When is the 'optimal' time for school transition? An insight into provision in the US

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Abstract

Across countries, the age and timing of when children navigate school transition varies, as does provision of support during this challenging time. These two factors can heavily shape young people's adjustment, yet to date there is minimal research which has investigated how this period is navigated in different cultures. The aim of the present exploratory-explanatory case study was to explore how educational transitions are managed and supported within the US, with a view to apply the lessons learnt to the UK context. Parents in the US have more choice regarding the age and timing of when children transfer schools, and so the research examined differences in transition preparations and experiences by children's age, and whether they are in a two or three tier school system. To do this, data collection methodologies included ethnographic classroom observations, student focus groups and staff and parent interviews, which were analysed using Thematic Analysis. Findings demonstrated that the earlier the transition, especially between the ages of 11 and 12, the harder it was perceived to be, and stakeholders had differing attitudes as to whether two transitions are better than one. It was concluded that while the present study has made preliminary progress in exploring the significance of transfer timing on students' adjustment, further longitudinal and intervention comparative research is needed using wider cross-cultural samples.

Keywords: school transition, case study, transition timing, emotional well-being

Background

There is wealth of research suggesting that school transition can have negative short- and long- term impacts on children's academic, social and emotional well-being (Jindal-Snape, Cantali, MacGillivray & Hannah, 2019). This is especially common when there is a lack of support provision. Yet in order to provide this support effectively there is a need to understand why children struggle and how to prevent this.

Cross-culturally the age of school transition can vary. In general, children who are older when they transition schools show better adjustment (Holas & Huston, 2012). The reason for this is that the older children are when they transition schools, the more likely they have been exposed to previous life transitions, such as moving to a new house, parent divorce and especially a school transition (Andrews & Bishop, 2012) and as a result adapt to similar challenges inherent in school transition more easily. Moreover, when transition timing is delayed, children have longer to gain developmental skills, such as emotional intelligence (Adeyemo, 2005) and self-regulation (Symonds, 2009), necessary to successfully navigate challenges inherent in school transition, whether that is disagreements with peers, environmental discontinuities, or academic changes. For example, UK Middle schools (that teach children from age nine to age 14) have advantages over secondary schools, by providing children with consistency (in terms of being taught by the same teacher and in the same school environment) and more focussed supportive pastoral environments. This can be helpful for children during early puberty (see Puberty) (Crook, 2008).

However, these two ideas are in conflict. Within three-tier school systems, where children attend three different schools, children may find transition to their third school easier reflecting the insight and skills gained from their first transition. However, the first transition is likely to be harder as they will make it at a much younger age. Therefore, it is unclear

which school system is best for children (two-tier where one transition is made, or three-tier where two transitions are made) and the optimal age for school transition. As discussed below, competing pressures, children's developmental age and maturation, puberty, and specialised support, can also shape this.

Competing Pressures

In the lead up to secondary school transition in the UK, Year 6 children face competing pressures, from academic stresses associated with National Assessments, to psychosocial challenges around school choice decisions and physiological pubescent changes. During transition, children then face simultaneous academic, social and environmental discontinuity.

The accumulation of changes children face over school transition can have a significant negative impact on their ability to cope. This is unsurprising and supported by Coleman's *Focal Theory of Change* (1989) which suggests that sequential rather than simultaneous change can be easier for children to cope with and have psychosocial and emotional consequences. Extending on this theory and in line with Baumeister, Vohs and Tice's *Depleted-Resource Hypothesis* (2007), over time, frequent concurrent stressors can significantly draw on self-regulatory capacities and disrupt cognitive processing. This is shown in the context of primary-secondary school transition; Rice, Frederickson and Seymour's (2011) longitudinal study found that the number and not severity of school concerns during this time predicted peer problems, generalised anxiety and depression.

Developmental Age and Maturation

In line with the *Developmental Readiness Hypothesis*, which outlines the significance of acknowledging children's maturation during times of change (Ge, Conger & Elder, 2001), it has been theorised that children can be at greater risk of psychological and behavioural

problems if they are not emotionally or cognitively ready for transition. This has been shown empirically, children who are more mature, exhibit superior emotional intelligence, or have been exposed to previous transition (Jordan, McRorie & Ewing, 2010), shown to find transition easier.

Children with such resources are generally older, and, as a result, more developmentally ready to navigate school transition. Research conducted in the US (where children can transition to Middle school or Junior High school at age 11 or 12 and then High school at age 14) although dated, supports this and suggests that the younger children are when they transition, the more likely they are to experience emotional problems (Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford & Blyth, 1987).

Puberty

The typical age for puberty to begin is 11 for girls and 12 for boys (NHS, Nov 2018). This age directly corresponds to the age at which children transition to secondary school in the UK and Junior High or Middle school in the US. Research has shown that there is a relationship between the negative impacts of transition and the timing of puberty. Early pubertal developing girls have been shown to find school transfer more difficult and report higher depressive symptoms, lower-body image and lower self-worth following school transition (Simmons et al., 1987).

Extending the above research, Ng-Knight et al. (2016) found that while it is common for children's feelings of self-control to decline over primary-secondary school transition, for children experiencing puberty earlier than their peers, this decline is greater. These findings are unsurprising as while hormones account for 4% of variance in depressed mood, social factors and negative life events account for 30% of the variance (Brooks-Gunn and Warren 1989); thus navigating these two 'key rites of passage' (puberty and transition) together is

likely to be much harder. However, given that primary-secondary school transition is often navigated during the onset of puberty, adjustment differences specific to each event cannot be easily isolated and compared (Eccles et al., 1993, p.90).

This was acknowledged by Symonds (2009) in her longitudinal research in the UK, which examined the interaction between biopsychosocial changes associated with puberty and primary-secondary school transition environmental changes, on children's adjustment. Same-aged Middle school children (who were not transitioning schools) were also sampled as a baseline comparison. It was found that for girls who were negotiating puberty and transitioning schools, reports of social embarrassment, low self-body image and self-esteem were more prominent. Nonetheless, given the small sample size, but also that puberty onset can vary in timing and consistency, caution is needed drawing conclusions.

Specialised Support

Since the publication of the *Transforming children and young people's mental health provision: a green pape*r (2018), which raised the importance of supporting children's mental health within the school environment (DfH & DfE, 2018), there has been more attention placed on the need to support children's emotional wellbeing during challenging periods such as primary-secondary school transition. Schools can have a 'frontline role' in the promotion, protection and maintenance of children's emotional well-being (DfH & DfED, 2017, p.9) and when well-designed and supported (especially across stakeholders), school-centred primary-secondary school transition support has been shown to improve children's academic and social functioning.

