single past paper available from every exam board that was relevant to our syllabus, until I had absolutely no more mathematics papers to do (Ayaan, IN).*

When teachers develop positive relationships, give encouragement and set high expectations, students rise to the expectations. Teachers can make the process of transition easier for students by maintaining a close and supportive relationship with their students in the new school environment (Benner & Graham, 2011; Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009).

### c) Stress alleviation strategies

Schools can provide a safe setting to learn coping strategies and encourage students to be creative and innovative in their learning process.

*I wrote a lot and my entire wall was full of notes...I even made very pretty diagrams; I remember I made an embroidery of the stages of mitosis. (Anju, FGD).*

Expressive writing (Pennebaker, & Chung, 2011); music therapy (Carr & Wigram, 2009), and art therapy (French & Klein, 2012) are also strategies that can help to alleviate stress from academic pressure and socio-emotional issues.

## 4. Negative stressors

Some of the stressors that have a negative impact on student achievement, highlighted by the students were a) helicopter parenting, b) negative communication by parents and guardians, c) absence of parents, d) absence of counselling and therapy support, e) lack of financial support for impoverished students, f) lack of support and encouragement by teachers, g) excessive homework, h) inability to engage in extracurricular activities due to lack of time management skills, and i) extreme pressure to achieve perfect academic scores. The number of negative stressors highlighted by students identifies challenges faced by students in making a successful transition to academic achievement in higher secondary education.

### a) Helicopter parenting

Over parenting or helicopter parenting during adolescence can be detrimental to students' health and wellbeing and their academic outcomes as children of this age focus on developing autonomy, competence and relatedness to their social environment (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013)

Some parents forced their children to take private tuitions while depriving children of their leisure activities such as playtime, watching television and extra-curricular activities at school. Such direct and indirect punishments could make high school students lose their interest in studies, as indicated by Deb et al (2015), who argued that extensive parental pressure without involvement of

the children in the decision making process can decrease students' academic achievement.

*I was involved in a lot of activities at high school unlike my lower secondary, so I went home late after school sometimes, so, my mom thought I was just hanging out and enjoying with my friends with the excuse that I was participating in school activities, so, at some point she stopped me from going in to school activities and forced me to go to tuitions and then I used to ditch all the tuitions and go back to school activities (Maan, FGD).*

*I was actually reluctant to take tuitions, but my family forced me to take tuitions, and I used to trick them... I used to skip all of the classes. I just took 2 or 3 tuitions (Samaah, FGD).*

According to Deb et al (2015), some parents may pressure their children to achieve higher if the parents were poor even if their children did not have the drive or the aptitude. Some of the negative impact of failure by parents to listen to their children's needs and the one way communication of telling the children to study constantly can be overwhelming for the students. A coping mechanism can be loss of interest in studies.

*They were expecting me to get a scholarship and I achieved a low result in first semester, I felt a closing in pressure from all the sides, family, peers, basically everyone. It was challenging, because I lost a lot of classes... Because when you're in the high school, you cannot expect to have similar results all along, it would fluctuate... but parents won't understand it (Samaah, FGD).*

#### **b) Negative communication by guardians and parents**

When the parents or guardians sometimes fail to understand when the child requires help and criticise them unnecessarily, this makes them extremely demotivated and their self-esteem suffers.

Parents and guardians need support and training on the detrimental effects of one way communication and trained on how to have non-threatening, supportive, dialogic conversations with their adolescent children.

According to Irfan and Hussain (2014), parental communication with children can take different forms, where any sort of negative communication would affect children's performance negatively.

*My dad was the kind of person who just says negative things all the time, he thought that was motivation, ...he thought he was doing the right thing, but he wasn't...and with my mom, I didn't want to disappoint her and with my dad, I didn't want to make him angry, I was scared of him, ... I just didn't want to disappoint them. (Anju, FGD)*

### **c) Absence of parents**

Absence of parents can be overwhelming for children, living away from home, as explained by this child, living with an older brother's family.

*When I told my brother, I needed tuitions because I couldn't cope, he was like, why would I need tuition? ...I actually asked when I couldn't cope. I was very hesitant to ask even, because no one in my family got tuition even in A' levels. When I started tuitions it was too late, I could have coped if I had started earlier... I had asked for tuition, because according to them I couldn't manage my own studies and then I got criticised for it every day. Not kidding, every day. Every day, when my brother picks me up and when he drops me home, I gets criticised for like thirty minutes in the traffic...I sat there, and tried not to cry, but then I got used to it, I had to get prepared for the mental talk every day, pressure was really high, it was the only conversation we had, honestly...' (Ithu, FGD).*

### **d) Absence of counselling, and therapeutic support**

Regular exercise, yoga (Karmalkar & Vaidya, 2017), mindfulness meditation (Khusid, & Vythilingam, 2016), and spiritual activities can be self-management and resilience building strategies for reducing stress, anxiety and depression. These activities can be introduced to students during orientation, as therapeutic activities to help with stress management, relaxation and sleep.

