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**Title: 'You're in this world now': Students', teachers' and parents' experiences of school transition and how they feel it can be improved.**

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## **Abstract**

### **Background**

Primary-secondary school transition is a major life event for eleven-year-old children in the UK, and can also be a stressful period for parents and teachers. However, most research focuses on the impact of transition on children's academic performance and social well-being and we have a limited understanding of their emotional experiences in the lead up to and during the transition, from the perspective of key stakeholders: students, parents and teachers.

### **Aims**

To explore transfer students', parents' and teachers' experiences in the lead up to and over the transition period, and how they feel it could be improved.

### **Sample**

The sample consisted of 45 year seven students, 8 year seven parents, 8 year seven teachers and 8 year six teachers, recruited from five primary and five secondary schools.

### **Method**

Students participated in face-to-face semi-structured focus groups, and adults in asynchronous online focus groups. Transcribed audio-recordings were analysed using inductive thematic analysis.

### **Results**

Students, parents and teachers were shown to navigate a similar process over primary-secondary school transition. They manage (either their own or others') emotions, relationships and expectations, which are shaped by shared communication across primary and secondary schools and stakeholders, and are impacted by how sensitive provisions are.

## **Conclusions**

There is a need to understand the transition period from the perspective of students, teachers and parents, to improve school transition. This information will allow us to design emotional centred support interventions that reflect these lived experiences.

**Keywords:** School transition, emotional well-being, parents, teachers, focus groups

## **Background**

The transfer from primary to secondary school is a major life event for eleven-year-old children in the UK (Eccles et al., 1993) and is arguably ‘one of the most difficult (transitions) in pupils’ educational careers’ (Zeedyk et al., 2003, p.67). During this time, transfer children face simultaneous discontinuities, from changes in their school environment (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008) and academic expectations (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000) to the nature of their social interactions (Symonds & Galton, 2014). Transition can also coincide with biological pubescent changes, in addition to competing school-based pressures, such as academic national Standard Assessment tests (SATs) and school choice decisions, meaning children are required to concurrently navigate many ‘key rites of passages’ (Pratt & George, 2005, p.16).

Whereas adults are more concerned by major events, such as changing school, for children, negotiating multiple small discontinuities are more difficult, for example, taking a bus to school for the first time and using a timetable (Akos, 2004). This is especially challenging for children when these changes co-exist, accumulate and persist. In line with Coleman’s (1989) focal theory of change, which depicts that sequential change is far better for students’ long-term adjustment than simultaneous change (Coleman, 1989), it is unsurprising that the accumulation of stressors children face over primary-secondary school transition can cause some degree of anxiety and apprehension in most children (Qualter, Whiteley, Hutchinson & Pope, 2007).

For most children, transition anxieties are short-lived and dissipate within the first term of secondary school (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012). However, this is not the case for all children, and for a minority (around 17%), primary-secondary school transition is very hard (West, Sweeting & Young, 2010) and marked by increases in internalising problems, from low self-esteem (Seidman, Lambert, Allen & Aber, 2003) to more serious, long-standing mental health problems, such as depression (Rice, Frederickson & Seymour, 2011), and externalising problems (Jindal-Snape &

Miller, 2008). The reasons why some children find the transition so challenging are not well understood. Year seven children are exposed to very similar, environmental, social and academic stressors during transition, which explain little variation in transition experiences (West et al., 2010), and mental health functioning (Vaz, Parsons, Falkmer, Passmore & Falkmer., 2014). Thus, identifying factors beyond the school environment, which can protectively buffer children against transitional maladjustment, is of paramount concern (Stadler, Feifel, Rohrmann, Vermeiren & Poustka, 2010).

Research has shown that parents, teachers and peers can provide the most salient sources of support over adolescence, especially during times of change (Eccles & Harold, 1993) and vulnerability (Stadler et al, 2010). The same can be said over primary-secondary school transition where children who report good relationships with parents and teachers are shown to express fewer internalising and externalising adjustment difficulties (Bailey & Baines, 2012; Hanewald, 2013). However, adolescence is also a period of time when social support networks are challenged and restructured, especially if support figures interfere or challenge the adolescent's desire for autonomy (Helsen, Vollebergh & Meeus, 2000).