However, emotional centred support transition provisions are limited and there are also challenges implementing specialised support over primary-secondary school transition in the UK (Jindal-Snape et al., 2019). One of these challenges is competing priorities and

increased workloads that have resulted in pressure to redirect both human and financial resources (Jeffery & Troman, 2012). Difficulties embedding support provision into the school environment can also limit the sustainability and uptake of emotional-centred programmes (Trotman, Tucker & Martyn, 2015). See Bagnall (2020) for a full summary of limitations pertaining to emotional centred primary-secondary school transition interventions.

In contrast, in the US, schools employ school counsellors to provide specialised and targeted emotional centred support, which includes transition and school liaison provision, for children and their families within the school environment. This support is likely to have a positive impact on children's transition experiences and aligns with pillar one and two outlined in the Government's recent paper *Transforming children and young people's mental health provision: a green paper* (2017).

This support is a significant contrast to the UK, where transition liaison roles are often given to a Year 6 and 7 teacher who already have a full timetable, and therefore must balance this role alongside internal pastoral matters and relationships with feeder schools. Thus, having full-time counsellors who concentrate exclusively on transition support, offering a comprehensive advisory service for all stakeholders (children, parents and staff) is likely to have a positive impact on transition experiences for all (DfH & DfED, 2017). This would seem to be a significant resource that could be replicated from the US to the UK, but greater clarity as to how this school-based support is delivered over school transition is imperative to help us understand and improve UK children's transition experiences.

Rationale

In sum, to improve children's experiences of school transition, and inform support provisions in the UK, there is a need to explore how this period is navigated across different transition systems (three-tier and two-tier education systems, early and delayed onset times).

Children in the US transition to High school at age 14, later than children in the UK who transition from primary to secondary school at 11. Additionally, in the US, school districts can follow either a two-tier or three-tier school system which is determined by the board of education. For the former, children make just the one transition to High school at age 14, whereas for the latter, children make a transition to Junior High (at age 12) or Middle school (at age 11) prior to High school transition (at age 14). Moreover, the age composition of children within the schools will also vary depending on school system, as two-tier school systems have a wider age range of children than three-tier school systems.

While there are clear cultural differences between the UK and US, there are also commonalities, which have been acknowledged in previous research (Symonds & Galton, 2014). This is especially important when concerning the age at which children transition to Middle school (at age 11) in the US which directly corresponds to the age at which children transition to secondary school in the UK (see Table 1), enabling a direct comparison. The same can be said regarding school transition adjustment outcomes, which are also comparable across the UK and US. For example, similar declines in academic attainment (Benner & Graham, 2009), social affiliation (Pellegrini & Long, 2003), school appraisals (Symonds & Galton, 2014) and internalising problems (Simmons & Blythe, 1987) are shown over transition periods in the US and UK. However, in order to better understand which school system is best for children (two-tier where one transition is made, or three-tier where two transitions are made) and the optimal timing for school transition, there is need to fully understand these different systems.

Although in the UK some areas use a three-tier system, where children transfer to Middle school at age nine, and again to High school at age 13, there is minimal research on this transition in the UK. Most pupils in the UK follow the dominant primary-secondary school two-tier transition system, which is acknowledged as ‘the most nationally

representative ‘transfer’ sample available to study’ (Symonds, 2009, 72) and draws few comparisons with Middle school three-tier systems. For example, the age at which children transition to Middle school in the UK (age nine) is not comparable to primary-secondary school transition (age 11), unlike US Middle school transition (also age 11). There are also distinct school environment differences between Middle schools and secondary schools. On average Middle schools are smaller than secondary schools and as a result of this have fewer teachers and less specialist teaching. These distinct school environment differences are shown to shape children’s sense of identity, situating school transition in early adolescence shown to make children feel more grown up (Symonds, 2009). In addition to this, UK Middle school transition and primary-secondary school transition are not comparable in terms of maturity status markers, as when school transition is made at age 11, children often navigate biopsychosocial changes (see Puberty), on top of school environment changes.

Comparing children within different school systems in one US state, Northern California, which contains districts aligning with all three systems (three-tier (Middle and Junior High schools) and two-tier (K-8)), allows exploration of differences in transition preparations and experiences reflective of the age and type of transition. Moreover, given that US education systems are decentralised and highly diversified dependent on state, focussing solely on one state will allow focussed comparison of school systems, which would have been difficult and less generalisable if schools in other states were sampled. Thus, the school districts sampled in the present study were selected on this theoretical basis.

Furthermore, despite consistent recommendations endorsing the importance of obtaining first-hand insight about transition from a range of key stakeholders (students, parents and teachers), to date, there is minimal research which has done this. See Bagnall, Skipper & Fox (2019) for a full outline of current literature and primary-secondary school transition qualitative research study limitations. Without exploring the lived experiences of a

range of stakeholders', efforts to understand and improve the transition period can only be superficial, as perceptions of the school context have been shown to differ across multiple informants (Kim, Schwartz, Cappella & Seidman, 2014).

Eccles and Midgley's (1989) *Stage Environment Fit (SEF)* theory, which outlines the importance of the *match* between children's developing needs and opportunities afforded to them by their social environments, provides a useful theoretical framework to guide investigations into understanding developmental processes, such as primary-secondary school transition and has been referenced in several articles pertaining to this time (Symonds & Galton, 2014). School transition has been recognised as a critical and challenging period in children's development , that can heavily impact their ability to cope. SEF theory attributes this to a developmental mismatch between changes in psychological characteristics (e.g. pubertal development, self-consciousness, desire for autonomy) and the lack of a stable, safe environment for children to enact these changes (Eccles et al., 1989). For example, during school transition, children are required to navigate simultaneous new environmental features of post-transition schools (e.g. older children, more specialised teaching), which are likely to be harder for children to cope with and adjust to, in comparison to the consistency inherent in remaining in pre-transition schools.

However, except for the interview research by Symonds and Hargreaves (2016), to date, minimal research has investigated SEF theory in the context of school transition from a qualitative perspective. Instead, SEF theory has mainly been developed from review of quantitative associations between a handful of premeditated variables and the school environment (Eccles, Midgley, & Adler, 1984), most outdated (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016). Thus, to fully understand SEF theory and obtain a more holistic understanding of *why* environmental features of post-transition schools are at a mismatch with children's developmental needs, and *how* to improve this, further qualitative research is needed.

