How can we improve children's emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transition?

C L Bagnall

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CHARLOTTE LOUISE BAGNALL

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Abstract

Primary-secondary school transition is a major life event for eleven-year-old children in the UK. During this time children face simultaneous discontinuity and challenge, which can heavily draw on their ability to cope. However, support efforts to improve children's emotional experiences of primary-secondary school transition are minimal, both in research and practice. Interventions that have been developed to counter the negative outcomes children commonly experience during the transition are limited in number, sustainability and reach. Furthermore, very few interventions focus on supporting children's emotional well-being.

Talking about School Transition (TaST), which is an emotional-centred support intervention, was developed to fill this gap in the literature. To inform the design and delivery of TaST, data were collected in both the UK and USA, in mainstream and special schools, obtaining insight from multiple stakeholders. For *Study 1*, UK children's, parents' and teachers' retrospective experiences of school transition and how they felt this period could be improved were explored using focus groups. For *Study 2*, case study research was conducted in the US to examine the 'optimal time' for school transition and examine differences in transition preparations and experiences. For *Study 3*, case study research was conducted in a special school to examine how children with *pre-existing* emotional problems cope with the added apprehension and anxiety that comes with school transition and how they are supported. Together this insight was used to develop TaST which was evaluated in *Study 4*.

The evaluation of TaST consisted of a longitudinal follow up questionnaire-based design and investigated the efficacy of TaST in improving children's coping efficacy and adjustment, assessed using the outcome variables *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems* and *Transition Worries*. Results suggested that TaST had immediate positive implications for participating Year 6 children who showed a significantly greater reduction in *Transition Worries* scores once at secondary school, compared to control children. TaST also has implications for educational practice and policy in elucidating the importance of supporting children's emotional well-being over this period. Further research is needed using larger sample sizes followed over time and contrasted with targeted approaches.

Contents

Chapter 1: Literature Review

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1.1.   Background

Transition is an 'inevitable part of life' (Coffey, 2013, p. 261), and can be defined as, 'any episode where children are having to cope with potentially challenging episodes of change' (Newman & Blackburn, 2002, p. 1). During transition periods, children can be at greater risk of poor adjustment (Neal & Yelland, 2014) as previously-learned behaviour patterns need to be adapted to enable children to cope with new demands and more challenging environments (Hanewald, 2013). Thus, transition periods are often conceptualised as a 'time of threat' (Newman & Blackman, 2002, p. 17), especially when concerning the development of mental health complaints (Topping, 2011). However, transition periods can also set in motion chains of events that can have positive effects on well-being over extended periods of time following adaptation (Rutter, 1989). Thus, transition can also provide 'windows of opportunity' (Rice et al., 2015, p. 9) for growth and learning (Sirsch, 2003).

School transition, which has received most attention empirically, is no exception, and was first coined as a 'status passage' by Measor and Woods in 1984. Elaborating on this definition, Hallinan and Hallinan (1992) positioned school transition as both a step up and a step down for children, what they defined as a 'transfer paradox', as in order to gain a level of autonomy and maturity reflective of the new school environment the child is transferring to, the child must be willing to give up the support, familiarity and protection of the school they are leaving behind. Whilst most children will have negotiated changes that could be defined as a transition prior to school transition, such as the birth of a new sibling, moving to a new house, and parental divorce, school transition is the first time when the child is the sole focus of the transitional experience (Symonds, 2015). This again reinforces how school transition is a critical period in children's development.

Primary to secondary school transition (where children move from Year 6 in primary school to Year 7 in secondary school in the UK), which approximately half a million eleven-year-old children negotiate each year in the UK (Symonds, 2015) has been conceptualised as a 'challenge of living' (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008, p.217) and argued

as 'one of the most difficult (transitions) in pupils' educational careers' (Zeedyk et al., 2003, p. 67). For example, coupled with primary-secondary school transition being the first transition that the child will make alone (Symonds, 2015), the transition period also coincides with the onset of biological pubescent changes (Ng-Knight et al., 2016) and competing school-based pressures, such as academic national Standard Assessment Tests (SATs). In addition to this, within a very short period, Year 7 children are required to navigate simultaneous environmental (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008), academic (Anderson et al., 2000) and social changes (Symonds & Galton, 2014). Navigating these simultaneous changes can heavily shape children's ability to cope. For example, research has shown that adults are far more concerned by major life events, which, in the case of primary-secondary school transition would be the transfer to secondary school, in itself. In comparison, for children, although the move is a cause of significant anxiety, daily hassles, such as disagreements with friends and getting lost, indicative of negotiating simultaneous environmental, academic and social transition changes, are perceived as more difficult (Akos & Galassi, 2004). This is in line with the Strength Model of Self-Control (Baumeister et al., 2007), which posits that an individual's ability to cope deteriorates as the number of stressors in their life accumulates, co-exists and persists.

This literature review will firstly outline in turn the environmental, academic and social changes children face over primary-secondary school transition to put this period into context. Then, bringing together this research, there will be discussion of how navigating these simultaneous changes over primary-secondary school transition can significantly influence children's emotional well-being. Finally, drawing on resilience theory, there will be discussion pertaining to how both internal factors, (i.e. children's coping efficacy), and external factors, (i.e. social support obtained from parents, teachers and peers), can protect children during this time. To enable a specific focus, literature specifically relating to primary-secondary school transition in the UK will be prioritised within the review.

1.1.1.   Environmental changes

In the space of a year, eleven-year-old children transition from small and often tight-knit primary school environments, where most children have very stable, personal and close relationships with peers and class teachers, to enter larger and less familiar secondary schools (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Repositioned as the youngest and

smallest children within a larger, older and anonymous school body, the transfer unsurprisingly brings with it inherent changes in Year 7 children's sense of self and identity at school. This is summarised well by Summerfield (1986), 'from being the oldest, most responsible, best known and most demonstrably able - both academically and physically - these children became the youngest, least knowing and least known members of the community in which they find themselves' (Summerfield, 1986, p. 11).

School transition also brings structural changes in the school environment. For example, from the onset of Year 7, children must learn to navigate their way around the newer, much larger secondary school building (Mowat, 2019). Whilst negotiating these physical environmental changes, Year 7 transfer children are also required to adjust to new customs and organisational structures, such as moving between classrooms, different subjects and remembering to bring equipment for each lesson. This is far from the 'culture of care' ethos children are accustomed to at primary school where children spend most of their day in the same classroom (where all equipment is provided) with the same teacher and the same group of peers (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Taken together it is unsurprising to see how these disparities contribute to the 'transfer paradox' that is school transition. This arises because Year 7 children negotiate many changes to fulfil their new identity as a secondary school child that are often discontinuous with what they were accustomed to at primary school (Hallinan & Hallinan, 1992).

Research has consistently shown that many of the problematic aspects of primary-secondary school transition stem from formal and informal differences between primary and secondary school environments (Mackenzie et al., 2012). Formal environmental changes pertain to schools' physical environments (e.g. school size, cohort, organisation), and informal environmental changes refer to aspects of the schools that may not be initially visible (e.g. school standards, learning styles and ethos).

Children's appraisals towards formal and informal discontinuities, and their adjustment towards these changes, can vary across time; therefore, it is paramount that when investigating school transition experiences, researchers consider both formal and informal discontinuities and use longitudinal designs. For example, in the lead up to primary-secondary school transition, it is the formal environmental changes that are shown to be at the forefront of children's minds. As conceptualised by Symonds (2015) as the 'dual nature' of school transition, children are shown to feel excited towards these

formal changes, many looking forward to moving between classes for different lessons and having more opportunities (Zeedyk, et al., 2003), but formal changes also cause the most anxiety, e.g. fears of 'getting lost' (Qualter et al., 2007). For example, between 10% and 20% of children are reported to worry about formal environmental changes, such as increased school size when they move to secondary school (Gray et al., 2011).

However, within the first term of secondary school, when the children become more settled, the majority of formal environmental concerns (such as anxieties pertaining to adjusting to new routines and the school size) dissipate (Rice et al., 2011), which demonstrates the short-lived nature of these concerns. However, during this time is when children begin to realise that they may have underestimated the significance of informal environmental changes they will encounter at secondary school, such as changes in social climate and negotiating new school standards, which takes more time to become familiar with (West et al., 2010). In Rice et al.'s (2011) longitudinal study conducted in the UK, new expectations and secondary school rules were shown to account for 40% of variance in concerns at both primary school and into secondary school. Moreover, in Chedzoy and Burden's (2005) survey study, also conducted in the UK, when asked to comment on the general ambience of the new secondary school environment six months into the transfer period, 25% of Year 7 children reported the school to be an 'unexciting place' and 15% of children indicated that it was 'definitely not friendly'. Given that informal environmental factors, such as perceptions of belonging and connection at school are shown to predict children's well-being, especially in the first year of secondary school and can be longstanding (Lester & Cross, 2015), these findings are concerning.

Extending on the above findings, Chedzoy and Burden (2005) also asked the children reasons why they felt secondary school was unfriendly and unexciting, and it was clear that certain aspects of primary school were heavily missed, such as being the oldest and having younger friends and siblings. This is unsurprising as while transfer children are moving to often much larger secondary schools and given greater opportunities than they had at primary school, they also become the youngest children in a much older and mature school body. Year 7 children are also the least known children within secondary school, which has the capacity to produce feelings of irrelevance and anonymity. This can be a significant source of stress for children, and shape concerns about safety and making

friends (Booth & Sheehan, 2008), in addition to feelings of low self-esteem, worth and competence (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008).

Changes in the school ethos and climate at secondary school are also a significant contrast to the feelings of safety and a sense of belonging transfer children commonly have about primary school (Prince & Hadwin, 2013). Unsurprisingly, it is common for Year 7 children to miss primary school (Mowat, 2019), and poor transition experiences are especially prominent amongst children who feel this way (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Nonetheless, for transfer children to move on and fulfil their new role as a Year 7 child, they must be willing to negotiate informal and formal environmental changes, despite the former often taking greater time to adjust to (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012). Psychological research has shown the significance of nurturing school environments, especially during times of change such as primary-secondary school transition (Booth & Sheehan, 2008). Thus, it is paramount that secondary schools strive to support Year 7 children who may be grieving the loss of their primary school (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008), and help them to build a sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness within their new secondary school environment, as when these needs are met there is a meaningful improvement in children's psychosocial well-being (Lester et al., 2014) and attainment (Gillison et al., 2008).

Support efforts around transition should begin at primary school, especially given that Year 6 children often underestimate informal environmental changes (van Rens et al., 2018), to help children set realistic expectations of what secondary school environments will be like and establish strategies to cope with these changes. This can be aided by familiarising children with their new school environment and people within it (Ashton, 2008) prior to primary-secondary school transition, during taster, move -up days and school induction, to decrease the amount of stress associated with school transition (Booth & Sheehan, 2008). Moreover, research has shown that children who show superior adjustment over primary-secondary school transition attended secondary schools which had very close links and co-ordination with their primary school (Evangelou et al., 2008). Thus, maintaining consistency through communication and collaboration across primary and secondary schools is paramount, and where this is not possible, greater support for the child within both schools is needed; this could take the form of support groups such as nurture groups (Anderson et al., 2000).

In sum, children face both formal and informal environmental discontinuities over primary-secondary school transition. While, the former can cause the most anxiety prior to secondary school transition, once at secondary school, these concerns dissipate. In comparison, informal environmental changes are often unanticipated prior to the transition, and once at secondary school take longer to adjust to. As discussed above, supporting children during this time, to negotiate both formal and informal environmental discontinuities, is critical, both prior to school transition and when they are in secondary school.

1.1.2. Academic changes

In addition to negotiating organisational changes within the school environment, Year 7 children also face considerable academic changes, from *what* they are taught to the *way* that they are taught. However, despite the National Curriculum being introduced to provide continuity and a progressive trajectory of learning across all Key Stages (Braund & Driver, 2005), problems pertaining to learning disjunction and curriculum discontinuity are of significant concern over primary-secondary school transition (Galton et al., 1999). This can be reflected in the commonly reported post-transfer academic attainment 'dip', which can stretch from the end of primary school to three years into secondary school (West et al., 2010). For example, Galton et al. (2003) found around half of Year 7 children to make no gains in English and Science levels by the end of the academic year. For 40% of pupils this was shown to be attributed to environmental change and curriculum discontinuity.