Therefore, understanding the roles of parents, teachers and peers can be complex, especially over primary-secondary school transition, which, coinciding with puberty and early adolescence, is marked by additional rapid change, particularly in perceptions and the utilisation of social support (Bru, Stormes, Munthe & Thuen, 2010). Research has shown support figures to have reinforcing, compensatory and additive influences on each other during this period of time, which is shaped by environmental factors at school and home (Vaz et al., 2014) and past experiences of eliciting support (Helsen et al., 2000).

It is also important to recognise that primary-secondary school transition can be a period of substantial change for support figures, as it is not only transfer children who adjust to new

identities, expectations, roles and interactions, but also that parents and teachers face similar challenges (Hanewald, 2013). Thus, changes in pre-existing support structures, is common during this time (Coffey, 2013).

## **Rationale**

In sum, children who feel unprepared for school transition and do not feel supported, experience greater difficulties over primary-secondary school transition (Coffey, 2013). However, what is less clear is how children can be effectively supported by parents, teachers and peers during this period (Bailey & Baines, 2012; Hanewald, 2013). In part, this uncertainty is due to methodological limitations, particularly the absence of investigations into students' emotional well-being over this period. In addition, most research been conducted has assessed various predictor and outcome factors believed to shape children's transitional adjustment, but we know less about how children, parents and teachers feel during the transition. This matters as social support can greatly enhance students experiences of transition. It is also argued that using qualitative methods, rather than the traditional quantitative approach could evoke honest and more in depth insight (especially given that adjustment can be subject to individual and environmental characteristics) (Adeyemo, 2005), that would otherwise remain latent if reliant solely on quantitative closed questionnaire items (Zeedyk et al., 2003).

Thus using focus group methodology the present research aims to explore how stakeholders (students, parents and teachers) feel the transition period could be improved, drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1994) proximal (relationships) and distal (educational policies and practices) influences on adjustment (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), to answer the research question:

1. What are transitioning students', parents' and teachers' current experiences of secondary school transition and how do they feel it could be improved?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Forty-five year seven children (twenty-three females), aged eleven and twelve, from three UK Staffordshire secondary schools (with divergent demographic, socio-economic and performance statistics) participated in seven student focus groups.

Eight year seven parents (seven females), eight year seven teachers (six females) and eight year six teachers (six females) from five Staffordshire secondary schools and five primary feeder schools participated in three online asynchronous focus groups.

### **Materials**

Focus group semi-structured questions were developed to guide both face-to-face and asynchronous discussions. Prompts and follow up questions (mainly ‘can you tell me more about that’) were used where necessary.

### **Procedure**

#### **Student face-to-face focus groups**

Following ethical approval and Head Teacher consent, a recruitment presentation was delivered to all Year 7 students, and opt-in parental consent obtained a week prior to data collection. Randomly selected students were then organised into three groups of eight in one school and four groups of five or six students in the other two schools by class teachers, to control for individual differences such as personality characteristics and friendships groups, that may influence maximum output from discussions (Heary & Hennessy, 2002). Prior to data collection students were briefed, asked to adhere to key ground rules and informed assent from each participant was obtained. Once the allotted time ended (1 hour) participants were thanked, debriefed, offered the opportunity to ask



questions, pointed to sources of support, and informed that they had a one week time frame to withdraw their own data.

### **Parent and Teacher online focus groups**

Recruitment information letters were distributed to year seven parents, year six and seven teachers. Self-selected participants who indicated interest were then emailed an information sheet containing details regarding how to access the online focus group and when. On the first day of data collection, all participants were emailed a survey link and presented with further information and a consent form to electronically sign. Until consent was elicited participants were unable to access the focus group website and questions (which were online for one week). Due to anonymity participants were made aware that they could not withdraw their data once participation had begun. Following the data collection week, participants were presented with an online debrief, pointed to sources of support, and an email address to ask further questions.