Symonds and Hargreaves (2016) extended SEF theory, and argued that as children adapt to the post-transition school environment, they hold contradictory schemas towards their school experiences, in other words children enjoy and dislike school at the same time. As a result, SEF interactions are subject to change at different points in time as children adapt to the new secondary school environment, which extends initial SEF theory that solely focusses on the mismatch in pre and post transition experiences in shaping appraisals. Further research is needed to investigate this adaptation process, which the present research sought to do.

Furthermore, we have a limited understanding of whether the challenges inherent in school transition account for the mismatches proposed by SEF theory, or mismatches are typical of children at this age, progressing through year groups at school. Thus, there is a need to compare samples of same aged children transitioning or not transitioning schools to fully understand SEF theory, validate it, and bring it up to date. Symonds and Hargreaves (2016) made preliminary progress in doing this by examining SEF interactions amongst 11- and 12-year olds, who had either transferred into their first year of secondary school in the UK, or remained in their third year of middle school in the US. However, their findings are limited subject to the small sample size, cultural differences between the UK and US and interview design limitations (situating the interviews in school inhibited discussion of out-of-school issues). In line with earlier conclusions drawn by Symonds (2009), the latter two limitations are especially problematic as developmental characteristics are believed to not be comparable across cultures and context. Thus, further research is needed using wider age samples within one country, across contexts, and using multiple research methods and informants. Drawing on SEF theory, the present research sought to do this, by exploring the 'optimal time' for school transition,obtaining insight from parents, students, and school staff in the US using focus groups, interviews and observations. The following research questions were addressed:

1. How are educational transitions managed and supported in the US?
2. Do transition provisions differ across school systems (K-8 Elementary schools vs. 6-8 Middle schools vs. 7-8 Junior High schools, in other words transfer at age 14 as opposed to age 11 or 12)?
3. Does the age (Grade 6 [age 11] or Grade 7 [age 12] vs. Grade 9 [age 14]) at which children navigate transition shape their experiences and adjustment?
4. To what extent does navigation of prior educational transition to Middle or Junior High school at Grade 6 (age 11) or Grade 7 (age 12) influence children's experience of later transition to High school?

Method

Sample

Five Grade 6 (three females), twelve Grade 7 (four females) and twenty-six Grade 9 (thirteen females) students participated in eight focus groups. Two parents (one female), six teachers (two Grade 6 [one female], two Grade 7 [one female] and two Grade 9 [one female]) and five school counsellors (four females) participated in interviews. This sample represents seven schools (one Elementary, two Middle, two Junior High and two High schools) situated across four school districts within Northern California in the US. These four districts were selected on a theoretical basis to enable comparisons of transition preparations reflective of the age, system and type of transition the student made. For example, one school district used the three-tier Middle school system, one school district used the three-tier Junior High school system and two districts used the two-tier system. The schools within the districts were selected on an opportunistic basis. All districts were amongst the largest in California based on student population, and schools had similar demographic, ethnic, socio-economic, and

performance statistics. See Table 2. for a breakdown of participant numbers in each focus group/interview from each school system.

Design

This study used a qualitative exploratory-explanatory case study design. Data collection methodologies included ethnographic classroom observations, student focus groups and staff and parent interviews.

Materials

Focus group and interview semi-structured questions (see Appendix A) were developed to guide discussions. Prompts and follow up questions were used where necessary.

Procedure

Focus groups

Following ethical approval and obtaining parental consent and student assent, Grade 6 (one focus group), Grade 7 (three focus groups) and Grade 9 students (four focus groups) from K-8, Middle, Junior High and High schools participated in focus groups. Students were randomly selected and organised into groups by school staff to control for individual differences such as personality characteristics and friendship groups, which may influence maximum output from discussions (Heary & Hennessy, 2002). Within some focus groups, students were grouped according to the school system they attended (e.g. all Grade 9 students who had previously attended a K-8 school) or were attending (e.g. all Middle school students), in others, students within the groups had attended different systems. See Table 2 for a breakdown of participant numbers in each focus group from each school system.

One group interview was conducted with two parents, six individual interviews with six teachers and three interviews with five school counsellors (one of which was grouped),

see Table 2. Prior to data collection all participants were briefed, asked to adhere to key ground rules and informed consent was obtained. Once the allotted time ended (20-40 minutes) participants were thanked, debriefed, offered the opportunity to ask questions, pointed to sources of support, and informed that they had one-week to withdraw their data.

Observations

In total twenty-four, two hour classroom observations were made over the three week research project, which included four observations (two in the morning and two in the afternoon) in one Middle school (Grade 6, 7 and 8 classrooms), one Junior High school (Grade 7 and 8 classrooms) and one K-8 Elementary school (Grade 6, 7 and 8 classrooms). Prior to this, consent was obtained from school Principals and class teachers. To further inform understanding of the research area and more formal elements of data collection (interview and focus groups), other events, i.e. awards ceremonies, were observed. To protect the well-being of participants all data were recorded anonymously.

Data Preparation

Observations

During each observation, detailed field notes were taken and included observation notes, methodological notes and theoretical notes, which allowed for recording of conceptual thoughts, and early identification of themes and patterns within the data. E.g. notes were taken pertaining to students' engagement during class. As direct observation can be open to personal perspective, bias and validation (Wolcott, 2008), at the outset of this project a reflective statement was written to identify and acknowledge preconceptions.

Focus groups and Interviews

Audio-recordings were transcribed using verbatim transcription.

Data Analysis

As the intent of the analysis was to describe, summarise, and interpret, surface-level patterns in semantic content from the whole sample, data were analysed using inductive Thematic Analysis within a contextualist framework, adhering to Braun and Clarke's (2013) stages. Following on from data immersion of each transcript, the focus groups, observations and interviews were each coded separately for units of meaning. Semantic similarities and differences were then compared across each group of transcripts (focus groups, interviews and observations) and group of participants (student, parent or teacher) to generate codes, which identified features of the data that were considered pertinent to the research question. Coding was thus bottom-up and data driven. Codes were then analysed and combined at a broader level, to develop themes and sub-themes, see Table 3. The themes' external and internal homogeneity were then reviewed to ensure that they were accurate and valid representations of the data set, exhibiting clear and identifiable distinctions between groups, but also cohered meaningfully. Themes were refined through discussion between first, second and third author.

Results

Four main themes: *Magnitude of school choice decisions; Managing students' emotions and appraisals during the middle school years; Transfer timing and developmental readiness* and *Transition support* were identified across focus groups, interviews and observation narratives, as shown in Table 3. Each theme has a differing number of sub-themes, and all are explored separately below in narrative order, using illustrative quotes (see Table 2. for key).

1. Magnitude of school system choice decisions

Choice is at the forefront of America's education system, and parents in the US select both a school system (either: two tier or three tier) for their child prior to High school transition, in addition to a specific school. Appraisals of the different systems were split across stakeholders.