Dips in academic performance over the transition year in the UK are commonly attributed to curriculum disruption and academic narrowing influenced by increased concentration on Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) in the Year 6 transfer year. However, academic dips during the initial transition period are also shown cross-culturally, when transition is made at different ages in different educational systems, including Australia (Hopwood et al., 2017), the USA (Akos et al., 2015) and within Europe (Alexander, 2010). These findings suggest that academic pressures in Year 6 may not be exerting as much of an impact on adjustment as initially believed. Instead, the nature of school transition and the simultaneous changes children face during this time may be a 'weak link in the education system' (Hirsch, 1998, p.70).

School transition bears remarkable similarities cross-culturally and attainment dips could be argued to be largely subject to the disparity between the cultures of the school the child is moving to and the school left behind (Ashton, 2008). For example, findings from the US demonstrate that the larger the High school and when schools take in children from a number of feeder schools, the greater the dips in academic attainment (Alspaugh, 1998). Nonetheless, while support for these findings are shown in the UK (Symonds, 2015), it is worth noting that there is considerably less research examining children's achievement in the UK over transition in comparison to the US. This may be in part subject to the grading system the UK uses. In comparison, to the US where children are formally graded annually, in the UK, from completing their National Assessment SATs in Year 6, children are then not formally assessed until their Gradual Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in Year 11. This is a large gap for researchers to trace.

Shedding greater light on this decline in academic achievement and considering the grading system in the UK, declines in children's progress over primary-secondary school transition in the UK have been reported in numerous studies conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Galton et al. (1999) reviewed a number of transition studies and professional reports and found evidence for a post-transition dip during primary-secondary school transition. For instance, it was found that 6.1% of children made no achievement gains over the transition period and just under one third of transfer children made achievement losses (Galton & Willcocks, 1983). These findings were concurrently supported three decades later (Galton et al., 2002) and more recently by Cauley and Javanovich (2006) who found declines in academic attainment amongst 38% of children after the transition to secondary school, and West and Schwerdt (2012), who found declines in reading abilities to be as large as seven months of learning. This suggests that these findings are relatively robust.

These studies tend to dominate in many transition reviews (Evans et al., 2018), often because they were conducted in the UK and used a longitudinal design (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). Yet, it is worth acknowledging that these studies were conducted several years ago. Since then there has been vast changes within education systems and technological advancements, which may additionally impact transfer children's emotional well-being and their learning environment (Males et al., 2017). Nonetheless, to date very few studies have investigated the impact of these changes on emotional well-being and

achievement over primary-secondary school transition in the UK (Evans et al., 2018), which highlights the need for more research in this area.

Attainment dip findings should be taken tentatively when considering the contexts in which assessments are made. For example, when children's attainment on 'high-stakes' tests at the end of KS2 in primary school are compared with their performance a few months later on relatively 'low-stakes' tests administered in Year 7 by secondary schools, it is plausible that children's performance may have differed due to the different contexts in which the two assessments were made. Furthermore, there is often greater focus placed on academic attainment during Year 6. Thus, even when SATs scores are not used as a baseline measure, it is plausible that subject to the pressure children experience towards tests in Year 6, dips in attainment would be shown on any academic test, if scores are compared at a less stressful testing period. For example, in Year 7, greater emphasis is often placed on children's settlement into secondary school as opposed to their academic performance, especially by children themselves, in comparison to in Year 6 when national assessments often take precedence (Zeedyk et al., 2003).

Dips in academic performance have also been shown in policy documents, such as Ofsted inspections, which show proportions of schools where attainment was judged to be 'unsatisfactory' between the end of Key Stage 2 (KS2) and the early stages of Year 7 to have risen to 50% (OFSTED, 1998). However, again, measurement constraints need to be considered. For example, different groups of inspectors (primary-oriented and secondary-oriented) made assessments at the two time-points, which is concerning given that perceptions from 'sending' and 'receiving' schools can differ in terms of what constitutes progress. Thus, while it is acknowledged that there are dips in attainment over the transition period, it is unclear how large these differences may be because of constraints in test comparison in both policy and research studies (Galton et al., 1999).

Academic attainment dips have also been shown to be susceptible to both gender and ethnic differences. For example, Riglin et al.'s (2013) longitudinal research found that for boys only, school concerns and anxiety at the start of Year 7 predicted lower attainment at the end of Year 7. Whereas for girls, school concerns and anxiety did not adversely affect attainment, and for some girls correlated with higher attainment. Together, these findings demonstrate the more complex relationship between children's psychological well-being and academic attainment across the transition period (Riglin et

al., 2013). Children who are from ethnic minorities are also shown to be more susceptible to academic worries and decreased school bonding (Benner & Graham, 2007) and in turn academic underachievement over the transition from primary to secondary school (Symonds & Galton, 2014).

The Observational Research and Classroom Learning Evaluation (ORACLE), which was published in two volumes: Moving from the Primary Classroom (Galton & Willcocks, 1983) and Inside the Secondary Classroom (Delamont and Galton, 1986), shed initial light on the reasons for dips in academic attainment over the transition period. For this, teachers and children were observed termly for three days using systematic observation schedules and children's attitudes and attainment were measured on three occasions using self-report. (Galton & Willcocks 1983). It was concluded that lack of curriculum continuity and the incompatibility of teaching methods in the feeder and transfer schools were a major factor in shaping these declines (Delamont & Galton, 1986). This observation research was followed up two decades later, where dips were also shown to be attributable to differences in teaching methods (such as less interaction at secondary school), learning styles and curriculum discontinuity, from primary school to secondary school, in addition to falls in children's motivation and learning disengagement (Hargreaves & Galton, 2002). These findings have been corroborated more recently, where motivation has been shown to peak in the first term of school transition, but after this decline to levels sustained in the final year of primary school (Delamont & Galton, 2014). This was also shown through the robust evidence presented in Jindal-Snape et al.'s (2020) international review, where, amongst negative educational transition experiences, were lack of curricular continuity and progression. There was also shown to be a clear decline in well-being and educational outcomes, including motivation to learn and school engagement, following the initial transition period.

Decline of motivational behaviours initially following transition can also be explained in line with the temporary 'honeymoon transition period' children experience during initial transition, where anxieties are reduced in the short term as children perceive their new secondary school environment through rose-coloured glasses (Hargreaves, 1984). Originally attributed to transition anxieties which are shown to temporarily reduce or disappear during the first term of secondary school, and then increase again in the following term (Galton et al., 2000), it is plausible that an initial

increase in motivation may similarly be short lived once the novelty of the transition starts to wear off, and children feel settled in their new school. This can be shaped by environmental factors. For example, teachers have been shown to be more permissive during the early months of secondary school (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008), but as the year continues this is no longer shown, which can be overwhelming for children to adjust to (West et al., 2010).

Furthermore, and in line with Attentional Control Theory (Eysenck et al., 2007), which outlines how children's emotions, namely anxiety can interfere with selective attention during learning, it is plausible that internal factors may also interfere with their learning. In other words, children's anxiety over the initial transfer period may result in more energy placed on coping than learning. For example, Symonds' (2009) longitudinal research, which compared primary-secondary school transfer children's adjustment against a group of same-aged children attending Middle school, found children negotiating primary-secondary school transition to report shifts in complex thought, memory-loss, perceptions of work progress and learning enjoyment, post transition, whereas children remaining in Middle school did not. This suggests that it is the negative emotions associated with school transition and not children's age which may interfere with children's learning.

Extending on this research, Jindal-Snape et al.'s (2020) recent systematic review, found consistent robust evidence that educational and well-being outcomes decline over primary-secondary school transition, and suggested a link between the two. However, due to the limited longitudinal research in this area, and the many methods used to assess well-being and academic outcomes across studies, it is difficult to arrive at firm conclusions. Bailey and Baines' (2012) longitudinal, self-report study found child-rated academic progress over primary-secondary school transition to be predicted by protective factors, such as support, in addition to emotional stability predictors, such as emotional control and sensitivity. Taken together, and in line with Attentional Control Theory (Eysenck et al., 2007), it is plausible that changes in children's academic progress over primary-secondary school transition are shaped by their ability to emotionally cope during this time. However, further investigation is needed (Evans et al., 2018).

Despite experiencing curriculum continuity consistently expressed as a key underpinning successful transition for children in governmental reports (Evaneglou et al.,

2008), there is more that needs to be done to ensure that there is an ongoing dialogue between and within primary and secondary schools to ensure that children receive pedagogical and curriculum continuity as they transition schools (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). For example, when children transition to secondary school, it is common for secondary schools to adopt a 'fresh start' approach to learning practices (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016), and as a result children can experience disjunctions in their learning (van Rens et al., 2018). Workloads (particularly the volume of homework), expectations (specifically in children's learning autonomy), level of challenge, and even the way subjects are taught, which is often more didactic and focussed on performance goals than mastery goals, are subject to change (Symonds, 2015). Unsurprisingly, discontinuities in education can result in some children feeling academically incompetent and lead them to feel underprepared throughout the first year of secondary school (Coffey, 2013). It can also lead them to exhibit negative attitudes towards school subjects and teachers (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). Thus, as suggested by Riglin et al. (2013), creating and maintaining environments that reinforce and renew children's academic motivation during vulnerable periods, such as primary-secondary school transition, is paramount. This can be facilitated through the development and implementation of interventions that target children's academic attainment and psychological well-being side-by-side, which was shown to be successful by Humphrey and Ainscow (2006), as discussed in more detail in *Chapter 5*.

Although primary schools do their best to prepare children for environmental change at secondary school, as do secondary schools in anticipating capabilities of primary schools, not all learning discontinuities can be anticipated, and the curriculum can be taught to varying degrees within primary schools (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). Thus, 'fresh start' approaches help secondary school teachers establish a more level playing field within their classrooms and establish smoother academic progression for more disadvantaged children (Gray et al., 2011). However, while this 'fresh start' approach serves the needs of lower achieving children or those who have little experience in that subject area, it can also frustrate and demotivate more advanced learners (Davies et al., 2018) and many transfer children have reported the work at secondary school to be too easy (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006). Thus, it is important that a balance between recap and progression is established, with teachers providing work that is challenging but success achievable (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006).

However, 65% of secondary teachers are believed to have never looked at KS2 schemes of work (Galton et al, 2000), or had adequate opportunities to see and experience the teaching and learning in primary schools (Evangelou et al., 2008). Furthermore, 66% of teachers argue that if they had awareness of practices and programmes used by teachers in their feeder schools, this would aid curriculum continuity (Hopwood et al., 2016). Thus, resources and time are needed to develop communication and information exchange between primary and secondary schools in all aspects of administration and curriculum (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020), as transition is consistently shown to be successful when it is integrated fully into primary and secondary school programmes (Evangelou et al., 2008).

In sum, an important marker of transition success is academic attainment. Yet, as discussed above, declines in academic performance are common over primary-secondary school and only shown to recover after a year or two into secondary school (Zeedyk et al., 2003). However, what is often neglected is that children's academic achievement is often linked to their feelings towards secondary school (Symonds, 2015), especially their motivation and relationships with teachers (Jordan et al., 2010). Thus, it is important that both educators and policy makers take this into account when considering primary-secondary school transition provision. While teachers preoccupied with dips in attainment may neglect children's emotional and social adjustment and focus more on children's academic attainment, it is imperative that they focus more on renewing children's motivation and positive appraisals towards school during this time.

1.1.3. Social changes

Social relationships are pivotal for children's psychological well-being (Raja et al., 1992) and this is no exception over primary-secondary school transition (Ng-Knight et al., 2019). In fact, 'developing new friendships' is consistently positioned as one of the most important factors underlying functional adjustment during this period in both governmental reports (Evangelou et al., 2008, p.2), and in empirical studies (Zeedyk et al., 2003). For Year 6 and 7 children, social disruptions are amongst their most prevalent concerns both prior to and after the transfer period (Ashton, 2008), and continuity and development of relationships with others (both classmates and teachers) perceived to be more important than academic and environmental concerns (Jindal-Snape et al., 2018).

Booth and Sheehan's (2008) longitudinal mixed-methods study found 11- and 12-year-old UK and US children's happiness in school, especially their feelings of comfort and satisfaction, to be influenced the most by their classmates, followed by their relationships with teachers. These findings emphasise the significance of social relationships during this time and provide concurrent support for many other studies (Coffey, 2013). However, these findings should be taken with caution, due to the limited sample size, which is an artefact of some of the challenges associated with conducting longitudinal research, see *Chapter 5*. In addition, the sample reach in Booth and Sheehan's (2008) study was problematic, as within both the UK and US sample, children were selected from one school district. Although, this allowed variances in social contextual variables and school climate to be minimised, this also meant that differences across school models and districts were not reflected in the findings, which have been speculated to impact transition outcomes (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020).