### **Data Analysis**

Audio-recordings were transcribed using verbatim transcription and analysed using inductive thematic analysis, adhering to Braun and Clarke's (2006) stages (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following on from data immersion of each transcript, semantic similarities and differences were compared across each group of transcripts (i.e. student or teacher) to generate codes, which identified features of the data that were considered pertinent to the research question and that stakeholder. Codes were then analysed and combined at a broader level, using thematic mapping. Themes were refined through discussion between first, second and third author.

## Results

Three main themes: *Managing Emotions*, *Managing Relationships*, and *Managing Expectations* were identified across the ten focus groups. As shown in *Figure 1* each theme has a number of sub-themes which are explored separately below using illustrative quotes from participants.

### 1. Recognition of emotions

#### Awareness of conflicting emotions

Although acknowledgement was made of primary-secondary school transition being a ‘right of passage’ (Parent focus group), in the lead up to and during the transfer period almost all students and parents expressed experiencing conflicting emotions and strong feelings of loss. Stakeholders could recognise these emotions, and strategies employed to manage them (i.e. repression) in themselves and others.

#### *Students*

Prior to secondary school transfer, students faced mixed, conflicting emotions, such as nervousness and excitement: *‘at the start of the holidays I felt dead sad because none of my friends from my primary came here and then throughout the holidays got really excited and then the last bit I got really nervous’* (Student focus group D). Other key emotional conflicts were: feelings of loss vs. progression: *‘Um, that like you had, like you were leaving part of like your family behind, and you were leaving part of like yourself behind but like when you come into High school like then you get a new bit of yourself more grown up’* (Student focus group H) and excitement vs. nervousness: *‘Erm it’s a bit of excitement and a bit of stress and err anxiousness’* (Student focus G).

## **Parents**

Parents appeared to recognise their child's conflicting emotions: *'I ensured the conversations were positive and acknowledged his nerves/worries'* (Parent focus group), and the trajectory in which these feelings manifest: she felt a *'Mixture of emotions, one day really excited and the next day nervous, then that turned to fear so reassurance stepped in, then back to excitement'* (Parent focus group). Verbal reassurance was deemed best to support students manage these conflicting emotions.

Parents were also negotiating their own emotional conflicts of feelings of personal loss: *'they are no longer in the primary school bubble'* (Parent focus group) and letting go: *'I definitely agree that it is a process of letting go'* (Parent focus group). **The process of letting go was shown to get easier with time and shaped parenting behaviours: *'I have had to learn to ask questions in a different way so they don't think I'm over protective'* (Parent focus group).**

## **Feelings of loss**

The motif of loss was shown to be dominant and reoccurring across all focus groups, and central to parents' and students' experiences of primary-secondary school transition, the end of year six frequently depicted as *'definitely more leaving than starting'* (Student focus group). Thus loss merits its own sub-theme.

## **Students**

For students leaving primary school was portrayed as a personal loss: *'like you were leaving part of like your family behind, and you were leaving part of like yourself behind'* (Student focus group H). Losing support, especially from primary school friendships was a significant concern: *'like some friends you've been through like since Primary so you don't want to lose them and they're been through with you since Nursery, all the way here, so you don't really want to lose*

them' (Student focus group I), although students felt that this loss could not always be understood by adults: 'they didn't understand as much erm because like when they were younger it is different and now you just really need friends to do well' (Student focus group H).

### ***Parents***

Parents not only acknowledged their child's loss: 'I think as soon as they start year six they are thinking about leaving' (Parent focus group), but also experienced feelings of personal loss that their child was growing up, which was reported more subtly through anecdotes: 'the apron strings slowly get longer' (Parent focus group), or masked as frustration: 'this year the primary school even made the decision to drop the year 6 leavers assembly which was very upsetting as it is important for children and parents to be reminded how far we've all come' (Parent focus group).