Adults' perceptions

Adults generally favoured the two-tier school transition system, where children make one transition to High school at age 14, as opposed to either three-tier system. As discussed by one school counsellor, this was often because K-8 schools (the first school children attend within two-tier systems) were perceived to be more child-focussed and receptive to their needs in giving children time: 'it's amazing how much transition happens to these kids so I think it is crucial for them to have some time and space to just kind of work through puberty and then they're ready to go to High school' (Junior School Counsellor Q). The two parents agreed: 'I felt it kept them in a smaller community for a little bit longer before they get exposed to bad behaviour of the other kids' (Parent A: 1 [child attending K-8]) and favoured the small Elementary school culture, which was more congruent with their wishes in keeping children sheltered and safe: 'I know all the people and it's nice to know that people are looking out for my kid' (Parent A: 2 [child attending K-8]).

In comparison, Middle and Junior High schools were deemed unprotective environments, particularly by parents, and teachers who favoured two-tier systems which they felt were more helpful in minimising behavioural problems by reducing problems associated with pubescent and developmental change: 'they just need that time to suppress the growing up stage' (Grade 7 Teacher H [JH]). Within the observations and informal discussions with teachers it was also clear that K-8 schools foster children's independence and maturation differently than Middle and Junior High schools. Examples included granting older children greater responsibilities over others, such as leadership positions.

However, the two parents that participated in the interviews had children navigating the two-tier school system, and had limited insight into three-tier systems, which can be problematic and lead to false perceptions of three-tier systems: 'there just seems to be a lot of

misinformation out there or again they have this expectation that Middle school is scary, that we are all kind of cut off and we're not really responsive' (Grade 9 Teacher N [H]).

Students' perceptions

Students on the whole, favoured three tier systems, as they felt Middle and Junior High schools were more attuned to their development, especially in terms of maturation, which they felt was subdued within K-8 campuses: 'I think you are introduced to that freedom a little earlier than K-8 schools because K-8 schools you're like seen with all the other little kids and when you're at Junior High people see you as not like a little kid, you're like kind of growing up to be like an adult' (Grade 9 student K, Kendall [navigated JH]). Students who had navigated two tier school systems also felt the same way: 'well I kind of think I would like it [High school] better if I went to like a Middle school because I feel like you're not around little kids and the teachers understand more of what you're like working with' (Grade 9 student K, Grace [navigated K-8]).

In line with this, Grade 9 High school students reported school choice systems to shape adjustment prior to and on entry to High school. For example, students who had navigated K-8 systems were seen as standing out from peers by being less prepared: 'I agree. I did feel like the 7th and 8th Graders [who had attended K-8 schools] from what I remember, they were a lot less prepared for going to High school because it was a lot bigger of a change' (Grade 9 Student K, Jennifer [navigated K-8]) and in their sense of maturity: 'everyone is just like way more grown up than they would be in a K-8, the Junior High school environment was way closer to a High school environment' (Grade 9 student K, Kendal [navigated JH]).

Summary

The decision about which school system to choose has a significant bearing on how students feel in their sense of self (especially maturity), perceptions of support (students often

reported feeling misunderstood in K-8 schools) and their feelings of readiness for High school. Acknowledging that during early adolescence 'children don't have it all together' (Grade 6 Teacher C [M]), adults favoured two-tier systems, whereas students preferred three-tier systems, often regardless of the system they had navigated, which is discussed in more detail below.

2. Managing students' emotions and appraisals during the Middle school years

Central to school choice decisions in the US, are perceptions of how to best support children during early adolescence (11-14 years), which differed amongst adults and students. Adults felt children needed consistency during this time, in other words a constant school environment and stable support from the same, trusted school staff. In comparison, students felt exposure to transition challenges (such as navigating a new school building and peer relationships) and 'High school' standards and customs (e.g. older children, more mature environment and new learning skills), was more important and would help them to negotiate High school transition. While the previous theme outlines stakeholder attitudes to the different systems, the themes below summarise perceptions of *how* the different systems can best support children.

Emotional instability and the need for consistency

Early adolescence was frequently depicted as a period of amplified development, where children are navigating significant biological changes: 'I think they are still trying to mature and figure themselves out' (Grade 7 Teacher I [M]). Unsurprisingly during this time emotions can be unstable and impact day-to-day school life, which was shown in the observations through emotional outbursts, especially in Middle and Junior High schools: 'they'll melt down and you know they'll be tears because they didn't get the class they

wanted, or they're having trouble with friends or just trouble trying to figure out where they fit in because it can be overwhelming' (Middle school counsellor P).

In fact, there was a sense of uncertainty towards the efficacy of the three-tier education systems in supporting and managing lots of similar age children with very sensitive issues within a concentrated space: 'It's really hard when you put thirteen- and fourteen-year olds together at the same time for two years. Everything is intense, it's amplified and that's such a critical age of development too where lots of things are happening you know physiologically, socially' (High school counsellor R, Tracy). In comparison, K-8 schools were deemed superior in providing children with much needed consistency during this time: 'I mean during the time when they're in the most turmoil, they would have more consistency in an Elementary level you know with one teacher or people who know them' (High School counsellor R: Cassandra).

This attitude was also voiced amongst some High school students who had navigated the three-tier system: 'I feel like I would want the time where I don't have to like worry about those things [environmental changes], because like, I mean we are all kids in Middle school, but we kind of still had that side of us that we were responsible' (Grade 9 student K, Tiffany [navigated M]).

Exposure, self-assurance and confidence

For students, Junior High schools (transition at age 12) and Middle schools (transition at age 11) were perceived as 'mini High schools' (Grade 7 student F, Lucy, [attending M]), that have similar environments to High schools: 'the Junior High school environment was closer to a High school environment than the K-8 so we just got even more prepared' (Grade 9 student J: Cole [navigated JH]). Children who were attending three-tier systems felt more confident moving to High school: 'I think I am going to find it easier going to High school by

going Middle school' (Grade 7 student G, Gabe [attending M]), and could not imagine transitioning to High school without this previous transfer: 'it's [Middle school] kinda like a bridge, without it you wouldn't get from Elementary school to High school' (Grade 6 student B: Evan [attending M]).

This was often because a transition to Middle or Junior High school provided children with transfer exposure prior to High school, as raised by one Grade 7 teacher: 'there's just a bigger leap, there's a bigger gap between K8, you're gonna keep them little longer and then all of a sudden they're thrown in with seniors and they didn't get to transition and kind of come into their own of being independent, making their own decisions, they're still kind of under the guise of you're little' (Grade 7 Teacher I [M]). In comparison, children within K-8 schools discussed being at a disadvantage by not having this: 'they don't really teach you anything about High school so I feel like if you don't have that Middle school in between it's just like, it's gonna be a really rough road' (Grade 9 student M, Sophie [navigated K-8]).