In line with what has been discussed above regarding the 'transfer paradox' (Hallinan & Hallinan, 1992) that children face as they transition from primary to secondary school, another inherent component children navigate during this time is redefining relationships and social structures. For example, on entry to secondary school transfer children are no longer the 'big fish in the little pond', and so they need to forge new peer relationships and establish their place within their new secondary school environment (Coffey, 2013, p. 264). Secondary schools are much larger than primary schools and have an intake of children from many local primary schools. It is therefore unsurprising that primary-secondary school transition can be marked by significant relational instability (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016) as small primary school friendship groups are commonly dispersed and dismantled (Rice et al., 2011) or overshadowed within the larger school population.

Moreover, while some school concerns, particularly anxieties pertaining to the formal school environment, diminish gradually following a few weeks at secondary school, social disruptions persist well into secondary school as fears about losing friends, but also making new ones dominate over the transition period and can shape other concerns (Hammond, 2016). For instance, pre-transition concerns regarding friendships are shown to be associated with informal environmental anxieties, especially fears regarding older children (Rice et al., 2011). Making new friends during initial transition to

secondary school in this same study was also associated with fewer transition concerns (Rice et al., 2011), which extends previous findings regarding the importance of maintaining friendships from before school transition (Aikins et al., 2005). However, it was acknowledged by Rice et al. (2011) that their findings may to some extent be reflective of shared method variance as there were greater correlations between *The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* (Goodman, 2001) self-reports and other self-report measures, in comparison to peer assessment measures. Shared variance is a problem when using the same method to assess both variables, which can result in inflated correlations. Furthermore, the study mainly used a selective sample design, as only a limited number of children were assessed pre and post transition which again limits the generalisability of the findings, due to the effect of individual differences.

Building on the shortcomings of their previous work, Rice et al. (2015) investigated 2000 transfer children's well-being, academic achievement, their views about school, and their relationships with friends and teachers. The same measures were completed pre and post primary-secondary school transition. This longitudinal research used socio-cognitive maps of peer groups and full friendship networks, in addition to self-report. In addition, survey data were also collected from children's parents and teachers. In doing so they shed greater light on friendship fluctuations over the transition period, finding only 38% of transfer children to keep the same best friend from the end of primary school to the beginning of Year 7, and 28% to the end of Year 7. However, amongst the children whose friendships remained stable, these children exhibited lower conduct behavioural problems and higher prosocial behaviours, and these effects were slightly higher for children who kept their 'very best friend'. As multiple assessments were used, these findings are considered relatively robust and support previous research findings (Ashton, 2008; Coffey, 2013), demonstrating the positive outcomes of friendship stability over primary-secondary school transition.

Furthermore, these findings have been concurrently supported more recently by Ng-Knight et al.'s (2019) longitudinal study which explored rates of friendship stability on children's adjustment (assessed in terms of academic attainment, emotional and behavioural problems) over primary-secondary school transition in the UK. It was similarly shown that just over a quarter of children maintained the same best friend until the end of the first year of secondary school (27%). Maintaining the same best friend was shown

to have beneficial associations with academic attainment and emotional and behavioural functioning at secondary school, whereas maintaining a greater number of lower quality friendships was associated with increased emotional problems. However, what was particularly interesting is that the stability of children's friendships was also associated with secondary school policy regarding how children are allocated to classes, in that the two secondary schools which used friendship requests to allocate children to form groups, tended to have higher levels of friendship stability. These findings have significant implications for schools in demonstrating that these effects are not entirely driven by characteristics of the child, such as previous academic success and mental health, and instead presents the value in implementing procedures to assist children to navigate the social changes inherent in primary-secondary school transition.

Social relatedness and feeling cared for by others, especially peers, are shown to be pivotal for children's well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000), but also to be a protective buffer against peer victimisation (Williford et al., 2016), which is consistently shown as the main reason for children not liking school (Booth & Sheehan, 2008). This is no exception over primary-secondary school transition, where fear of bullying is shown to be the largest and most frequent concern expressed by final year primary and first year secondary school children (Rice et al., 2011), in addition to their parents (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008). However, this concern is not unmerited, as bullying is shown to increase over school transition periods. This is not surprising given that social affiliation is often an inhibitor of victimisation, yet frequently shown to reduce during initial primary-secondary school transition, as do perceptions of social ability and peer values (Rice et al., 2015). Combined with the loss of old primary school friendships and support at the start of secondary school, such behaviours can leave Year 7 children feeling vulnerable and unsupported (Weller, 2007).

Moreover, in their US middle school sample, Pellegrini and Long (2002) argued that changes inherent in the new school environment, from lack of supervision to school size, can also account for increases in bullying behaviours during the initial transition period. For example, in line with dominance theories, which have shown bullying to temporarily act as a way for children to establish status and dominance within new peer microenvironments and explore undefined social roles (Bjorklund & Pellegrini, 2000), it is clear to see how initial primary-secondary school transition can be marked by such

behaviours, as children strive to find their social place within their new environment. Support for this theory was shown by Pellegrini and Long's (2002) longitudinal findings, as initial agonistic friendship behaviours were followed by reconciliation and co-operation strategies as children settled into middle school. Both studies above were conducted in the US; thus, findings should be taken with caution when considering UK primary-secondary school transition subject to the cultural differences, specifically school environment factors between the US and UK, as discussed in *Chapter 3*. However, similar findings have been shown in the UK by Rice et al. (2015), who also found concerns about bullying to reduce in the first term of secondary school.

Furthermore, as shown by Williford et al.'s (2016) longitudinal study, cognitive empathy, which is characterised by an individuals' capacity to understand and interpret others' emotional states, may also be driving children's involvement in bullying and victimization, over school transition. For example, it was found that over the transition from Elementary school to Middle school in the US, cognitive empathy decreased, which is surprising given prior evidence has found cognitive empathy to increase during adolescence as cognitive skills develop (Van der Graaff et al. 2014). Bullying involvement was also shown to correlate with lower cognitive empathy scores over time, suggesting that as children participate in bullying, their ability, or, perhaps more accurately, their interest in taking the perspectives of others (cognitive empathy), may decrease, particularly during this school transition.

Taken together, and given the psychosocial and academic implications associated with social vulnerability (Lester & Cross, 2015), addressing affiliative behaviour pre-transfer by giving children the opportunity to develop social skills is invaluable. Reflecting Williford et al.'s (2016) findings, interventions must also target the development and application of cognitive empathy skills during the transfer, given that this a developmental period where children tend to show relatively low empathy, particularly among children who bully others.

In sum, the continuity and development of social relationships prior to and during primary-secondary school transition is shown to override all else (Ashton, 2008); being isolated, marginalised and even bullied is a significant concern for Year 6 children and moving with pre-existing primary school classmates and the need to belong to a peer group shown to be of great importance (Pratt & George, 2005). However, reports of peer

affiliation are shown to be considerably low over the transition period, which is concerning, as expected and perceived social acceptance is shown to significantly predict children's self-esteem over time, but can also have problematic ramifications within primary and secondary schools both inside and outside of the classroom (Ganeson, 2006). Nonetheless, within both school settings less attention is placed on the importance of supporting children's social adjustment, in comparison to children's academic attainment. This is despite the extra pressure that is placed on children's social relationships during this time and that children who experience social difficulties show lower behavioural, emotional and academic adaption (Rice et al., 2015). Thus, as recommended by Jindal-Snape et al. (2018), it is paramount that both primary and secondary schools strive to support children's social adjustment, whether that is through group work or assigning incoming children a 'buddy' who is an older secondary school student. Given that fears of older children are amongst transfer children's largest concerns, but also as research has shown that children who build relationships with older children exhibit greater self-esteem, the latter can be very effective (van Rens et al., 2018).

1.1.4. Summary: environmental, academic and social changes

In summary, children face simultaneous environmental, academic and social change over primary-secondary school transition. Children are shown to anticipate some of these changes prior to the transition when in Year 6, such as formal environmental changes and friendship disruptions. However, others are not anticipated, such as informal environmental changes and academic learning disjunctions, from the *way* children are taught, to *what* they are taught. Nonetheless, children who are prepared for the challenge and change that primary-secondary school transition brings, and feel sufficiently supported, show superior adjustment (West et al., 2010). Therefore, as raised above, there is a need for *all* transition concerns children face to be addressed at both primary and secondary school. As discussed below in *Section 1.2. Children's Emotional Well-being*, but worth noting at this point, is that each area of change (whether environmental, academic or social), which so far in this thesis has been addressed separately, are linked and together shape a child's transitional adjustment, specifically their emotional well-being, which is a focus of this thesis.

1.2.   Children's Emotional Well-being

As discussed above, the transition from primary to secondary school can have an adverse impact on several social and educational variables, such as poor peer affiliation and academic performance (White, 2020). In addition to this, there is consistent evidence to suggest that most children experience some degree of stress and anxiety around primary-secondary school transition (West et al., 2010), and the transfer can also have a negative impact on emotional outcomes, including children's self-esteem and ability to cope. West et al.'s (2010) longitudinal research in Scotland found 68% of children in their sample to report the transition from primary to secondary school as 'hard' to cope with, of which 17% reported it to be 'very hard'. These figures are concerning as children who report experiencing a difficult transition are at an increased risk of experiencing poor emotional well-being (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020) and mental health complaints in the long term, including anxiety and depression (Lester & Cross, 2015).

Recognising that the transition from primary to secondary school is an unsettling time for children that can pose a threat to their emotional well-being, this next section focuses on children's emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transition. Emotional well-being is a critical component of our health, and underpins our experience and expression of feelings, communication, and ability to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships (Jordan & Graham, 2012). Emotional well-being has been argued to be a core component of mental health, significant and prolonged changes to emotional well-being in the here-and-now a key signifier of the emergence of early onset mental health complaints (ONS, 2017).

To date, investment in supporting children's emotional well-being lags formal mental health provision (ONS, 2017). This is concerning, as efforts to improve children's emotional well-being could aid early intervention and prevention of mental health complaints before they develop into diagnosable mental health problems, which is becoming a growing policy priority as argued in the 'prevention pays' agenda (DfHSC & DfE, 2018). For example, while one in ten children and young people have a diagnosed mental health disorder, one in four show some evidence of poor mental health (Mental Health Foundation, 2015). In recognition of the increasing number of children experiencing mental health complaints, especially long-term conditions (Pitchforth et al.,

2019), prevention and early intervention of mental health problems is paramount, and a greater focus on emotional well-being can support this.

Emotional well-being is by no means a stable construct and can be shaped by changing environmental and psychological conditions. Thus, critical periods, such as school transition, where children are more likely to experience changing environmental and psychological conditions, can present heightened risk to children's short and long-term emotional well-being (Bosacki, 2016).

In the short-term, especially leading up to and during immediate primary-secondary school transition, children report struggling to cope and emotionally adjust to the simultaneous changes in their academic, social and physical school environment. Jindal-Snape and Rienties (2016) defines this as multiple transitions in multiple domains (e.g. environmental, academic and social) across multiple contexts (e.g. home, school) in their *Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions* theory. Unsurprisingly negotiating these multiple simultaneous changes can undermine children's ability to meet their basic emotional needs, and during initial transition, many children report feelings of stress and anxiety (White, 2020). Whereas, mild levels of anxiety are considered adaptive for adjustment, excessive anxiety can be problematic for children and has been linked with poor emotional well-being (Vassilopoulos et al., 2018).

However, to date, minimal research has specifically examined the impact of primary-secondary school transition on children's emotional well-being (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). For example, some studies have looked at specific mental health complaints over primary-secondary school transition, such as anxiety and depression (Vaz et al., 2014). However, findings from this research are limited in terms of their generalisability and implications for the wider, general population of children transitioning from primary to secondary school. This is because most children face anxieties and concerns over primary-secondary school transition (White, 2020) which pose a threat to their emotional well-being, but very few children experience mental health conditions. Thus, in this section, there will be a focus on research that has taken a holistic approach and looked at changes in emotional symptoms over primary-secondary school transition, as opposed to individual mental health conditions.

In general, emotional symptoms are shown to increase over the transition period and significantly correlate with school concerns (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012). The

number of concerns about school transition (environmental, academic and social factors) both before and after the transition to secondary school are shown to be significantly associated with emotional symptoms (Rice et al., 2011). However, under the umbrella term emotional symptoms, Rice et al. (2011) specifically looked at school-related and generalised anxiety symptoms, and depressive symptoms. As discussed above, this is problematic as these outcome variables could be seen as reductionist and too specific to account for larger populations who may not show symptoms of diagnosable mental health conditions but still show emotional complaints, indicating poor emotional well-being.