Students can be regularly reminded of school counselling services through easily and frequently available mini-video clip advertisements of students sharing their experiences of school counselling services and how that can benefit.

Counselling services can support and guide students to deal with family ill-health, elderly care, bereavement, divorce, substance abuse, poverty, homelessness and fear of failure to meet family expectations.

*I struggled with sleeping...because the social situation was there in my mind every day, like what is going to happen today? ...and also my grades, like how did I get a C in physics and how do I get an A\* in Islam, those thoughts were there and it really did bother me, made me question that am I a good person, am I doing the right thing?*

*At one point, I really did think of going to therapy, I don't like to label myself depressed, but...I really didn't feel like studying...I did not feel like coming to school... they just made me feel that way, I was in the center of the stupid controversy, then I really wanted to get out of the situation (Zaan, IN).*

#### **e) Lack of financial support for impoverished students**

Impoverished students need access to school based scholarships so that they can complete their studies free from financial worry and the stress this causes to a young person.

*I didn't go to the exam in Grade 12. What happened was, my grandfather passed away. In my family everyone had their own jobs to go to and I was the only person available... my grandfather was admitted in the ICU, because a family member had to be there always, I was there for like two weeks, and it was hard for me, because from my father's side, my grandfather was the only person who made me feel like I was important. Because of this incident, my AS level exams results were bad and I wanted to re-sit in Grade 12, but I had to work during this period, as soon as I finish the school, I had to go to my father's shop, sometimes in school uniform...I didn't have time to study at all, even to breathe, I go home late and sleep...I couldn't study at all and I didn't want to take the exams because I didn't study at all I didn't know where I was headed (Faiz. IN).*

#### **f) Lack of teacher support and encouragement**

Adolescents can perceive even neutral comments as negative feedback, and these perceptions of teachers' behaviour or language can have a detrimental



impact on students' achievement.

*He compared with the same class and same student and always to put me down, like in this particular class, there was this percentage (to be achieved), and I'm not comparing with anybody. I am just asking for help to improve my grade and when you compare students like that it is destroying their self-esteem. They fail to see the personal growth of students, for anything that happen, they should not underestimate the students (Zaan, FGD).*

If the school has a culture that the students' voices are valued, that they can tell someone how they feel, if they feel intimidated or have a negative perception of a teacher, the teachers can alter their language and speech and learn from the students how to improve on their mistakes to develop rapport and provide autonomy support, creating an environment where students feel listened to, that the teacher has confidence in their ability to do self-directed learning. This can lead to intrinsic motivation and higher academic outcomes (Toit-Brits, 2019).

*I didn't actually know some of the concepts from O'level and during A' levels, teachers didn't have time to explain. For example, in Chemistry, they would expect me to know those and if I tell the teacher that I don't know it, he would ask me to go home and refer, I even told him that I have a weaker understanding of O'level concepts...and asked him to explain, by assuring that I would understand quickly, but he would ask me to go home and do independent study (Faiz. IN).*

Barber and Olsen (2004) argued that changes in student academic achievement, self-perception and interpersonal relationships are reflected by teacher support and encouragement in adolescents' academic transition. The relationship between teacher support and student achievement was identified by Ganeson and Ehrich (2009), who further revealed that lack of teacher support during high school transition is linked with depression in adolescents. Kimani, Kara and Njagi (2013) found that increases in teacher workload negatively impacted the support given to underperforming students.

Additional to whole class teaching hours, teachers need to have time to give tutorial support to underachieving students and to guide them on where to find suitable free online study courses.

The Teaming Model is a strategy where a group of four teachers who teach core

subjects, who share a group of students, are allocated time to meet regularly to discuss at risk students' needs and identify strategies to support the student behaviourally, academically, mentally and socially (McIntosh & White, 2006).

#### **g) Excessive homework**

The school needs to ensure homework allocation is planned for across the curriculum so that each student is expected to complete a given number of hours of homework, leaving enough time for students to engage in organised play, have down time and time to relax with family. Unstructured and personally directed free time to hang out with friends, pursue hobbies and interests, spend time outdoors and to have fun leads to improved physical health, self-regulation, communication and social skills and empathy, which are core abilities for resilience in adult life. Time management awareness and training; and help seeking tools including collaborative peer learning skills during induction training is an essential step to ensure students are not overwhelmed with the higher demands of Advanced Level studies.