Some Grade 9 children who had attended K-8 schools would have preferred to attend a three-tier system: 'Yeah I went to a K-8 and I wish they would have split it up and made it more of a Middle school, so you know what to do when you reach High school' (Grade 9 J, Jake [navigated K-8]). However, others felt that transition exposure is not needed for all children to feel ready for High school, and instead transition readiness is dependent on the individuals' maturity: 'So I think a K-8 worked for me but I don't think it might work for everyone else, I think it depends on the person, their maturity' (Grade 9 student K, Grace [navigated K-8]).

Summary

Three-tier and two-tier school systems support children differently. K-8 schools provide children with consistency, time and space to work through pubescent, developmental

changes. In comparison, through transition to Middle or Junior High school, three-tier school systems provide children with transition exposure in preparation for High school transition.

3. Transfer timing and developmental readiness

Children's readiness to make a smooth transition was discussed as being strongly related to their *Maturation* and *Self-advocacy and independence.* The older children are when they transitioned schools, the more likely they are to have these skills which makes the transfer less disruptive for all stakeholders.

Maturation

It was acknowledged that transition was easier the older children are: 'I think in terms of cognitive development, in terms of social development, in terms of physical development, yeah I think it is better to do it a little bit later' (Grade 9 teacher N [H]). However, children's maturation, which not always correlated with age, was also discussed as shaping their developmental readiness for school transition: 'it depends on their maturity and their social-emotional skills, some kids it's better that they wait and then they go right into High school, for some it's been fine in 6th Grade' (Junior High school counsellor Q).

Within the three-tier education system, children either transition to Middle school at age 11 (Grade 6), or Junior High school at age 12 (Grade 7) prior to High school. The one academic school year between Grade 6 and 7 (age 11 and 12) was shown to be significant in terms of children's maturation: 'the students who come in 7th Grade are much more prepared than the students who come in 6th Grade. The Grade 6's are still trying to mature and figure their selves out. So I think it makes a difference, I think they're too immature' (Grade 7 teacher I [M]). This was also shown in the observations, especially within the Middle schools, where distinct social differences were shown between the Grade 6 and Grade 7 children.

Grade 7 and 8 children tended to socialise and integrate with each other, whereas Grade 6 children tended to socialise with solely Grade 6 children.

However, there were also advantages in transitioning children at Grade 6, as opposed to Grade 7, such as providing more time for staff to instil coping skills and resilience in preparation for High school transition: 'we see a big difference between 7th and 8th Grade and it's not really enough time for us to dig in and like provide some of the work that I am talking about, building up the perseverance' (Middle school counsellor P).

Self-advocacy and independence

It was clear that the older students were, the more likely they were to exhibit resourcefulness and help seeking behaviours, which were discussed as 'age-related' protective factors: 'if they have those skills, the coping skills, I think they're better able to adapt to the challenges' (Junior High school counsellor Q). Coping skills shaped social interactions. Middle school students (age 11-14) needed more support in solving peer disagreements, than High school students (age 14+) who had the advocacy to solve these problems themselves: 'I think the kids are pretty good at dealing with social issues for the most part, they have problems but they all kind of seem to work those out, it's minor' (Grade 9 teacher O [H]). This was also shown in the observations, Middle and Junior High school teachers spending more time resolving peer conflicts at break time, but also in lessons.

Similarly, the older the students were, the more likely they were to seek support from parents: 'when I was in Middle school I did not want to talk to my mom because I thought she was going to get mad' (...) 'I feel like you learn to appreciate them more as you grow up' (Grade 9 student M, Alice [navigated K-8]), and teachers: 'I have such a better relationship with my teachers in High school than I did in Middle school, because in Middle school they were just mean and I didn't want to like go to talk to them. You're also like immature in 7th

and 8th Grade' (Grade 9 student L, Jessica [navigated M]). This was shown in the observations, as High school students waited to see school counsellors during break times or arranged meetings themselves, whereas Middle and Junior High school students did not arrange meetings and were instead taken from lessons to see school counsellors if adults felt this support was needed.

The older students were, especially once at High school, the more likely they were to discuss the importance of the 'emotional parts to growing up' (Grade 9 student K, Kendal [navigated JH]) in both focus groups and day-to-day discussion shown in the observations. This suggests that once at High school, students also have more confidence in their self-advocacy to acknowledge what they need: 'if someone's like down on themselves in High School then it's probably not going to lead to a very good future but if they're always happy and seeing happy people who are supporting them then they're going to go on to do that with other people' (Grade 9 student L: Sophia [navigated JH]). It is important at this point to acknowledge that this may also be reflective of attitudes towards mental health in the US and their approach to mental health literacy.

Summary

The older children are when they transition schools the easier they seem to find it, and, as a result, High school transition is discussed as easier than Middle or Junior High school transition: 'I think a bigger transition for kids is actually moving from Elementary school to Middle school, I think that transition from Middle school to High school is less traumatic' (High school counsellor R, Dave). This is often because children are more mature and have superior coping resources with age. However, the later transition is delayed, the less time teachers have to instil these strategies in preparation for High school transition.

4. Transition support

Transition support was portrayed as vital pre, during and post school transfer, to establish an *Ethos of gradual change* and help with the *Reconfiguration of supportive relationships.* To provide this support, schools employ school counsellors, as discussed in the sub-theme *Specialised support.*

Ethos of gradual change

Students discussed school transition as smooth and linear as opposed to a series of transition disruption spikes, especially if they had navigated a three-tier system: 'people think that High school from Elementary school is like an exponential growth, it's really like a linear growth, it's not like easy, easy all of a sudden it just spikes up and it's really hard, it's really actually just kind of like a smooth line' (Grade 9 student J, Jason [navigated JH]). Nonetheless, these attitudes were unsurprising given the regular and consistent transfer acclimatisation efforts, which were phrased by schools as 'transfer demystification' strategies, to foster the notion of school transfer as a progression. This was shown in the observations and stemmed from High school academic and sports club posters displayed in school corridors and visits from High school Principals, to orientation meetings and 'open house' nights, where students could visit prospective High schools. Educators also emphasised the importance of gradual transfer provision throughout the transfer year to prevent a build-up of anxiety for both staff and students: 'I think you can stress a student out and that's when you see students with anxiety, it increases, and teachers are trying to close their year too and I think when it gets rushed it's not a good job done' (Grade 9 teacher N [H]).