Nonetheless, cross-culturally, similar findings are shown as Lester et al.'s (2013) longitudinal research in Australia found that following the transition to secondary school, children who experienced a 'difficult' or 'somewhat difficult' transition were more likely to report greater emotional symptoms at the end of their first year of secondary school. However, Lester et al.'s (2013) longitudinal research did not measure children's emotional symptoms prior to the transition to secondary school. This is problematic as children who show greater emotional symptoms at baseline prior to primary-secondary school transition, are also shown to find the transition harder. For example, Cox et al. (2016) found that children with elevated emotional symptoms prior to primary-secondary school transition expressed greater transition concerns immediately following the transition.

Long term negative implications have also been shown for children who are more emotionally vulnerable pre-transition (Riglin et al., 2013; West et al., 2010). Moreover, in the long term, poor primary-secondary school transition experiences can lead to increases in symptoms of depression (Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987), anxiety (Benner & Graham, 2007), problem behaviour (Pellegrini & Long, 2002) and self-worth (Simmons et al., 1987), which is concerning given that 15% of British school children annually are reported to be in danger of never settling into the new secondary school environment (Evans et al., 2018).

 Thus, taken together, these findings attest to the importance of reducing children's concerns before critical events or turning points, such as primary-secondary school transition, in order to nurture children's emotional well-being in the here and now, but also long-term (Stratham & Chase, 2010). For example, it is recognised that successful navigation of school transition establishes the foundations for future and lifelong well-

being and can thus be effective points to introduce and deliver intervention programmes (Kessler et al., 2005). However, in order to do this, researchers firstly need to obtain a clear understanding of how children's emotional well-being is affected by school transition and how to improve this, which this thesis has set out to do. The focus group and case study research discussed in *Chapters 2, 3* and *4* focusses on the former, by obtaining insight from transfer children, their parents and Year 6 and 7 teachers to understand their experiences of school transition and the challenges they face. This research then informed the overarching intervention study, *Study 4*, which seeks to improve children's emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transition, through a universal emotional-centred support intervention.

1.3.   Resilience Theory

Several researchers have developed frameworks to define and operationalise the concept of resilience. Resilience is a multidimensional concept (Olson et al., 2003) and can be conceptualised as an outcome of adaption: 'the maintenance of competent functioning despite interfering emotionality' (Garmezy, 1991, p.563), a personality trait (in other words an individual's internal ability to cope) (Leys et al., 2020), in addition to a process of adaptation. In other words, resilience can refer to how an individual perceives and interacts with a given stressor to cope, as depicted by Ungar (2008): 'in the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways' (Ungar, 2008, p. 225).

Resilience literature aims to understand why some people can overcome risk and maintain functionality, while others are not able to. To do this, it is important that a distinction is drawn between the schools of thought, as when considering resilience as an outcome, assessments are primarily concerned with investigating the maintenance of functionality. In comparison, if we are looking at the process of resilience, greater focus is placed on elucidating factors within the environment and at the individual level that are protective or a risk (Olsson et al., 2003). Moreover, considering resilience as a personality trait is less informing of practical solutions, such as the development of interventions to improve resilience. Therefore, it is better to understand the underlying process of

resilience and provide interventions that support protective factors (Leys et al., 2020), which this thesis sets out to do.

Protective factors and risk factors can 'modify, ameliorate, or alter a person's response to stressors' (Armstrong et al., 2005, p.276). As outlined in Mandleco and Peery's (2000) Organizational Framework, protective factors and risk factors can reflect internal personal qualities but can also be external to the individual, and stem from within one's environment, as depicted by Gilligan (2004), 'the degree of resilience displayed by a person in a certain context may be said to be related to the extent to which that context has elements that nurture this resilience' (Gilligan, 2004, p.94). This dual focus, or ecological understanding of resilience, where equal attention is placed on the individual's personal agency, but also the individuals' physical and social ecologies (Ungar, 2008) suggests new directions for theory development, research, and intervention (Ungar, 2011). For example, this understanding has the potential to resolve definition constraints and measurement problems, by shifting the focus from a child-centred individualised understanding of resilience as an outcome, to a process-oriented and contextualized understanding of resilience (Ungar, 2011).

Some risk and protective factors, internal and external to the individual, are relatively stable over time, whereas others are considered variable and can be susceptible to change (Truffino, 2010). Thus, a robust theory of resilience needs to account for changing environments and the facilitative function that each provides, in addition to changing individual factors, as child development is dependent on environmental facilitation (Ungar, 2011). This is especially prominent across childhood and adolescence, where the impact of protective and risk factors can be dependent on when in time, these factors are assessed (Riglin et al., 2013; Olsson et al., 2003). This is of particular concern when considering school transition, a period of time when the internal resources children draw on and their external environments, especially their social support networks, are susceptible to significant change in response to discontinuities in their school environment (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012), which Ungar (2008) described as a time which presents 'the confounding effect of environment on development' (Ungar, 2008, p. 2). However, the onset of school transitions can differ across countries and educational systems, meaning at times it may be navigated alongside other stressors, such as national assessments in the UK, or even puberty. Thus, the timing of when internal factors are

measured (specifically in relation to children's age and the timing in the transfer year) can heavily shape research findings (Riglin et al., 2013), as discussed in *Chapter 3*.

In line with Gilligan's (2000) five key background concepts which underpin resilience:

a) reducing stockpile of problems

b) pathways and turning points in development

c) having a sense of a secure base

d) self-esteem

e) self-efficacy

it is clear to see how protective and risk factors, external and internal to the child, are susceptible to change over primary-secondary school transition and can affect children's ability to cope. For example, resonating to a) reducing stockpile of problems, it is commonplace for children to navigate simultaneous, accumulating stressors over primary-secondary school transition, which in itself is a 'turning point' for children in line with b). Negotiating multiple changes or 'stressors' within such a short period of time can have significant negative implications on children's ability to cope, especially if there is a 'mismatch' between children's developing needs and opportunities afforded to them by their social environments (Eccles et al., 1993). This clearly maps onto c), d) and e) of Gilligan's model. For example, in line with c) having a secure base, the support children can draw on from significant others, such as parents, teachers and classmates can be crucial over primary-secondary school transition, but can also be susceptible to change (Weller, 2007). In addition to this, resonating to d) self-esteem and e) self-efficacy, children with a greater repertoire of internal protective resources such as self-esteem and self-efficacy show greater adjustment over primary-secondary school transition, but also the transition can threaten these resources (Evans et al., 2018).

However, while it is acknowledged that internal protective factors (e.g. adequate coping skills), and external protective factors (e.g. social support) can help reduce children's response to the multiple stressors they experience over primary-secondary school transition (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008), there are limited indications into the trajectory of how internal and external protective factors shape children's adjustment. In other words, a cause and effect relationship is missing; it is unclear whether:

a) the transition threatens or changes children's ability to draw on external and internal protective factors (Evans et al., 2018). In other words, children's internal and external protective resources are negatively affected by primary-secondary school transition, meaning that children with protective resources prior to the transfer, show poor resources following it.

b) children with poorer protective resources (whether this be lack of support or lower coping efficacy) perceive the transition as more difficult (Lester et al., 2013) and do not have protective resources to draw on during this time, leading to poorer outcomes. For example, children with lower levels of self-control and emotional intelligence show poorer adjustment, than children with high self-control and emotional intelligence (Evans et al., 2018).

c) the two are reciprocally related. In other words, children with pre-existing vulnerabilities may respond to or interpret environmental stressors differently (e.g. increased victimisation, capacity to draw on support), which then leads to a further increase in difficulties following the transition. Thus, children get caught up in a vicious cycle with one problem exacerbating the other. This latter preposition aligns with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model, which outlines the dualistic, but also dynamic, interplay between individual characteristics, particularly one's appraisals, and the environment in which the individual is situated, in shaping adjustment outcomes. This model is the most plausible and will be focussed on in this thesis.

In sum, resilience theory has implications for practice, and shifts attention from the individual and their capacity to navigate resources to adapt and sustain well-being, to the interaction between the individual and their environment in facilitating or inhibiting developmental paths (Ungar, 2008). This presents a challenge for resilience researchers, to identify processes that are systemic and variable, while avoiding excessive focus on individual characteristics that are not under an individual's control (Ungar, 2011). Few intervention studies have accounted for both internal and external protective and risk factors in shaping adjustment over primary-secondary school transition, especially from a long-term perspective. This means that it is difficult to ascertain the long-term impact of primary-secondary school transition (White, 2020). Thus, in line with the research discussed above, in this thesis selected internal and external protective factors were assessed over time, using mixed methods, which is deemed essential to account for

processes such as the above, which are interactive and variable (Ungar, 2011), see *Study 4*. Children's feelings of efficacy in being able to carry out successful coping efforts, and their social resources for coping (perceptions of social support) have been shown to shape transitional adjustment. Thus, the internal protective factor that will be focussed on in the present thesis is children's coping efficacy. The external resilience factors that will be focussed on are transfer children's perceptions of parent, teacher and classmate support. These resources have been shown to be powerful intervention levers in preventing deleterious short and long-term consequences of stress, risk and adversity to foster resilience (He & Wong, 2017), and will be discussed below in relation to previous research in the context of primary-secondary school transition.

1.3.3. Coping efficacy

Proposed by Bandura (1997), coping efficacy is a protective internal factor that refers to one's appraisals and sense of control in being able to manage the demands of a stressful situation, and emotions aroused (Sandler et al., 2000). Coping efficacy is a core self-evaluation mechanism (St Claire-Thomas et al., 2015) or internal representation of one's belief in being able to cope and overcome perceived contextual barriers (Tate et al., 2015). As with the construct emotional self-efficacy, which pertains to children's confidence in their emotional skills, coping efficacy pertains to children's confidence in being able to cope and interpret challenges in an enabling, as opposed to a debilitating way.

Coping has been defined as a regulatory process that serves to prevent, avoid, or control emotional distress (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). In line with Lazarus's (1966) Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping, emotion and coping are bidirectional processes, one's ability to cope is shaped by how an individual appraises a given stressor within their environment and their antecedent emotions. Coping is therefore 'constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person' (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 41). Following appraisal, individuals can then engage in a) problem-focused coping, where they look to change the stressful situation, or b) emotion-focused coping, where an individual would place greater focus on regulating maladaptive emotions towards the stressor (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). However, as mentioned above, prior to coping processes, an individual must have appraised the situation as a challenge

and engaged in secondary appraisal where they assess what they can do to change the stressful situation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). This is where one's coping efficacy is drawn on, in other words, the individuals' appraisal of their own coping capability and resources.

Coping efficacy has been investigated in various contexts including depression (Mosher & Prelow, 2007) and divorce (Sandler et al., 2000). Although, to date, the role of coping efficacy has not been investigated over primary-secondary school transition. However, coping efficacy is closely related to constructs such as self-esteem, locus of control (the extent to which an individual feels that they can control events that affect them) and emotional stability (on average r= 0.64) (Judge et al., 2002) and conceptually linked to self-efficacy, which have been investigated over primary-secondary school transition. For example, children with low-levels of self-esteem are shown to be particularly vulnerable to poor transition experiences, both in the context of primary-secondary school transition in the UK (St-Clair Thompson et al., 2017) and Elementary-Middle School transition in the US where children also transition schools at age eleven (Seidman et al., 1994). Moreover, children with higher self-efficacy at primary school show greater adjustment at secondary school (Bailey & Baines, 2012), as do children with an internal locus of control (Shepherd et al., 2006).

Whereas some protective internal resources such as emotional intelligence are shown to be relatively stable across childhood and early adolescence (Qualter et al., 2007), self-perceptions, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-control, are subject to change. This is especially prominent over adolescence, which is often conceptualised as a period of identity-crisis, where children struggle to establish a stable sense of self (Riglin et al., 2013). Primary-secondary school transition not only co-exists with early adolescence, but also puberty (Ng-Knight et al., 2016), which can additionally exacerbate negative self-image perceptions (see introduction in *Chapter 3*). Thus, assessing self-perceptions can be more problematic over school transition, as it can be unclear whether changes are attributable to general disturbance associated with transitioning to a new school (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008; Simmons et al., 1973), puberty-particularly onset age (Ng-Knight et al., 2016), developmental age-related changes, or their interaction (see *Chapter 3* for further discussion). Subsequently, longitudinal, as opposed to cross-sectional research designs, are best when assessing self-perceptions, ensuring that multiple assessment points are employed to assess temporal precedence and causation.

There is need for these design considerations to be implemented in further research projects, in order to shed light on the above research gaps.