Feelings of personal loss were enunciated the more parents viewed transfer students as childlike: 'he also seemed much younger than he seemed before because he is still my baby and he had to step into big boy shoes' (Parent focus group) and unprepared for the transition: 'He needed to be dependent for longer simply because he had freedom and wasn't mature enough to use it responsibly' (Parent focus group).

### **Repression**

#### ***Students***

For students, repressing feelings of apprehension and anxiety towards primary-secondary school transition was used as a method to protect the self: 'I made myself forget so I wasn't worried' (Student focus group G), and mask feelings of vulnerability around peers, 'I think like if it is mainly a personal thing that I should deal with it, I wouldn't open up to any teachers or anybody at school' (Student focus group E). However, this strategy was also shown to be maladaptive and led to perceptions of being alone in feeling anxious about the transition: 'I think if we had someone

to talk to about how we felt about secondary school then it would have been a bit better' (Student focus group F). The lack of and delaying of emotional support provision within the school environment was shown to reinforce these feelings and students emphasised the need for more open discussion: 'I think that if we had someone to talk to about how we felt about secondary school then it would have been a bit better' (Student focus group F).

Students were also shown to be aware of adults' feelings of loss. Whereas, primary school teachers' feelings of loss were more explicit, parent anxieties were perceived to manifest subtly through changes in their behaviour towards them: 'your parents are like really worried and always asking loads of questions so it is better if your parents relax because then you can relax' (Student focus group G). Common advice revolved around wishing adults would *suppress* their emotions, to prevent children feeling worried: 'not stress like the children out to make them worried about what's going to happen to them at school' (Student focus group E).

### ***Parents***

Parents recognised and helped students' manage repressed feelings of transition apprehension and felt teachers could help more with this: 'I think more talking about feelings about leaving in class could be done. We spoke a lot at home, but this could have been reinforced' (Parent focus group). Nonetheless, parents were also aware that they are repressing emotions, as there is a shared understanding that endorsing feelings of negativity and apprehension towards the transition in front of transfer students has harmful outcomes. This was picked up on by teachers: 'the hardest situations I have found is where a parent is visibly nervous and agitated about the transition in front of their child, causing their nerves to be passed on' (Year seven teacher focus group) and transfer students: 'I don't think parents should stress that much, that gives kids more work' (Student focus group G). As a result parents felt that they too could benefit from transition support: 'It would be

great to talk to someone on a 1:1 basis, then if we have concerns we can air them' (Parent focus group).

### ***Teachers***

Primary school teachers felt that the summer term following SATs, is the optimal time to provide emotional centred transition support: 'I think transition is best placed after SATs as they can focus on their next steps once SATs are complete' (Year six teacher focus group). Provision prior to this was believed to create feelings of unsettlement and anxiety towards the transfer: 'I don't think emphasis should be placed on the transfer too early, this may just stretch out the inevitable pre-transfer stress. While obviously it is a big deal for children to move school, we should avoid making a big issue of it' (Year six teacher focus group)

However, primary school teachers also recognised the disadvantages of this strategy, as this delayed provision subtly encourages students to suppress feelings towards secondary school transition until a more convenient time, and can cause greater problems in the summer term, where 'tensions that have been hidden tend to come to surface' (Year six teacher focus group). Secondary school teachers also favoured early onset secondary school support provision: 'the earlier the transition, or 'drip feeding', the students get of their future transition to take place, the more familiar and less painful it will be for them to transfer' (Year seven teacher focus group).

### **Management of emotions**

#### ***Students***

Some students felt that extra support from teachers at school would have been beneficial over school transition to help them manage their emotions, as opposed to repressing them, as discussed above. However, not all children felt this way and many believed adjustment was instead shaped by students' emotional self-management: 'I don't think it is about preparing them, I think

it's about the child's attitude to what they're doing' (Student focus group I), and confidence: 'I didn't think I would fit in so over the holidays I was trying to get more confident' (Student focus group F).