Specialised support

School counsellors conduct the majority of parent and child transition support work within schools in the US. This not only supports teachers by reducing their workload, but also provides transfer children and parents with consistent, accessible and available support.

Support includes parent phone calls, 1:1 face-to-face consultation, in addition to family and student group sessions, which was observed.

To support parents, regular communication and timely support was discussed as paramount to prevent transference of their own stress: ‘we do a lot of work with just reassurance for parents, especially if it’s their first child’ (...) ‘there’s a lot of anxiety with the parents which I think can get translated down to the kids’ (Middle school counsellor P) and aid letting go processes: transition is a ‘learning time for everybody and most parents are receptive to that and then throughout the year they kind of let go a little bit more’ (Grade 6 teacher D [M]).

In supporting children, school counsellors discussed tailoring support to their unique needs: ‘each kid’s going to have different coping skills, so I think as counsellors we kind of follow up on that 1:1 and help the individual to figure that out’ (Middle school counsellor P). As a result, support differed depending on whether children transition schools at age 11 or 12 as opposed to 14, in that younger children received more hands on support provision, subject to the competing emotional challenges faced at this age: ‘I would say, probably the first year in Middle school they are dependent on the teacher regardless of the Grade’ (Grade 7 teacher H [JH]).

Reconfiguration of supportive relationships

School transition can be a period where relationships are in a state of disjunction. The extent and length of this disjunction was shown to be shaped by stakeholder’s ability to negotiate and manage new support networks. To help prepare children for this, advocating decision-making and help-seeking behaviours within Elementary and Middle schools was promoted amongst staff: ‘I think that’s so important not to immediately jump in, you have to

start fading some of these supports by 8th Grade, really watch, guide but don't do it for them' (Grade 9 teacher N [H]).

Supporting parents over school transition can also help children adjust over school transition: 'I think parent communication is probably the most effective and best way to support kids. If the parents are in the know then they help out quite a bit' (Grade 7 teacher I [M]) as 'it can be a challenge for the student when parents can tend to want them to go back to Middle school and seek out info rather than transition into High school because I think sometimes it's fearful, change can be fearful and I think that can confuse the student' (Grade 9 teacher P [H]).

Summary

In sum, transition is best when: 1. discussion of the transfer is gradual and integrated into school life (positioning transition as a progression being key), 2. both parents and students receive specialised support and 3. there is open communication across stakeholders so all are able to reconfigure supportive relationships.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to explore how school transition is managed and supported in the US to learn lessons to apply to the UK context. Most children in the UK make one educational transition at age 11 to secondary school, which, in contrast to the age at which children transition schools in other countries, is early. Thus, we specifically wanted to examine the significance of transfer timing on students' adjustment by contrasting differences in transition provision and preparation, dependent on the child's age at transfer. As children in schools in Northern California can also transition schools at age 11 or 12 prior to High school transfer at age 14, we were able to assess the perceived 'optimal age' for school transition, in

addition to examining the impact of navigating a previous school transition on future transition, to answer four research questions, which are addressed in turn.

1. How are educational transitions managed and supported in the US?

Prior to selecting a school for their child to attend, parents in the US must also select either a two or three tier school system, which enables parents to match their child's schooling to their child's specific needs. This individualised, child-centred approach is in line with Eccles and Midgley's (1989) SEF theory, which emphasises the importance of a developmental match between a child's psychological needs and their environment. While a change in policy would be an ambitious proposal to enable school transition to be made at a time which matches children's individual developmental needs, these findings demonstrate the need to consider how to manage educational transition and support transfer children in the UK where children transition to secondary school much earlier. To do this, recent directions in SEF theory, need to be at the forefront of provisions, particularly Symonds and Hargreaves' (2016) extension of the role of time-specific SEF transition adjustment phases, such as early transition preparations and encounters, which adults could support to ensure children's expectations and anxiety are moderated. This was shown in the present research through the 'transfer demystification' strategies, to foster the notion of school transfer as a progression, in addition to orientation meetings and 'open house' nights. School choice decisions were also shown to be shaped by parents' appraisals of the different school systems (two-tier vs. three-tier), especially with regards to how their child will be supported, which was not always well-informed. This again has useful implications when considering secondary school choice decisions in the UK, which can have a significant impact on children's short- and long- term adjustment (Bywater & Utting, 2012). To do this parents need to be supported from as early as Year 5, when 79% are already considering primary-secondary school transition (McGee, Ward, Gibbons & Harlow, 2003).

In line with recent UK school mental health reforms (DfEd & DfH, 2017), US schools employ school counsellors to provide specialised and targeted school transition emotional centred support for children, but also their parents, within the school setting. This is a sharp contrast to our current limited emotional centred transfer provision in the UK (Symonds, 2015), which can vary from one school to the next, especially when there is no central steer from the government. Nonetheless, this is something that could be applied through these reforms.

As recommended in Bagnall, Skipper and Fox's (2019) focus group study, providing Year 6 children with gradual and sensitive transfer support is important. This finding was echoed in the current study as within schools in the US, transition was portrayed as an educational continuation and progression, as opposed to a loss, which directly contrasts with how secondary school transfer is often discussed in the UK (Bagnall et al., 2019). Thus, the present findings provide support for Symonds' (2015) review regarding the need for socio-emotional transfer support interventions (see Bagnall (2020) for a full outline of emotional centred primary-secondary school transition interventions and their limitations), in addition to continuity and progression in the lead up to and over this period.

2. Do transition provisions differ across school systems (K-8 Elementary schools vs. 6-8 Middle schools vs. 7-8 Junior High schools)?

Middle and Junior High schools were often portrayed as 'mini-High schools' where more emphasis and support is placed on High school transition. In comparison, K-8 Elementary schools were seen as more nurturing, keeping children in a younger and more child-friendly environment with the intention to reduce problems associated with pubescent and development change and where discussion of High school transition is minimal. As discussed below, while there is value in children transitioning schools at a later age, children

who have navigated the two-tier K-8 school system can feel less prepared for High school transition.

3. **Does the age (Grade 6 or 7 vs. Grade 9) at which children navigate transition shape their experiences and adjustment?**

For all stakeholders, later educational transitions were less traumatic and easier to negotiate. Even the difference of one academic school year (between age 11 and 12), was discussed as making a huge difference in children's maturity and readiness to transfer schools. This is in concordance with previous scholars (Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010) and sheds greater light on Ge et al.'s (2001) *Developmental Readiness Hypothesis*. These findings are suggestive of the need for children to transfer schools at the earliest at age 12, and when this is not the case, greater support is needed. This has useful implications for primary-secondary school transition in the UK where children transition to secondary school at age 11. Nonetheless, as discussed below, there is value in children making a previous school transition prior to High school transfer, and so educational practitioners and parents (especially US parents who can choose the school system they would like their child to attend) must address this conflict in line with their child's individual needs.