The timing of when self-perceptions are measured over the transition period, especially pre and post transition, is likely to shape adjustment outcomes. In Bailey and Baines' (2012) longitudinal study, the higher pupils rated their self-efficacy at primary school, the better adjusted they were at secondary school, especially in terms of their peer relationships and their ability to adopt problem solving abilities. This demonstrates how self-efficacy prior to transition periods can shape children's adjustment to secondary school. However, a limitation of Bailey and Baines' (2012) research is that the *Resiliency Scales for Children and Adolescents* (Prince-Embury, 2006) were used to measure risk and resilience factors including self-efficacy, which in this study pertained to 'how able children are to use problem solving attitudes and strategies' (Bailey and Baines, 2012, p. 51). This sub-scale could be viewed as reductionist as self-efficacy is domain specific, in other words, individuals can hold different beliefs about their capabilities dependent on the ability being evaluated, e.g. an individual can have high problem-solving efficacy, but low emotional efficacy. When considering primary-secondary school transition, a period which can heavily draw on children's emotional resilience and ability to cope, considering children's appraisals towards their emotional competencies is important.

Extending the above research, Nowland and Qualter's (2020) longitudinal study found that children with higher emotional self-efficacy (children's perceptions of their emotional skills) also expressed lower social threat sensitivity (children's sensitivity to potentially socially threatening situations connected to school transition) prior to the transition to secondary school. These children also coped better with transition concerns and demonstrated greater social adaptation four months following the transition than children with lower emotional self-efficacy. These findings demonstrate the potential impact schools can have in promoting emotional self-efficacy skills both prior and during primary-secondary school transition to reduce anxiety and improve social adjustment side-by-side.

Moreover, self-perceptions can not only change over time, and are domain specific, but are also sensitive to contextual factors, especially changes in environment, meaning that individuals can exhibit high self-efficacy in one context and low self-efficacy

in another (Schunk & Pajares, 2009). A recent study by Madjar and Chohat (2017) developed an eight-item transition self-efficacy scale to examine children's transition self-efficacy over the transition from Elementary to Middle school in Israel, where children also transition schools at age eleven. The authors focussed on two major areas of concern shown over school transition which are shaped by a change in context: coping with high academic expectations and adjusting to new social settings. Findings demonstrated that children could distinguish between the two self-efficacy contexts and provide different assessments of their abilities to cope with each. For example, prior to the transition, transition self-efficacy towards social aspects of the move predicted both emotional and behavioural engagement following the transition and was stronger than their self-efficacy towards coping with higher academic expectations. In comparison, transition self-efficacy towards coping with higher academic expectations, pre transition, was only related to teacher emphasis on mastery goals, post transition. These findings were also shown to differ by gender, as boys reported greater transition self-efficacy in relation to their academic adjustment to Middle school compared with their social adjustment, whereas girls reported the opposite. However, all variables, including contextual factors, were assessed using self-report in Madjar and Chohat's (2017) research, and therefore represent subjective perspectives. Whilst subjective self-perceptions are believed to mediate the relationship between contextual factors and behavioural and emotional outcomes (Bandura, 2001), perceptions are also subject to individual differences. This may account for why some children cope better and find transition easier than other children.

Drawing on Madjar and Chohat's (2017) research and in contrast to Baumeister et al.'s (2007) Strength Model of Self Control, it is plausible that rating the number and frequency of stressors over primary-secondary school transition, which has been shown in many research studies (Rice et al., 2011), is too simplistic, and disregards children's appraisals of these challenges, and perceived ability to cope with them, which are child-specific and often dependent on their past experiences (West et al., 2010). However, while there has been research which has looked at coping efficacy within educational contexts (Sandler et al., 2000), to date there is no research that has specifically investigated transfer children's coping efficacy over primary-secondary school transition. As discussed in more detail in *Chapter 6*, this raises the issue that in future research it

would be worthwhile assessing coping efficacy, specifically related to primary-secondary school transition, as opposed to general coping efficacy.

Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that the accumulation of simultaneous stressors children face over primary-secondary school transition significantly impacts their ability to cope (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Moreover, children who have positive expectations prior to transition show greater transitional adjustment (Waters et al., 2014a). Thus, taken together with Nowland and Qualter's (2020) research, it is plausible that children with higher coping efficacy scores have more confidence in their ability to cope and feel less vulnerable in response to transition challenges. Thus, these children are more likely to persevere and draw on coping skills to think in a enabling as opposed to a debilitating way during the transition to cope. It is therefore important to understand children's appraisals of stress and how this shapes their behaviour and adjustment. This is informing of practical solutions, especially interventions to support children expand and strengthen their coping efficacy to cope successfully with stressful experiences. Thus, significant research is needed in this area to reconcile gaps in knowledge. Addressing this gap in the literature, *Study 4* investigated the trajectory of children's coping efficacy pre, during and post primary-secondary school transition, and assessed whether an emotional-centred intervention focussed on improving children's emotional well-being, by supporting children's coping efficacy, can aid this.

1.3.2. Social support

Theoretical perspectives on resilience typically consider social support, such as that provided by parents, teachers and classmates, as an important protective factor (Ungar, 2011) which can scaffold coping processes, and protect individuals' mental health and social functioning (Ng-Knight et al., 2019). This is no exception over primary-secondary school transition, despite this period typically marked by disruption in children's social networks as they change schools. For instance, van Rens et al.'s (2018) systematic literature review, concluded that positive relationships between all stakeholders, including children, parents and schools, over primary-secondary school transition, can help to improve children's perceptions of the challenges presented by the transition. More specifically, Zeedyk et al. (2003) found that children who exhibited poor coping skills depended more on support from others. Extending this research, van Rens et al.'s (2019) longitudinal study, which looked at Dutch children's perceptions of primary-

secondary school transition, found that children who lacked coping skills and felt insufficiently prepared to cope successfully with the social and emotional aspects of primary-secondary school transition pre-transition, which was not uncommon, depended on greater support from mentors within the school, post transition. In this section of this thesis, the protective role of the external factor social support will be discussed.

Social support is a multifaceted construct that can be conceptualised, operationalised and assessed in various ways. For example, social support can be perceived, received and given (Malecki & Demaray, 2003). Individuals can also receive four different types of social support: emotional (e.g. trust and love), informational (advice), instrumental (resources, such as time) and appraisal (in other words feedback). Social support can also be elicited differently dependent on the source of support (e.g. the provider of support, in this thesis, parental, teacher and classmate support will be focussed on), the situation (Brittain, 1968) and the individual's age (Cobb, 1976).

In the context of primary-secondary school transition, parents, teachers and classmates have both unique and collaborative roles in preparing children before, during and after the transition to secondary school, which are discussed in turn below.

1.3.2.1. *Parent support*

Parental support can not only protectively buffer children from the impact of stressful life events, but also help children overcome maladjustment (Gilligan, 2000). Newman et al. (2007) argued that more than any other support system, parental support is directly related to academic success, positive self-image (self-esteem, confidence) and overall psychological well-being.

Similarly, during adolescence support from parents has been shown to be the most consistent and significant protective factor in shaping both behavioural (Galambos et al., 2003) and emotional adjustment (Helsen et al., 2000), and has the most long-lasting influence (Benard, 1991). However, as will be discussed below, this can be dependent on whether parent support is responsive to children's needs during a given time, and underpinned by age-appropriate autonomy, closeness and reciprocity (Pratt & George, 2005), which can be a fine balancing act, especially when parents need to reduce support to help children's developing maturation.

Moreover, support obtained from parents can differ depending on the type of support the child is seeking to elicit (Malecki & Demaray, 2003) and the context, particularly the availability of other support figures (Yeung & Leadbeater, 2010). In the context of school transition, children are more likely to elicit emotional support from parents, and informational support from teachers, particularly if the concern pertains to the new school environment (Chedzoy & Burden, 2005).

Unlike relationships with classmates and teachers which are interrupted over primary-secondary school transition, parents can provide a crucial source of continuity for children, while other arenas of their life and sources of support are uncertain. This can have significant consequences on children's academic, social and emotional adjustment (White, 2020). As outlined in Jindal-Snape et al.'s (2018) review, factors external to the school, such as 'having a secure base' (outlined in item three of Gilligan's (2000) five resilience background concepts) at home through strong parent-child support relationships can be more predictive of adjustment outcomes than factors within the school, especially when concerning the development of children's resilience. For example, according to transfer children, the people who helped them most to prepare for secondary school transition were their family (Topping, 2011). In addition, the pivotal importance of parental support over the transition period in providing good quality relationships, consistency, and a paramount 'arena of comfort' when many other aspects of the child's life are unstable, is consistently delineated (Zeedyk et al., 2003). Nonetheless, schools rarely recognise the significance of parental support in helping children to adjust to primary-secondary school transition (Coffey, 2013), which is significant and useful involvement that could be harnessed in support interventions.

In part, this absence in provision may be subject to the fact that some children can be disadvantaged if parents cannot provide sufficient support during this time, whether that is subject to familial socio-economic status or language barriers (Topping, 2011; West et al., 2010). For example, Graham and Hill's (2003) retrospective study used questionnaires and focus groups to examine ethnic minority children's perspectives and adjustment over primary-secondary school transition in Scotland. Reflecting on their experiences it was found that 77% of children from ethnic minorities felt that their transition to secondary school was more difficult due to the fact that they spoke another language than English when at home. These findings were corroborated by secondary

school teachers in the same study who reported a higher proportion of ethnic minority children to negotiate a greater number of academic and environmental changes. Nonetheless, recognising how helpful parents can be in providing much needed emotional support for children over primary-secondary school transition, and as suggested in Graham and Hill's (2002) research, it is paramount that teachers and schools build on the strengths in families. This should include families where children may be more vulnerable to poor transition experiences subject to language barriers and/or familial disadvantage. For these groups additional targeted support approaches are needed to attend to matters that may hamper children's adjustment and provide extra support for their parents so that they can best support their child.

One way in which parents can support their child over primary-secondary school transition and in line with 'facet a) - reducing stockpile of problems', of Gilligan's (2000) resilience background concepts, is that parents can help to reduce the number of risks their child is exposed to by selecting a school that exhibits the best 'goodness of fit' (Eccles et al., 1993) with their child's individual developmental needs. This is something that is of considerable concern for parents, potentially more so than children, as 79% of parents, in comparison to 21% of children begin contemplating school choice decisions from as early as Year 5, and 55% of transfer parents are believed to make the final school choice decision as opposed to the transfer children (McGee et al., 2003).

Nonetheless, while parents are ultimately responsible for their child's education (Bosch et al., 2008), by making this decision without input from their child can undermine the core principles of maturation inherent in Hallinan and Hallinan's (1992) 'transfer paradox', which recognises primary-secondary school transition as both a step-up and step-down. In other words, in order to gain a secondary school child's level of autonomy and maturity, transfer children must be willing to give up the support, familiarity and protection of their primary school. As a result, parent over-involvement can do little to support children's growing autonomy and can have a negative influence on 'facet b) - pathways and turning points in development', 'facet d) - self-esteem' and 'fact e) - self-efficacy' of Gilligan's (2000) resilience framework.

Moreover, children's self-reports of autonomy and competence are consistently shown to predict adaptation following the transition to secondary school (Duchesne et al., 2017). For example, leading up to the transfer parents can scaffold and support their

child's resilience and mitigate transfer stress by adapting to their changing role in supporting their child's maturation (Pratt & George, 2005). When parents fail to do this over the transition period, and provide too much unneeded support, feelings of disconnection and incompetency are elevated amongst both parties (Eccles & Harold, 1993).

As shown in West et al.'s (2010) longitudinal research, for children who report their parents as over-controlling on the *Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI)* questionnaire, school and peer concerns are greater than those with the reverse and higher parental care. For parents, they can feel as though they no longer have a role in their child's development and do not belong in the new secondary school community (Eccles & Harold, 1993). Nonetheless, primary to secondary school can be an apprehensive and stressful period for all parents, especially if this is their first time, and establishing this fine balancing act of providing support but not too much so that children push them away, can be incredibly difficult. This can be elevated when support and communication between parents and schools is neglected, which is often common (Topping, 2011). Thus, it is important to acknowledge the social, emotional and procedural changes parents are also negotiating, alongside the feelings of loss inherent in saying goodbye to the support and protection of the primary school and in some ways their child's period of childhood (Zeedyk et al., 2003).