### ***Teachers***

In the summer term leading up to transition, primary school teachers reported managing students' internalising: 'some of the children get a little anxious towards the end of the summer term' (Year six teacher focus group) and externalising behaviours: 'some children push the boundaries in terms of behaviour expectations' (Year six teacher focus group). These behaviours were motivated by students' readiness to move on and adults' receptiveness (or not) in managing this behaviour sensitively: 'Those children who are generally less secure or motivated anyway, tend to appear more unsettled and find the less structured nature of the end of the year difficult to deal with' (Year six teacher focus group).

Once at secondary school, teachers emphasised the importance of fostering collaborative parent-teacher relationships: 'parents are much more likely to respond and come to parents evening and support the school and get involved with their child's education, and extracurricular, if they know it means a lot to teachers, as well as their child' (Year seven teacher focus group) to support parents' and manage their apprehensions.

## **2. Managing relationships**

Although, acknowledgment was made of the importance of support over primary-secondary transition: 'it can make High school very worrying and very depressing if no one's there to actually

help you' (Student focus group), relationships are also in a state of disjunction during this period, which is shaped by stakeholders' ability to reconfigure support networks.

## **Friendships**

### ***Student***

For students, peers are their most dominant source of support over primary-secondary school transition: 'you need friends, friends are like your brothers and sisters, you have to keep them with you' (Student focus group E). Peer affiliation was motivated by: fears of being lonely: 'I need to make friends because I won't have anyone to be with' (Student focus group E), environmental concerns: 'I just made friends and they just made me more comfortable around school life and everything, so it was easier' (Student focus group I), need for support: 'we all know what each other's going through' (...) 'so if you talk about it together then you can be a lot more confident' (Student focus group E) and perceived as confidence serving: 'I don't really like change that much so like if you're with your friends it's a lot more reassuring' (Student focus group E).

Prior to the transfer period, restructuring year six primary school friendships was a dominant strategy in anticipation for the transition: 'I tried to get closer to some friends that I wasn't really with in primary and tried to like stay with them because they were coming the same school' (Student focus group J). However, on reflection students felt that primary schools could help better prepare children for the social challenges they would encounter at secondary school: 'they didn't prepare you about everything so about you know bullying about you know like different types of situations and going into places where you might not know people so they should prepare you' (Student Focus Group D), and instead felt that their social concerns were misunderstood by adults: them: 'I think that parents should listen to us and like because I was like I need to make friends because I won't have anyone and to be with when I am here and they didn't really understand and



were like you don't need friends you just need to do well and then we will be proud of you'

(Student focus group).

## **Reconfiguration**

### *Student*

Year seven students' adjustment is shown to be heavily shaped by their ability to manage and reconfigure supportive relationships with parents and teachers. This is shown to be easier the more mature students are: 'I think I've opened up a bit more. Because I was, I wasn't that talkative in Primary, I was quite closed up. Now it's just easier because I've got more teachers' (Student focus group D), and was also easier when teachers were seen as approachable and available. However, some key barriers to this reconfiguration were identified, such as the school size: 'here it is so big so some of the teachers don't have time like not in a horrible way but because they are so busy with other classes' (Student focus group F). As a result primary school teachers were perceived to be easier to talk to: 'I think it is easier to tell someone your worries at primary school than at secondary school' (Student focus group F).

Strains in student-parent relationships, particularly in relation to parents' need for communication, were also discussed: 'I felt more comfortable talking to my parents in primary like now they want to know every detail that you've done' (Student focus group F), and eliciting support from relatable others, such as older siblings, favoured: 'I think it is a lot easier to talk about things with my sister because she is in year ten and knows a lot of things about the school and I think that is more helpful than talking to my parents sometimes because they don't really know the school' (Student focus group F). Students also reported reconfigurations in parents' management of school specific problems, which encouraged students to take greater responsibility for their actions once in year seven: 'in Primary school if something ever went on or if I had an argument with my friends,

they [parents] would kind of go and speak to the parents' (...) 'and when I was in High school and I had a fall out they would just tell me to get on with it' (Student focus group I).