4. **To what extent does navigation of prior educational transition to Middle or Junior High school at Grade 6 or 7 influence children's experience of later transition to High school?**

As discussed above, the notion of early adolescence being an amplified stage in development underpinned perceptions of how best to approach school transition. Interwoven within this was an inherent conflict between the need for students to have exposure to transition experience to prepare them for High school transition, and the need to maintain consistency to help students emotionally during this vulnerable time. Attitudes were split

across stakeholders, students favouring a school transition prior to High school transfer, whereas parents and teachers preferred one transition at age 14 to High school. This conflict is not surprising as previous literature has shown perceptions of school context to differ across participant groups (Kim et al., 2014), demonstrating the need to understand why certain stakeholders may favour specific systems.

However, empirically students' perceptions are relatively unexplored, despite consistent recommendations endorsing the importance of valuing their first-hand insight (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016) and involving them in decision-making (van Rens, Haelermans, Groot & van den Brink, 2018). Thus, one of the key strengths of the present research was obtaining first-hand insight into the transition period from students and using this, in addition to acknowledging parent and teacher concerns, to make recommendations. In line with this, one recommendation of the present paper is for future interventions to recognise the value of students' past experiences, and how their thoughts and feelings around a previous transition can aid future transitional adjustment. In the present study, this was a school transition, but in the context of the UK where children do not commonly make a school transition prior to primary-secondary school transition, this could also pertain to other transitions children may have experienced, e.g. moving house, the birth of a new sibling.

Moreover, it is important to note that transfer timing is also susceptible to individual differences (Gerber et al., 2013), as while it was recognised that exposure to previous school transition can be helpful for children in managing differentiations between school standards and expectations, and testing resilience and coping strategies (Andrews & Bishop, 2012), not all students need this. As shown in previous research, transitional adjustment can be context dependent (Vaz et al., 2014) and shaped by students' appraisals (Mandleco, 2000), which are susceptible to change over time. This was shown in Symonds and Hargreaves' (2016) qualitative research, which found SEF interactions to be time-specific, children negotiating

three processes: preparation (formation of expectations and anxieties relating to the upcoming school transition), encounter (in order to feel safe and positively adapt, children seek protective resources such as friendships) and adjustment (ongoing successful adaptation to the school environment). Therefore, it is important that school transition research and intervention, seeks to understand what is transitionally best to support each individual student and provide support within school and home environments that is responsive to children's changing developmental needs.

General Discussion

Transition periods are an unavoidable part of life, often conceptualised as 'windows of opportunity' imperative for personal growth and learning (Rice et al., 2015, p.9). By enabling parents to select either a two or three-tier school system for their child, parents in the US can match their child's schooling to the specific needs and disposition of their child. Nonetheless, parents' appraisals towards the different systems, can also shape these decisions and lead to parents' favouring smaller and more sheltered K-8 campuses, which might not be in their child's best interests.

However, it is important to acknowledge that there are many benefits to the K-8 system in that it offers consistency for children across a key developmental period. This maps onto why Middle schools were once favoured in the UK, where, unlike the lower end of the secondary school, children would continue to have consistency, through stable support from one teacher (Crook, 2008). In addition to this, schools in the UK could also learn from US schools in how they approach school transition as a *gradual progression*, rather than a *loss*, which is what often happens in the UK (Bagnall et al., 2019). The specialised support for transition would also be very welcome in the UK educational system.

Moreover, as shown in the present research, the timing of transition is crucial, especially when concerning children's emotional well-being. When simultaneous change is navigated, or students are ill-equipped, whether this is because they are: not developmentally old enough, or do not exhibit sufficient coping strategies or social support, transition can be a high-risk time (Topping, 2011), impacting all stakeholders (parents, students and teachers). The present research has found support for this body of research in two ways. Firstly, that transition is easier for all stakeholders the older students are. Secondly, past transition experience (from Elementary to Middle or Junior High school at age 11 or 12) can make future transition easier by providing students with exposure to transfer challenge and discontinuity. However, it is acknowledged that these two issues are in conflict. Transition appears to be better the older children are, but then the transition, when it happens, is a bigger 'leap'. This might be more noticeable in the US because children have navigated different systems, with those within the K-8 system appearing to other children and adults as not quite as prepared for the move as children within the Junior High or Middle school system. This has useful implications for transition provision once children are at High school, and the need for an individualised, targeted approach to this, so that children who have not navigated a previous transition receive more support, which is in line with Eccles and Midgley's (1989) SEFtheory.

Broader developmental changes, such as puberty, cognition, emotional and interpersonal relationships are likely to also influence adolescents' adjustment (Žukauskiené, 2014), puberty in particular shown to cause emotional changes, such as feelings of irritability and anxiety amongst girls, and behavioural issues for boys (Symonds, 2009). However, few studies use longitudinal methodologies to explore emotional-wellbeing across time from a developmental perspective (Realo & Dobewall, 2011). A gap also exists in more theory driven literature, as to date sparse attention has been made to develop models to account for

the complex, multi-faceted nature of school transition (González-Carrasco et al., 2017). Thus, the present study has also made preliminary progress in doing this by obtaining holistic insight from all key stakeholders, providing greater support for Ge et al.'s (2002) *Developmental Readiness Hypothesis* and Eccles and Midgley's (1993) SEF theory.

Nonetheless, as demonstrated in González-Carrasco et al.'s (2017) recent longitudinal study, self-reports of subjective well-being are shown to start declining between age 11 and 12, which directly corresponds to the age at which students transition to secondary school in the UK and Middle school in the US. As shown in previous literature, but also in the present research, school transition at age 11 is shown to be most traumatic and hardest to manage. This has so far been explained with relation to early adolescence being a stressful and emotional period, which, when navigated alongside school transition heavily impacts children's adjustment. Thus, the present findings have useful implications in suggesting that educational transition onset in the UK is an issue worthy of debate.

However, it is important to note that the present research set out to simply explore the impact of transition timing on students' adjustment and evaluate support provision using a qualitative design. Nonetheless, further quantitative research is needed to explicitly isolate and compare specific adjustment differences attributable to puberty and transition (Laird & Marrero, 2011). The present study was conducted with a relatively small number of schools within one state, precluding generalisations that can be made across districts, regions and countries. Moreover, while students were selected at random to participate in the present study by class teachers, it may have been that the students who agreed to take part had more positive transition experiences.