A strong degree of similarity has also been shown between concerns voiced by parents and transfer children, especially when considering classmate and school concerns. In addition, miscellaneous concerns such as anxieties pertaining to their child being overlooked and loss of communication can also be worrisome for parents (Zeedyk et al., 2003), especially if parents receive limited support from the secondary school (Coffey, 2013). Nonetheless, parent anxieties can also unintentionally rub off on their children, as parent and child anxieties are shown to be bidirectional and transmissive. For example, as outlined by Lucey and Reay (2000), it is often difficult to separate children's and adults' anxieties, and parents have been shown to pass on their concerns to their child and increase their anxieties. In Zeedyk et al.'s research (2003), too much sharing and ruminating was discussed as a significant factor in shaping these concerns, which had also been raised three years earlier in Lucey and Reay's (2000) qualitative study. In addition to this, Lucey and Reay (2000) also raised the significance of partial and fragmented

discussions from elders, especially pertaining to their experiences and perceptions, in forming unnecessary negative impressions amongst Year 6 children regarding the changes they will encounter at secondary school. This resulted in many children, once at secondary school, discussing the transition to secondary school as not being as bad as they had been led to believe. Nonetheless, as shown by Jindal-Snape and Foggie's (2008) qualitative study which examined parent perspectives over primary-secondary school transition, in addition to other stakeholders, this is not always the case and parents who had negative experiences themselves were shown to want their children to enjoy school and not have the same experiences as them, and thus took efforts to avoid transference behaviours.

Therefore, as raised by Jindal-Snape and Foggie (2008) it can be concluded that 'the responsibility for smooth transition lies not only with the school but with the child, parents and community as well' (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008, p. 16). Nonetheless, as discussed above, the importance of parental support is rarely recognised by schools, despite recommendations (Jindal-Snape et al., 2019). For example, Jindal-Snape et al.'s (2019) longitudinal mixed methods study concluded that transition planning and preparation by schools still do not consider the naturally occurring support network in the home and community, and the need for practice to be informed by effective collaboration between all stakeholders, including parents. For example, transition support provision and pastoral care strategies, involving parent support, already provided within primary schools are shown to be beneficial in school transition preparations (Hanewald, 2013); however, this needs to continue into secondary school after the transition.

In fact, due to concerns regarding transmission of anxieties, primary-secondary school transition parent-led and parent-teacher partnership intervention programmes are rarely considered by schools. This is especially avoided if this provision is to start before the child transitions to secondary school, which is acknowledged as a vulnerable period for both parties (Jindal-Snape et al., 2018). This is coupled by the minimal research in this area despite recognition of the importance of parental involvement in the transition process and support programmes, which has been raised for over a decade now. For example, Newman and Blackburn (2002) cautioned transition interventions to not neglect the beneficial impact of informal support from families, and instead utilise this natural protective factor.

In sum, when parents are involved during initial primary-secondary school transition, there is a greater likelihood that this partnership will persist throughout secondary school, demonstrating the longevity of this relationship (Coffey, 2013). Nonetheless, adolescence is a period where social structures and supportive relationships are subject to change, parental support consistently shown to weaken and be less salient than classmate support (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Thus, establishing supportive parent-child relationships early on in a child's education can have paramount ramifications for children's future academic, social and behavioural functioning (Mizelle, 2005). While classmate support is shown to be most influential leading up to the transfer period, during transition it is parental presence which is most predictive of children's adjustment, and has the most long-lasting implications, especially with respect to children's academic attainment (Waters et al., 2014b). However, as discussed above, primary-secondary school transition can also be a difficult time for parents and ensuring that parents feel empowered to become and remain engaged in their child's schooling during the transition and throughout secondary school is important. Nonetheless, as discussed later in this thesis, see *Chapter* 2, parents are the least researched stakeholder within the field of primary-secondary school transition, and insight into the challenges they face during this time and the support they provide for their children, but also receive themselves, is rarely explored. Thus, as recommended by Coffey (2013), there is a need to carefully consider both children's and parents' concerns when designing intervention programmes. The structure of this thesis models Coffey's (2013) recommendation as TaST, see *Study 4*, was informed by focus group research conducted with transfer parents, see *Study 1*, which explored their experiences of primary-secondary school transition and how they felt this period could be improved.

1.3.2.2. Teacher support

As depicted by Greenberg (2010), schools play a 'central role' in nurturing the lives of children and their families and are considered the 'primary setting' in which 'many initial concerns arise and can be effectively remediated' (Greenberg, 2010, p. 28). In fact, three quarters of parents report approaching a teacher with worries concerning their child's mental health in place of a family doctor (Barrett & Turner, 2001). Nonetheless, given that young people spend a substantial amount of their time in school, the findings above are unsurprising and relationships with both teachers and classmates are shown to have a significant impact on children's development (Crosnoe & Benner, 2015).

Interactions with non-parental authority figures are important for children's developing maturation and autonomy (Wit et al., 2011) and primary-secondary transition is no different. During this time there is a greater need for support from non-familial adults and support from teachers cannot be underestimated. Teachers are pivotal over the transfer period, not only in helping children prepare for the transition to secondary school, but also to settle into their new environment and navigate the simultaneous challenges posed (Coffey, 2013). For example, teacher support can be helpful in the short term, whether this support is simply being available to children, or encouraging coping processes (Demaray & Malecki, 2002). Teacher support can also be integral for children in the long term, particularly in nurturing academic success (Martin et al., 2007) and suppressing the initiation of health risk behaviours (Mcneely & Falci, 2004). For instance, Hallinan (2008) found that children who felt that their teachers cared about them, respected them and praised them, reported liking school more and performed better academically. Symonds and Galton (2014) also found that children who receive greater emotional support from teachers, report greater self-esteem and lower depressive symptoms.

However, as children move to secondary school, perceptions of teacher support are shown to decrease (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016); children commonly report teachers as less friendly, supportive and caring, and more critical which can predict later maladjustment problems such as misbehaviour and poor attendance (Reddy et al., 2003). These findings are shown to not differ by age suggesting that this reduction is not subject to developmental changes, and instead the transition itself (Bokhorst et al., 2010). For example, Bokhorst et al. (2010) found that twelve-year olds attending primary school reported significantly higher teacher support scores than twelve-year olds attending secondary school. Wit et al. (2011) found similar declines in perceptions of teacher support over primary-secondary school transition in their Canadian sample. Nonetheless, the timing of when support is measured in the transfer year and the dimension of social support being assessed have been shown to also shape findings. For example, Bru et al. (2010) found that prior to secondary school transition, primary school children were largely optimistic about the academic and emotional support offered by their teachers. However, when they transitioned to secondary school, children felt that they had overestimated the availability of support they could obtain from their secondary school teachers. As a result, perceptions of emotional and autonomy teacher support declined

significantly once at secondary school. Bru et al. (2010) suggested that deteriorations in perceptions of teacher support, but also feelings of anonymity inherent in this, may also be due to a mismatch between children's needs at the start of secondary school and the support teachers provide.

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). In line with SEF, and the research discussed above, it is plausible that declines in children's perceptions of teacher support over primary-secondary school transition are subject to a lack of fit between children's developmental needs during this time and their social and learning environment. In line with this theory it has been suggested that disjunctions in teacher-child relationships across primary-secondary school are shaped by: a) different perceptions and understandings of child-teacher relationships across the transition period (Symonds, 2015), and b) changes in schools' organisational and learning environments (McNeely & Fali, 2004).

In line with a) when children move to secondary school the multitude of secondary school teachers and the more formal approaches to teaching can be at odds with pre-existing practices, standards and the culture of care ethos children are accustomed to at primary school. For example, primary school teachers are often perceived by children as more nurturing and providing of more emotional support than secondary school teachers (Symonds, 2015). This can result in transfer children having difficulties forming similar close relationships with secondary school teachers (Bru et al, 2010). For example, transfer children are shown to commonly report secondary school teachers to be less approachable and available than their primary school teachers; 26% of Year 7 children report feeling that their teachers do not know who they are (Chedzoy & Burden, 2005). Children are also shown to rate relationships with teachers more negatively at secondary school, common characteristics of secondary school teachers being that they are stricter, more distant and less supportive than primary school teachers (Newman et al., 2000).

Opportunities for relationship formation between teachers and children can also be influenced by b) changes in schools' organisational and learning environments. For example, transfer children are taught by more teachers for short periods of time each day within secondary schools. Secondary schools' preference for didactic teaching styles, in addition to restricted curriculum opportunities subject to the 'high-stakes' testing ethos, can also limit opportunities for teacher-child interaction (Symonds, 2015). Similarly, secondary school's surveillance culture ethos, where teachers adopt a 'policing mentality rather than support mode' (Powell & Marshall, 2011, p.15), have also been shown to undermine relationship formation between teachers and children (McNeely & Fali, 2004). Taken together, it is clear to see how these changes can shape children's appraisals towards their teachers and learning once at secondary school.

Nevertheless, children who perceive that their teachers care about them and respect them, enjoy school more and perform better academically (Hallinan, 2008). This can be especially important given that most transfer children miss primary school (Symonds, 2015), and are often grieving the loss and support of primary school teachers at the start of secondary school. This is often not compensated for by feelings of anonymity on entry to secondary school (Chedzoy & Burden, 2005), whether this is subject to the inequitable emotional support transfer children receive from secondary school teachers (Bru et al., 2010) or the larger and older school climate which Year 7 children may not feel they belong in (Hanewald, 2013).

Nonetheless, this impacts children's socio-emotional functioning, which is concerning, and thus more attention needs to be placed on bridging discontinuities in teacher-child relationships across schools. For example, children who receive more support from teachers immediately following primary-secondary school transition experience better adjustment (Evangelou et al., 2008). This has been shown cross-culturally, more recently, as Virtanen et al. (2018) found decreased support from teachers during the transition to lower secondary school in Finland to be associated with lower psychological well-being. It was concluded that there is a necessity for lower secondary school teachers to support children's well-being in the new school environment by focusing on creating close relationships with them.

Recommendations endorsing effective communication between primary and secondary schools have been made since 2001 (Hawk & Hill, 2001) and continue to date

(Jindal-Snape et al., 2019), and transition programmes could also benefit from bridging across primary and secondary schools. For example, Jindal-Snape et al.'s (2019) mixed methods longitudinal study, found an overall lack of shared understanding and conceptualisation of school transitions between both primary and secondary school staff, which led to differences in views regarding the optimum timing for transition preparation and planning. It was concluded that there is need for effective collaboration and discussion across schools so that practice is informed by shared understanding.

On the other hand, for teachers, Year 7 and 8 children are frequently reported to be the most challenging age group to teach (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008), and it is important to note that whilst children have to adjust to new teaching styles, teachers have to also recognise discontinuities (especially expectations) between institutions and adjust their teaching accordingly (Hargreaves & Galton, 2002). Communication disjunctions between primary and secondary schools, and lack of awareness of differences in practices across schools can also often contribute to children negotiating greater change when they transition to secondary school (Hopwood et al., 2016).

Moreover, teachers are shown to have different priorities, namely attainment dips, over the transition period, in comparison to children and parents who are primarily concerned with socio-emotional aspects of the transition (Zeedyk et al., 2003). This was shown by Hammond's (2016) qualitative case study, which used Forum Theatre to explore children's and teachers' perceptions of challenge over this period. A notable disparity was found between teachers' and children's perceptions of challenge, especially concerning systemic and emotional challenges, which children were more likely to identify. It was suggested that teachers' misconceptions concerning children's relatively 'small' concerns, relating to peer relationships and environmental changes, could play a fundamental role in creating unnecessary relationship challenges between teachers and children.

Primary school teachers also have a part to play in primary-secondary school transition preparations. Regular transition preparation in Year 6 and helping children to gain an understanding of the routines and structure of secondary school can help to reduce children's anxiety and prepare them for the challenges Year 7 brings (Hopwood et al., 2016), as long as primary school teachers are mindful to not be overly protective, cautious or anxious, (Hammond, 2016). However, across primary schools, transition

preparations are variable (Ofsted, 2015), as discussed in more detail in *Chapter 5,* and secondary schools need to be receptive of this within their provisions (Symonds, 2015). Thus, it is important that discontinuities across primary and secondary school systems are bridged, and this should include expectations pertaining to changes in child-teacher relationships. Nonetheless, it is also possible that declines in teacher support from primary to secondary school may simply reflect changes in children's developing maturation. For example, as children grow older, the value placed on classmate support is consistently shown to exceed that of teacher support (Bokhorst et al, 2010). For example, Longobardi et al.'s (2016) longitudinal study, which examined changes in children's perceptions of child-teacher relationships over the transition from Middle school to High school in Italy, found children's perceptions of the quality of child-teacher relationships, to be higher at High school. This improvement was not linked to changes in children's perceptions of the level of closeness and sharing with the teacher, but to a reduction in the dimension of conflict and negative expectations. Children transition to High school at age 14 in Italy, which suggests that children's perceptions of child-teacher relationships may vary as children grow older.