### ***Parents***

Parents expressed changes in their parenting role to facilitate their child's growing independence: 'we changed the boundaries to accommodate them [their child] growing up' (Parent focus group), and prevent straining the child-parent relationship. Reconfiguring communication channels between themselves and the school, by transferring responsibility was also important: 'I have to accept that he is now responsible for letting me know of any important information from school' (Parent focus group). This was shaped by parents' preconceived perceptions of their child's readiness to make the transition: 'My son couldn't get out of primary quick enough and I was relieved to see him move schools. I was confident in his personality and knew he would be fine.' (Parent focus group).

### **Relationship building**

#### ***Teachers***

For secondary school teachers communication was vital to build relationships with parents and help them reconfigure their new role in supporting a year seven student: 'developing good relationships with parents at transition evenings so that a collaborative approach is used from the first day' (Year seven teacher focus group). This is a direct contrast to primary school teachers' approach to supporting parents over the transition period: 'I have heard very little from parents about the transition process. I would be more than happy to discuss their child but generally I have dealt with new teachers/heads of year about the children' (Year six teacher focus group).

To build relationships with year seven children, consistency: 'it is important for Y7 students to have a consistent form tutor who knows them well and who they trust to discuss their problems at

both school and home' (Year seven teacher focus group) and adopting a nurturing supportive role: 'I tend to have a nurturing relationship with my students within the first term' (Year seven teacher focus group) was deemed paramount. However, as discussed in the student focus groups, barriers such as time and competing pressures can prevent this: 'Ideally we would be able to host more transition events but many staff still have full timetables and this cannot be realistically facilitated' (Year seven teacher focus group).

### **3. Managing expectations**

Provisions employed to support children and parents can be far from cohesive across primary and secondary schools. This can shape stakeholders' experiences and how expectations are managed.

#### ***Students***

For students, honest insight into the differing standards and the social, environmental changes they will encounter at secondary school is deemed best to manage expectations, so students don't feel falsely prepared: 'Like tell them what they're about to go into, like don't be like 'oh some people might be mean to you', like tell them like what you're going to go into like how you should deal with it' (Student focus group D). However, students also felt that transition exposure should be sensitive to their emotional well-being, and preparations should be gradual: 'If they make too much of a fuss about it then it does proper worry you, it's like, like a soldier preparing for war like, if they give them a whole entire suit of armour it's then they can think, what are we going against' (Student focus group H).

#### ***Parents***

Parents reported managing their child's expectations: 'we just tried to talk at each opportunity, reassuring that it would be ok' (Parent focus group), **in addition to their own, as**

parents did not want their child to pick up on any of their negativities (see *Repression*). Common advice to future transfer parents was to help children develop realistic expectations, especially as parents were unsure as to how well primary schools had done this: ‘They were really excited about the move up from Year 6. I don’t know whether they set their expectations too high and that’s why they may have found it difficult to adapt’ (Parent focus group).

Fears of the unknown, and not knowing what to expect was especially concerning for first-time transfer parents: ‘I do not have older children but I think this would have made a difference as it made a difference when my youngest started primary school, knowing what to expect and how the system works etc.’ (Parent focus group). To alleviate this, parents discussed the need for greater parent-teacher communication across schools (see *Reconfiguration*).

### ***Teachers***

Within primary schools, teachers discussed how they used subtle indirect preparation strategies to manage students’ expectations: ‘we do not explicitly prepare our children for the movement to Year 7’ (Year six teacher focus group). This strategy may be due to prioritisation of SATs: ‘there is room for primary schools to start transition work earlier but tests do get in the way’ (Year seven teacher), and aiding classroom management, which can be more of a problem during the summer term: ‘cockiness in some children or frustration at the rules and regulations within the primary school can be difficult to manage at times’ (Year six teacher) .