It also needs to be acknowledged that subject to cultural differences, findings drawn from the US on how educational transitions are managed and supported, might not map onto

provisions carried out internationally, and thus comparisons should be made with caution. As raised in the present research, differences in attitudes towards mental health in the US and their approach to mental health literacy differs from that of the UK. The employment of school counsellors in all US Elementary, Middle, Junior High and High schools to support students and parents, also contrasts greatly with UK schools.

In sum, in order to improve primary-secondary school transition in the UK, acknowledgement that parents, students and teachers all have a stake in negotiation of this time, is paramount, which the present research has made preliminary steps in doing. In addition to this, by comparing transition onset times, which again to date has been minimal, the present research has also uncovered how varying school systems differentially shape adolescents' developmental needs. However, there is need for further investigations into changes in students' emotional well-being over adolescence, and this period, which are to date limited in scope. Thus, further longitudinal and intervention comparative research is needed using wider cross-cultural samples, especially children between age 11 and 12. This would enable us to unravel the pathogenesis and progression in emotional well-being changes and their interaction with transfer timing, to further understand why transition timing appears to be at odds with children's developmental readiness. Nonetheless, by contrasting difference in transition experience and provision across different transfer systems (two-tier vs. three-tier [within this Middle and Junior High schools]), the present study has made preliminary progress in exploring the significance of transfer timing on students' adjustment.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Semi-structure focus group guides Student focus group questions

Parents Interview Questions- Grade 8 Elementary school

1. How has the last few months leading up to High school transition been?
    - Have you or your child encountered any problems? If so how were they resolved?
    - Were you excited/nervous/sad to say goodbye?
    - Could you talk about your feelings with your child and vice versa?

2. In your opinion, is your child's behaviour changing as the transfer draws nearer?
    - When?
    - How did you deal with this?
    - What about communication, how is it?

3. How has the support from your child's Elementary and High school been?
    - What support do you receive?
    - Is this useful?
    - Could it be better?
    - What type of support provisions would be more helpful?

4. In some districts there are Junior High or Middle schools and children make two, as opposed to one, educational transitions before High school, by moving from Junior High school to High school at the end of Grade 6. What are your thoughts concerning this?

- Do you think the transition to Junior High school at the end of Grade 6 is helpful?
- Do you think children are more prepared for High school if they have transitioned schools before?

5. Children in the UK move to High school at age 11, whereas children move to High school here at age 14. Do you think the age in which children transition to High school is important? (Why)

6. Some parents have discussed the transfer as a process of letting go. Would you agree?
    - Do you feel that children's readiness/level of preparation plays a part?
    - Has knowing/having older children already navigated the process had an impact?

7. Does the parenting role change over the transfer period?
    - Do you feel that children's readiness/level of preparation plays a part?
    - Does your own willingness to transfer responsibility shape this?

8. Is there anything you would have liked to have done differently?

Teachers Interview Questions

1. On the whole how well do you feel the children in your class are ready for High school/settled into High school?
    - Have you encountered any problems? If so how were they resolved?
    - How does this year compare to previous years?

2. Are you noticing changes in your class' behaviours and dynamics now you are approaching/following the transfer period? What are they?
    - When did they manifest?
    - How do you adapt to this?

3. How would you describe the teacher-child relationship over the transfer period?
    - Does this change?

4. With reference to past experience, how do you feel is best to address transfer problems?
    - What have you done in the past?

5. The transfer from Elementary/Middle/Junior High to High school, or Elementary to Middle/Junior High is a significant life event for parents in addition to children? What are your thoughts concerning the parent role?
    - Can parents influence the adjustment process? (positive and negative)
    - What are your experiences working alongside parents?
    - How do you feel is best to manage parental concerns?

6. What provisions do you carry out in your Elementary school/Middle/Junior High school to prepare Grade 8 children for High school?

7. What are your thoughts concerning levels of pre-transfer support?
    - Should Elementary/Junior High/Middle schools be placing more emphasis on the transfer?
    - Should provision be integrated into the Grade 9 school year?
    - What else could High schools/Elementary/Middle/Junior High schools do to support you?

8. In your experience what qualities do well prepared pupils possess?
    - Level of parental support
    - Degree of insight into what to expect
    - Certain skillset/resilience to negotiate challenges

9. In some districts there are Junior High or Middle schools and children make two, as opposed to one educational transition, and move from Elementary school to Junior High school at the end of Grade 6. What are your thoughts concerning this?
    - Do you think the transition to Junior High school at the end of Grade 6 is helpful?
    - Do you think children are more prepared for High school if they have transitioned schools before?

10. Children in the UK move to High school at age 11, whereas children move to High school here at age 14. Do you think the age in which children transition to High school is important? (Why)

11. How do you feel the transition could be navigated more smoothly? Is there anything that could be done differently

Student Interview Questions

Warm up:

1. One phrase or word that comes to mind when you think of Elementary/Middle school/Junior High school?

   (In other words try to sum up Elementary/Middle school in one word).

2. One phrase or word that comes to mind when you think of Middle school/High school?

Focus Group Questions-Students

1. Before moving to Middle school/High school what are pupils most looking forward to?

2. Is there anything pupils do not look forward to?
   - How do pupils deal with these worries?
   - What do they do?

3. How was the summer leading up to the transfer?
   - Were you and your classmates excited/nervous?
   - Could you and your classmates talk about your feelings? Who was best to do this with?

4. Did your Elementary/Middle/Junior High schools prepare you for the move to High school?
   - What did you do?

- Would you have liked more support? When?
- What else could they have done to prepare you?

5. How would you describe your relationships with your teachers over the transfer period?
    - Do you feel that you have a different relationship with your High school teachers than you had with your Elementary/Middle/Junior High school teachers? In what way is this different?
    - Is this different for boys/girls?

6. Do relationships with parents change over the transition period?
    - When did this change?
    - Why do you think this is?
    - Can you talk to them more or less?
    - Is this different for boys/girls?

7. What advice would you give to parents to help them advise pupils about moving to Middle/High school?
    - What about teachers and schools

8. In general (and without mentioning particular people) how well do you feel Grade 9 pupils have settled into High school?
    - Without referring to particular people, have people encountered any problems? If so how were they addressed? Could this have been done differently?

- What sort of things were put in place by the school to make the transition a bit easier? What did you think of this?

9. How do you feel we can best prepare pupils for the transition to Middle/High school?
    - Is there anything you would have liked to have been done differently?

10. What top tips would you give Grade 9 pupils about to experience the transfer?