Moreover, it may be that the support teachers offer is constrained to time and place, in that teachers may fulfil different needs and offer specific support at different time points, dependent on children's needs. For example, prior to and during initial transition, teachers may initially be important in helping children to build skills, such as emotional regulation and social competence, but also provide informational support, and a sense of security, as a steppingstone for children to then explore their surroundings and build similar relationships with classmates. However, once these other supports are in place, teacher support may decline. For example, Longobardi et al.'s (2016) longitudinal study also found child-teacher relationship quality, particularly the closeness and conflict dimension, to be linked to children's prosocial attitudes, problem behaviour, individual adaptation in class and academic achievement.

In sum, support from both primary and secondary school teachers can be pivotal for children over primary-secondary school transition (Hopwood et al., 2016); relationships with teachers are consistently shown to be a stronger predicter of children's enjoyment within school and mental health than relationships with classmates (Symonds, 2010). However, as children move to secondary school, perceptions of teacher-child

support are shown to decrease (Bru et al., 2010; Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016), which in turn can destabilise perceptions of communal school environments and trust between both parties (Tonkin & Watt, 2003). Given the discontinuities children and teachers face over primary-secondary school transition, these declines in child-teacher relationships are unsurprising (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013), but nonetheless there is need to mitigate them. To do this, and as depicted by Hopwood et al. (2016), greater work is needed in this area to ensure transition is a smooth and successful process. Obtaining a deeper insight into teachers' perceptions of school transition, particularly how they feel it is best to support Year 6 and 7 children, is important in order to improve this period, as it is teachers who primarily prepare and guide children during this time. This thesis set out to do this, and *Study 1* explored Year 6 and 7 teachers' experiences of primary-secondary school transition and how they felt this period could be improved.

1.3.2.3. Classmate support

Although, parents and teachers continue to play a major role in children's development through late childhood (Brown & Larson 2009), adolescence marks a period of time where social support networks are restructured, and the central position of parents and support from non-parental adult figures such as teachers weakens and gradually becomes overshadowed by relationships with classmates, who exert a greater role in defining adolescents' feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Wit et al., 2011). As depicted by Pratt and George (2005), the school is central in the formation of classmate relationships, which, in turn, helps children make sense of their environment, develop a sense of identity and promote adjustment (Ashton, 2008). However, the start of adolescence also coincides with primary-secondary school transition, which is marked not only by change in school environment, but also disruptions in classmate relationships. Stable friendships that are also high in quality can provide emotional support in challenging situations such as primary-secondary school transition, especially given that it is the social aspects of the new secondary school environment and losing old friends which are common and persistent concerns amongst transfer children (Rice et al., 2011). Nonetheless, it has not been until recently (Ng-Knight et al., 2019) that the extent to which these concerns are borne out by reality has been known.

Pre, post and during primary-secondary school transition relationships with classmates are shown to be in a state of flux (Rice et al., 2015) and lack stability (Ng-

Knight et al., 2019). Such social fragmentation and reconstruction is not only subject to children moving to different schools, as transfer children often transition from several small-knit primary schools to one much larger secondary school, but is also influenced by emotional and identity changes reflective of changing pressures in the new secondary school environment. For example, close primary school classmate relationships are shown to become fractured and overshadowed within the secondary school environment as children strive for dominance (Pellegrini & Long, 2002) and autonomy (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Curson et al.'s (2019) interpretative phenomenological analysis which explored nine pupils' retrospective experiences of primary-secondary school transition, found that the issue that impacted children most over primary-secondary school transition was the changing nature of friendships, which continued for many of them ten months into their transition.

Weller (2007) argued that reorganisation in children's relationships with classmates over primary-secondary school transition can be compartmentalised into three main trajectories, in that relationships can be: enduring (survive the transition through children moving to the same secondary school and class), ruptured (fractured by the transition, subject to children moving to different schools, or separated within the same secondary school by different classes or interests), or transitional (short term bonds of support to overcome early stages of school transition). Whilst enduring and ruptured relationships can have more long-term ramifications on children's adjustment (Ashton, 2008), transitional relationships are of significant interest in the short-term during the early stages of school transfer, especially when considering the role of social support. Leading up to the transfer period, classmate support has been shown to be the most powerful and influential predictor of positive transition expectations for children, specifically amongst children transitioning schools with a cohort of primary school classmates (Waters et al., 2012).

Nonetheless, transitional relationships can pose significant challenges up to a year prior to the transfer when children are in Year 5 at primary school and start considering secondary school choice decisions. For example, although school choice decisions are instrumental in ending or constraining enduring relationships, for children, the outcome of such decisions can pose significant problems for their immediate primary school classmate relationships. In fact, leading up to the transfer period, primary school

classmate relationships are shown to become strained, and even rupture, as transitional relationships prevail and children instrumentally utilise social capital to grow closer to classmates going to the same secondary school as an attempt to cope with feelings of anxiety and apprehension (Weller, 2007). For example, Bloyce and Frederickson's (2012) intervention research found a reduction in pro-social behaviours, assessed by items such as 'I try to be nice to other people' between the penultimate term of primary school and the end of the first secondary school term (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012). Shedding greater light on this disruption, Waters et al. (2014b) found that strains in friendship groups leading up to the transition can be particularly upsetting for children and garner fears concerning friendships at secondary school.

Taken together, these findings are concerning as children who move to secondary school without any friends from their primary school, or who have had negative experiences with friends at primary school, show poorer outcomes (Jindal-Snape et al. 2018). This has led scholars to conclude that social stability in friendships is a protective factor over primary-secondary school transition, helping children to cope with challenges associated with the move during early adolescence (Symonds & Galton, 2014). For example, Ng-Knight et al. (2019) found children who maintained their best friendships across primary-secondary school transition to show better academic progress and fewer behavioural and emotional problems. Thus, while children should be encouraged to develop new friendships at secondary school, they should also be supported to maintain friendships with children who might be going to a different secondary school, who can provide support, albeit from afar.

Peer acceptance and reciprocated friendships are also reported to be considerably low at the start of secondary school (Jindal- Snape & Miller, 2008), subject to being compromised and overshadowed within the older and more mature secondary school environment, as children strive for emotional and behavioural autonomy (Pellegrini, 2002). For example, only three-quarters of primary school classmate relationships are expected to be maintained at the start of secondary school (Weller, 2007). Nonetheless, transitional classmate relationships are shown to have significant short-term implications in helping children adjust to their new environment. Such support can be vital when reassurances from old primary school friendships are often lost and grieved, and replaced by anticipation, fear and sometimes loneliness during initial transition (Jindal-Snape &

Miller, 2008). For example, transitional classmate relationships are shown to help children build confidence, cope, and establish a sense of belonging (Weller, 2006). Such relationships are also linked with peer affiliation, can buffer children against victimisation (Pellegrini & Long, 2002) and reduce the manifestation of mental health problems such as symptoms of depression and social anxiety (Wit et al., 2011).

Thus, providing methods to reassure or assuage social concerns while children are still in primary school is important, especially given that secondary schools are shown to vary in the degree to which they support friendships as part of their transition work (Rice et al., 2015). As discussed in *1.1.3. Social Changes,* cognitive empathy is shown to decrease over the transition period, which can also limit affiliative behaviour over school transition. Thus, addressing affiliative behaviour pre-transfer and into the secondary school transition period by giving children the opportunity to develop and test cognitive empathy skills is paramount (Williford et al., 2016). Furthermore, secondary schools can also aid friendship stability over primary-secondary school transition through endorsing policies that group children based on friendships, such as including children's friendship preferences into the configuration of their secondary school form groups. Such procedural amendments have been shown to aid prevention of mental health problems in children (Ng-Knight et al., 2019).

However, Ng-Knight et al.'s (2019) longitudinal study only assessed children's top three friends, which was acknowledged as a limitation in only partially capturing friendship groups. This is because when using unlimited nomination procedures, the average number of nominations usually exceeds three. Moreover, while transitional classmate relationships are shown to provide some degree of continuity, they are also shown to rarely result in enduring friendships which predict the likelihood of developing solid and stable friendships in later life (Ashton, 2008). Instead, transitional classmate relationships simply symbolise a shared past, common experience and similar anxieties, and provide a means to widen one's social network. In addition to this, moving with primary school classmates can make primary-secondary school transition easier as this support can aid children's resilience, confidence and even emotional intelligence, which in turn provides children with the social skills to make new friends (Hanewald, 2013). For example, Qualter et al. (2007) found children with higher levels of emotional intelligence were more likely to cope with the challenges associated with primary-secondary school

transition, encounter fewer problems and exhibit greater self-worth. This research presents the case for the development of intervention programmes that help children build social skills and appropriate coping strategies side by side, to in turn facilitate greater peer acceptance over primary-secondary school transition.

In sum, children's perceptions of support from classmates, as with parents and teachers, are linked with positive perceptions of school, feelings of competence and academic performance. However, children's relationships with classmates are impacted by school transition - a time where pressure to attain high social status is important, and when support from the peer group can become strained. Thus, bridging the gap between teachers' prioritisation of educational achievement and children's preoccupation with relational aspects of the transfer, is imperative, to put strategies into practice, to ease adjustment difficulties, that are receptive and attuned to children's social concerns.

1.3.2.4. Summary: parent, teacher and classmate support

As discussed in this section, parents, teachers and classmates can have unique, but also collaborative protective influences over primary-secondary school transition. For example, while good relationships with parents, teachers and classmates are necessary for the development of self-esteem and identity in adolescence, classmate support has been shown to uniquely act as a protective buffer against internalising problems, especially leading up to the transfer period, through helping children set positive expectations. In comparison, parents and teachers can exert a greater influence during the transition in helping children to adjust, which can have more long-lasting effects, especially in preventing externalising problems (Demaray & Malecki, 2002) and academic unfulfillment (Mizelle, 2005). However, as discussed above, and worth noting again, over primary-secondary school transition parent-teacher collaboration is shown to decrease markedly, which can be subject to school-based barriers, but also personal barriers, specifically parents' sense of efficacy. Nonetheless, this lack of cohesion can leave stakeholders feeling vulnerable, unsupportive and powerless (Hanewald, 2013) and there is a need to consider the collaborative supportive role of parents and teachers to understand how to best equip them support young people in practice.

It is also important to acknowledge that social relationships are embedded in context. For example, primary-secondary school transition is a period of substantial change for all three stakeholders and it is not only transfer children who adjust to new

identities, expectations, roles and interactions, but also parents, teachers and classmates. Thus, each stakeholder also faces competing demands, which can at times inadvertently shape supportive relationships. Nonetheless, as discussed in *Chapter 2,* these three stakeholders' perspectives and experiences over primary-secondary school transition are rarely considered in research studies, which can limit our ability to fully understand and improve this period.

1.4.   Other Theoretical Perspectives Review

It is worth noting that there is no one underlying theory underpinning research on primary-secondary school transition, and various theoretical perspectives have been used to explore school transitions. Drawing on wider educational and developmental psychology literature, Resilience Theory was selected as the overarching theoretical framework underpinning this thesis in order to both account for, and provide a holistic understanding of internal and external protective and risk factors, which shape children's ability to cope over primary-secondary school transition. The three preliminary qualitative studies, discussed in *Chapters 2, 3* and *4*, and the intervention study, discussed in *Chapter 5,* all draw on Resilience Theory (discussed in more detail in *section 1.3*) from different angles, reflected by the distinct research designs and methodologies used.

However, there are alternate theoretical perspectives which have accounted for adjustment over primary-secondary school transition. Key examples include Eccles and Midgley's (1989) Stage-Environment Fit (SEF) theory, Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) Eco-Systemic Model of Development, Rimm et al.'s (2000) Ecological and Dynamic model of Transition and Jindal-Snape et al.'s (2016) more recent Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions (MMT) theory, which are discussed in turn below. Eccles and Midgley's (1989) Stage-Environment Fit (SEF) theory and Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) Eco-Systemic Model of Development, are also discussed in further detail in the preliminary qualitative research study chapters, and provide additional theoretical frameworks for the study designs used in these chapters.

1.4.1. Eccles and Midgley's (1989) Stage Environment Fit (SEF) Theory

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 & Midgley, 1989). For example, during school transition, transfer 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 to cope with and adjust to, in comparison to the consistency inherent in remaining in pre-transition schools.