For secondary school teachers, their practice was influenced by how expectations have been managed at primary school: ‘Children that expect bigger changes and having to take on more responsibility settle in far quicker and primary school that give out homework and consequences usually send out pupils that get on board with this quickly and meet deadlines’ (Year seven teacher focus group). How prepared students are, their mind-set and degree of personal preparation can also

heavily contribute to their ability to adapt: ‘Children that can reason social problems but seek help from staff when they haven’t been successful in rectifying a situation, rather than bottling up issues and telling parents who then call in on their behalf. These are excellent skills to possess as it allows issues to settle far quicker’ (Year seven teacher focus group), which secondary school teachers felt primary schools could help more with.

## **Discussion**

The aim of the present study was to investigate students’, parents’ and teachers’ experiences of school transition and how they felt this period could be improved, using focus group methodology, a research method which has been underused in this field. As shown above, parents’, students’ and teachers’ experiences of school transition are similar, in that all are shown to navigate an analogous process where they manage (either their own or others’) emotions, relationships and expectations. Nonetheless, there are also key differences in students’, parents’ and teachers’ experiences of the transition period. While some sub-themes are found across all stakeholders, others are specific to solely parents and students, such as *Loss* and *Conflicting emotions* (which are featured quite heavily, acknowledging the transition as a difficult period), or stand alone, such as: *Friendships*, and only related to one specific stakeholder’s experiences, in this case students.

Peer affiliation, was shown to be a domineering concern for students before, during and after the transfer period, shaping their appraisals, experiences and feelings of adjustment, which is similar to previous research (Pratt & George, 2005; Weller, 2007). However, this concern was perceived to be misunderstood by parents and teachers and students commonly suggested that schools could assist in transition **by focussing on supporting children manage changes in their peer relationships**. These findings are also in line with recent government initiatives, such as Social and

Emotional Aspects of Learning (Wigelsworth, Humphrey, & Lendrum, 2012) and Targeted Mental Health in Schools initiatives (Wolpert, Humphrey, Belsky, & Deighton, 2013), which highlight the importance of facilitating and promoting students' social adjustment.

The above educational initiatives also emphasise the significance of collaborative support over the transition period between parents and teachers, but also primary and secondary school staff, to make the transition period easier for all stakeholders. However, as discussed in themes *Managing Relationships* and *Managing Expectations*, and in line with previous research (Tobell & O'Donnell, 2013), academic, social and environmental discontinuities across primary and secondary school systems, can represent barriers. This can prevent relationship formation between schools, parents and students, and shape these stakeholders' appraisals towards the transition period and inadvertently their practice (i.e. parents' and teachers' ability to uphold role as parent or teacher).

Students seeking support from teachers was generally deemed easier at primary school, as teachers were perceived to be more open, approachable and available, which is in line with previous research (Bru et al., 2010). Nonetheless, these findings are concerning, as children who perceive adults as available, open to communication (Maltais, Duchesne, Ratelle & Feng, 2015) and more importantly involved in their school life, show superior adjustment (Duchesne & Ratelle, 2010). For parents, re-establishing supportive relationships with their child's secondary school teachers is a significant concern and a process (see *Reconfiguration*). These concerns are shaped by perceptions of their child's readiness for primary-secondary school transition and how communicative secondary schools are with parents, which is consistent with previous research (Zeedyk et al., 2003). Taken together, these findings provide greater leverage for Tobell & O'Donnell's (2013) recommendation that on entry to secondary school, greater attention needs to be placed on social

provision, especially opportunities for relationship formation for transfer students, in addition to parents with staff at their child's secondary school (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013).

Furthermore, regardless of how hard parents and students try to repress and conceal pent-up anxieties, (see *Repression*), this is rarely successful and can have maladaptive outcomes. Parents and students are aware of and influenced by each others' emotions, especially anxiety with letting go for parents (Zeedyk et al., 2003; Lucey & Reay, 2000). Parents and students also share common appraisals, such as loss. Thus, focussing efforts on each party individually may not be necessary for school transition experiences to be improved and instead encouraging parents and students to acknowledge and air concerns through open communication and discussion channels, may help support adults support students.