*In my lower secondary school, they don't give lot of home work... but in the high school, even at the end of first week, there were many home works bundled up, which I had to finish for the following Sunday, and I don't like to work on weekends, I consider Friday as a free day, it was really difficult to complete and submit all the tutorials at once (Samaah, FGD).*

#### **h) Inability to engage in extracurricular activities**

Extra-curricular activities (ECA) including service learning and sports improve mental health and well-being. WHO (2010) recommends at least 75 minutes of intense vigorous aerobic physical activity per week. ECA can give students higher cognitive and transferrable skills necessary for work and family life. ECA is also associated with better academic performance (Slade & Kies, 2015). There has to be transitioning support to manage time more effectively to incorporate ECAs in to the daily schedule and a mechanism for recognising ECAs in awarding of scholarships.

*I think it's about putting too much pressure on myself. I really wanted to get the opportunity to study through a scholarship. So my goal was all 'A's. And I think I didn't do much extracurricular activities for the most*

*part. So I didn't have anywhere else to focus my energy on (Shai, IN).*

*I used to be someone who participated in a lot of extra-curricular activities during my lower secondary, but, the fact that I wasn't keeping up well with my studies in higher secondary led me to not have interest in taking part in extra-curricular activities (Saufa, IN).*

### **i) Overemphasis on perfect scores in academic grades**

The government through its policy of recognizing and rewarding only those who achieve perfect grades in high-stake examinations sends a powerful message of who matters and who is worthy. This may be limiting the students' opportunities to develop social and personal resilience, to accept themselves for who they are, and their self-efficacy to adapt and live healthy, gainful lives despite failing or not achieving a place in the top ten achievers list in upper secondary examinations.

*My parents are blessed with their kids except for me...unlike them, I was a normal teenager who was going through a lot of things...I didn't understand why 'A' was not good enough for them. It is good enough for me. Why do you need A\* s. But when I came with an 'A' it's like you could do better. How could I do better than that? (Ithu, FGD).*

*I came in to grade 11 with 8 A's from O' levels. So, you have to get 5 A\*'s in Edexcel to get into the top tens of A' levels and nobody knew how difficult even an 'A' grade was to get, so, their perceptions of A' levels was just invalid, yet, they thought A' level and O' level were the same... (Zaan, IN).*

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the students narrated a large number of challenges they experienced when transitioning from lower secondary to higher secondary education in the Maldives, some of which they were able to overcome through personal grit, determination and hard work. However, some of the students face severe challenges which they cannot overcome without support, including poverty, lack of positive communication, support and encouragement by parents, teachers and mentors, and inability to cope when required support is unavailable. The major challenges identified with strategies to support the

students are highlighted below.

Inability to secure private tuition to address gaps in learning, the necessity to work to support family, and care responsibilities were highlighted by the research participants as major hindrances for a successful transition experience. Lack of academic and financial support to compensate for student poverty is an issue that needs addressing. Bursaries for students from low income backgrounds can alleviate anxiety and stress about finances, have more time for study by reducing the need for part-time work, access private tuition, buy text books, pursue hobbies and provide the financial security and commitment to develop a sense of “belonging” and friendship which are essential for flourishing and academic success (Thomas, 2012).

High levels of parent or sibling conflict; and low levels of parent or guardian support and monitoring caused the students significant emotional and behavioural difficulties. Monitoring of student academic outcomes can be an early transition activity to ensure students and families are connected to the support services as required. A drop-in well-being centre easily accessible to students and an after school homework centre, organised through a dedicated and accessible transition coordinator and a Grade coordinator, with weekly staff meetings to discuss students’ progress academically and pastorally and regular communication to ensure students’ needs are met are some of the student support strategies recommended by Waters, Lester and Cross (2012).

Kift (2015) recommends an intentional transition curriculum that mediates just- in- time, just-for-me support and inculcates a sense of academic and social belonging focusing on intentional engagement and support of the whole student academically, socially and pastorally. Thomas (2012) highlights importance of transition preparation to begin early in the academic journey.

Effective interventions started pre-entry, and had an emphasis on engagement and an overt academic purpose. They developed peer networks and friendships, created links with academic members of staff, provided key information, and shaped realistic expectations. Current students and future students had opportunities to engage with each other which helped the new students to develop confidence, and nurture belonging (Thomas, 2012).

Transition support was not consistent for all of the students throughout their programmes of study where support from parents, librarians, careers and employment services, disability services, counselling staff, health care providers, academic language and learning advisors and teachers were integrated. This

requires sustainable partnerships across institutional boundaries, between students, academic and professional staff and requires coordinated effort so that the provision is not fragmented and piecemeal (Mann, 2020; Kift, 2015).

Transition can be supported through intensive induction training and social networking opportunities, social, financial and pastoral care during the two years of higher secondary education, while facilitating transition as “becoming”, through development of skills and capabilities of navigating mobility, voice and aspirations (Gale & Parker, 2014).

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