Moreover, this research suggests that repression behaviours can cause parents and students to feel alone and unsupported in feeling apprehensive during transition. In part, the delayed or absence of emotional centred transition provision within primary schools, due to prioritisation of National Assessment targets (McGee, Ward, Gibbons & Harlow, 2003) and behavioural concerns, was shown to shape these feelings and be discordant with transfer students' need to access support (Evangelou et al., 2008; McGee et al., 2003). These findings emphasise the need for year six teachers to integrate emotional centred transition support provision throughout the transfer year to address anxieties presented and prevent students repressing them (Zeedyk et al., 2003).

However, what has been missed empirically, yet shown in the present research, is the need for primary-secondary school transition provisions to establish a balance between exposure and consistency. In other words, transfer students need a degree of insight into what secondary school will be like and how to navigate differing standards, but this exposure should follow a clear continuum with a limit, as children also need consistency during this apprehensive period of time.

For example, students emphasised the dangers of too much primary-secondary school transition

provision, too soon, which can cause feelings of overwhelm and anxiety. These findings are in line with Hammond's (2016) research, that demonstrated the need for stakeholders to be mindful and not overly protective, cautious or anxious when discussing primary-secondary school transfer (Hammond, 2016). Gradual preparations were also deemed best, by both secondary school teachers and students, which has so far been unsupported empirically and practically.

However, the present research is not without its limitations. One such constraint is that participants were reporting retrospective transition experiences. Thus, post-transition experiences, forgetting and selective retrieval inherent in retrospections being constructed within present contexts, may have shaped pre-transfer recollections. However, given that the present research was conducted mid-way through year seven this is unlikely, especially given the anonymous and decontextualized nature of the online parent and teacher focus groups, which possibly aided the sharing of more personal feelings (Eccles & Harold, 1993). Furthermore, although caution was made to not over-represent their voices, it is worth noting that there were a greater proportion of students to parents and teachers participating in the research. Thus, there is an opportunity for further research with parents and teachers to strengthen confidence in the credibility and robustness of the present findings.

In sum, in order to improve primary-secondary school transition, acknowledgement that parents, students and teachers all have a stake in negotiation of this emotionally challenging period, is paramount. To do this, enhancing communication across schools, parents and students is imperative. Given the limited research in this area, the present study has made preliminary progress in doing this. However, further longitudinal and intervention research is needed to unravel the pathogenesis and progression of emotional experiences in order to best equip parents and teachers support students' over this critical period.



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## Figures

Figure 1

*A thematic table to show themes and sub-themes.*

<b>Child</b>	<b>Parent</b>	<b>Teacher</b>
<b><u>Recognition of Emotions</u></b>		
Awareness of conflicting emotions	Awareness of conflicting emotions (their own and child's)	
Feelings of Loss	Feelings of Loss	
Repression (of feelings in self and others)	Repression (of feelings in self and management of repression in their child)	Repression (management of repression in students)
Management of emotions (in self)		Management of emotions (in students and parents)
<b><u>Managing Relationships</u></b>		
Friendships		
Reconfiguration (in seeking support)	Reconfiguration (relationship with school and child)	Relationship building
<b><u>Managing Expectations</u></b>		
Managing expectations (exposure-acceptance)	Managing expectations (of their children)	Managing expectations (conflicting views of when is the optimal transition time)

Figure 2

Key of in-text transcript referencing. For instance (Student focus group H), equates to transcript H.

<b>Transcript</b>	<b>Stakeholder</b>
A	Parent focus group
B	Primary school teacher focus group
C	Secondary school teacher focus group
D	Mixed gender student focus group
E	All male student focus group
F	All female student focus group
G	Student focus group
H	Student focus group
I	Student focus group
J	Student focus group