Symonds and Hargreaves (2016) extended SEF theory, and argued that as transfer 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 discussion of SEF theory is outlined in *Chapters 2* and *3.*

1.4.2. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) Eco-Systemic Model of Development

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) Eco-Systemic Model of Development, posits that a child's development is influenced by characteristics of the child and their environment. These influences are nested, and it is through reciprocal and dynamic interactions between the developing child and components of the child's environment, that increase in complexity and become multifaceted over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006), which influences development. Through acknowledgement of the environment and changes in social context in shaping development, Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Eco-Systemic Model of Development encourages a shift in focus away from the child and their individual characteristics to the interaction (or 'goodness-of-fit') between the child and their environment in shaping developmental outcomes.

Reflecting this and given the many environmental and social changes children negotiate over primary-secondary school transition, Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) Eco-Systemic Model of Development, provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding this developmental period, and has been referenced in several articles pertaining to primary-secondary school transition (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006). For example, primary-secondary school transition has been conceptualised as a 'multi-dimensional process' (West et al., 2010, p.45). Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Eco-Systemic Model of Development draws attention to the role of environmental context, considering both proximal and distal factors, which are subject to significant change during this time. In the context of primary-secondary school transition, proximal processes include children's relationships with significant others such as teachers and classmates, whereas distal factors may include educational policies and practices. Both proximal and distal factors can influence the child's experiences during this time and are subject to change. Further discussion of Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) Eco-Systemic Model of Development is outlined in *Chapter 2.*

1.4.3. Rimm et al.'s (2000) Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition

Rimm et al.'s (2000) Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition is based on ecologically oriented system theories, such as Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) Eco-Systemic Model of Development and outlines how micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems have direct, indirect, and dynamic influences on children's transition experiences. The model provides a framework to specifically conceptualise risk inherent in the transition to school; although the model's emphasis on change during this transition also has implications for primary-secondary school transition.

The model firstly outlines how the transition to school must be conceptualised in terms of relationships between children and their surrounding contexts, such as schools, peers, families, and neighbourhoods. Secondly the model outlines how the quality of these relationships and the interactions among social contexts (e.g. between the home and school) can have both direct and indirect effects on children, throughout the school transition period, which presents increased demand and challenge. Finally, the model acknowledges that relationships within contexts change over time, and especially during the transition to school, which takes place in an environment characterised by change in patterns of interactions between individuals, groups, and institutions (e.g. home, school,

child, and peer contexts). Over time, children's school trajectories are likely to become increasingly stable; but until then, during early schooling, the degree of change and stability in these relationships, can either support or challenge children's adjustment into school and predict children's subsequent relationships in school.

This model also shares parallels to primary-secondary school transition, also a period of time where children face simultaneous changes, not only in their social interactions, but also school environment and learning environment. Thus, consideration of the bidirectional influence inherent in dynamic interactions between the child and context could also have implications for primary-secondary school transition support provisions delivered through social systems (e.g. by teachers within schools), often shaped by local-level resources and policies.

1.4.4. Jindal-Snape's (2016) Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions (MMT) theory

In line with the models discussed above, Jindal-Snape's (2016) Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions (MMT) theory similarly conceptualises transition as a 'dynamic and ongoing process of psychological, social and educational adaptation over time due to changes in context, interpersonal relationships and identity' (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019, p.1257). MMT theory outlines how individuals inhabit multiple domains (e.g. the home, school, and within each different social relationships and environmental structures), which presents unique challenges during times of transition, but also nested complexities. This means that at any one given time, an individual may be negotiating multiple transitions.

Primary-secondary school transition presents multiple changes across environmental, social, academic, emotional and even physiological domains as children negotiate discontinuities in their school environment, social interactions, academic expectations, sense of self, often alongside pubescent changes. This means that children are experiencing educational and social transitions, through changes in school and social contexts, in addition to a developmental transition and systemic transition through a complex process of 'becoming somebody' but also 'unbecoming' as outlined by Ecclestone et al. (2009). These changes can be both exciting and worrying, which can vary across time, and are susceptible to individual differences, meaning children require ongoing support from a range of significant others (Jindal-Snape, 2016).

The latter is particularly important as MMT theory also discusses the ongoing and dynamic nature of group transitions, outlining the complex interactions between different individuals' transitions. For example, in the context of primary-secondary school transition, it is not only the transfer child negotiating multiple transitions, but also significant others in the child's ecosystem, including their parents and classmates. This presents multiple layers of transitions and their interactions. Through several individuals negotiating different transitions, at the same time within the same or different domains, it is inevitable that this will impact others within the individuals' ecosystem. In the context of primary-secondary school transition, transfer children and adults, will be experiencing similar and different positive and negative transition experiences at similar and different times, in the same and different domains. These transitions will trigger changes for significant others within ecosystems, which can inadvertently interact with or instigate other transitions for the child.

In sum, MMT theory highlights the multiple layers of transitions and their interactions. Thus, it is important to acknowledge the multiple transitions individuals may be experiencing at any one time to understand the complexity of their experience, whether in one domain or several. In addition, it is equally important to consider significant others within the individuals ecosystem and transitions they also may be making which can inadvertently interact with or instigate other transitions for the individual, especially when considering group transitions, such as primary-secondary school transition.

Chapter 2: UK Focus Group Study (Study 1)- 'You're in this world now': Children's, teachers', and parents' experiences of school transition and how they feel it can be improved

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2.1. Background

As discussed above in *Section 1.3.2*, parents, teachers and classmates can provide the most salient sources of support over adolescence, especially during times of change (Eccles & Harold, 1993) and vulnerability (Stadler et al, 2010), such as primary-secondary school transition. During this time, children who report good relationships and communication with these support figures express fewer adjustment difficulties (Hanewald, 2013). Nonetheless, understanding the protective roles of parents, teachers and classmates over primary-secondary school transition can be complex. Coinciding with puberty and early adolescence, primary-secondary school transition is marked by rapid change, as discussed in *Chapter 1*, and children's social support networks can also be challenged and restructured during this time, see *Section 1.3.2*.

Moreover, primary-secondary school transition can also 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 parents, teachers and classmates (Hanewald, 2013). Thus, changes in pre-existing support structures, particularly those that pertain to the loss of the primary school, are common. In addition, cohesion between sources of support is not always practical, subject to the additional challenges these stakeholders face.

Thus, understanding the protective roles of parents, teachers and classmates over primary-secondary school transition can be complex, yet, to date, we have a limited understanding of their first-hand emotional experiences of primary-secondary school transition. Shedding light on this research gap, this chapter reports a study that examined

parents', teachers' and children's retrospective experiences of primary-secondary school transition and how they felt this period could be improved.

2.1.1. Parents' perspectives

To date, apart from Jindal-Snape and Cantali's (2019) mixed methods longitudinal study (which was published after *Study 1* was published, and places greater emphasis on children's perspectives), there is limited research which explicitly focuses on parents' experiences of primary-secondary school transition in the UK. In fact, amongst the few studies which have investigated school transition from a more bottom-up approach and considered parents' perspectives, most are used to support findings from transfer children (West et al., 2010) or teachers (Keay et al., 2015). Nonetheless, despite facing their own challenges during this time, which to date have been understudied (Coffey, 2013), parents are crucial over primary-secondary school transition. For example, supportive parent-child relationships characterised by autonomy and reciprocity are elemental in mitigating transfer stresses (Pratt & George, 2005). Thus, obtaining first-hand insight of parents' experiences over primary-secondary school transition and understanding how to best support them is of fundamental importance, especially when designing intervention programmes.

2.1.2. Teachers' perspectives

Teachers are natural implementers of school-based interventions, but also face competing pressures within the school environment. This includes academic and procedural demands, such as national assessments and school choice decisions, in addition to heavy staff workloads and overcrowded curriculums (McGee et al., 2003), which researchers often fail to acknowledge when designing school-based transition interventions. This can limit the longevity and sustainability of transition support programmes and only add to the marginalisation of pastoral care support programmes within schools (Tucker, 2013), which will be discussed in *Chapter 5.* Thus, understanding individual and system level pressures within the school environment that influence teachers' practice, is important to bridge the research to practice gap and make significant and informed change to school transition (Reinke et al., 2011).

However, few studies have explored teachers' perspectives and experiences in supporting children over primary-secondary school transition, especially in the UK, taking a more open qualitative approach (Kim et al., 2014). Teachers have a pivotal role during primary-secondary school transition not only educationally, but also in supporting children's emotional needs (Hopwood et al., 2016; Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016) and therefore it is vital that we shed light on this research gap by investigating what provisions primary and secondary school teachers currently employ in their classrooms to support transfer children, and the barriers these stakeholders may face in doing this.

2.1.3. Children's perspectives

Despite consistent recommendations endorsing the importance of valuing transfer children's first-hand insight and involving them in decision-making (Paris & Paris, 2001), especially over primary-secondary school transition (McGee et al., 2003), there is a clear paucity of children's voices in UK transition studies. For example, van Rens et al.'s (2018) review found only thirty articles published between 1987 and 2011 that focussed on children's perceptions of school transition. Amongst these articles, just two studies explicitly asked transfer children to share their first-hand thoughts and experiences and few made recommendations based on the content of what was said and translated this insight into practice.

Nonetheless, transfer children have first-hand insight into what primary-secondary school transition is like, and research has shown that children perceive school environment factors differently that adults (Bailey & Baines, 2012) and express different concerns (Pratt & George, 2005). Children's valued participation in research can also have a positive impact on their self-confidence and social competence, factors which are shown to protectively buffer children over primary-secondary school transition.

In sum, given that embedding pupil participation into school systems is not only considered an educational standard (DfHSC & DfE, 2018), but also a right of young people (UNICEF, 1989), by neglecting children's valuable first hand insight, studies not only lack context-specific evidence (Rossiter et al., 2018), but do little in terms of valuing children's voices. Taken together, these findings raise the importance of eliciting children's first-hand insight, as without direct consultation with transfer children, our understanding of primary-secondary school transition will only ever be partially informed.

2.1.4. Rationale

In sum, school transition can be a challenging time for children, which can have negative implications on their short- and long-term emotional well-being and mental health (White, 2020). The transition is especially difficult for children if the challenges of the transition exceed the child's coping capabilities and they lack social support, from significant support figures, such as parents, teachers and classmates at critical points during this time. Moreover, primary-secondary school transition is also a key concern, not just for transfer children, but also for parents and teachers who provide significant support for children making the transition to secondary school (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019). However, to date we have a limited understanding of parents' and teachers' experiences in the lead up to and during primary-secondary school transition in the UK, as their voices are often overlooked in research studies. Thus, it is unclear what additional support these stakeholders may need to effectively support transfer children (Bailey & Baines, 2012; Hanewald, 2013). In this study, focus on these significant stakeholders has been prioritised to answer the research question outlined below.

In part, this uncertainty is due to methodological constraints, particularly the dominance of research conducted in the US, where children transition schools at a later age there than in the UK (as discussed in *Chapter 3*). Therefore, it is important that more research is conducted in the UK where children transition at a younger age.

In addition, the general reliance on top-down quantitative survey-based designs (Riglin et al., 2013) where participants are asked to respond to predisposed quantitative facets of adjustment, as opposed to directly asking participants to share their transition experiences is also a limitation. While longitudinal quantitative designs are best when testing temporal precedence of developmental outcomes, qualitative methods can help us to better understand complexities and lived experiences inherent in the process and experience of primary–secondary school transition (Ashton, 2008; Graham & Hill, 2003). Given, that adjustment can be subject to individual and environmental characteristics (Adeyemo, 2005), which cannot be obtained when studies are reliant solely on quantitative closed questionnaire items (Zeedyk et al., 2003), qualitative studies can evoke more in-depth insight. For example, qualitative studies, have shown transition to be a more profound experience than quantitative studies, especially with regards to stakeholders' well-being (Pratt & George, 2005). This may be subject to the

decontextualized and unmediated nature of qualitative methods, which can shed unique insight on quantitative findings (King et al., 1994), evoking more honest declarations.

Nonetheless, while there has been a considerable number of qualitative studies investigating primary-secondary school in the UK (Rens et al., 2018), most are limited in terms of the conclusions that can be drawn. One limitation is that many studies are small scale, such as Green's (1997) interview research, which included only ten participants (Green, 1997), or vague with regards to reporting participant numbers. For example, Coffey (2013) did not indicate exactly how many participants took part in interviews following survey data collection, meaning the sample size for the qualitative data is unclear. Additionally, many studies simply collect qualitative data to supplement quantitative findings, without conducting separate analyses (West et al., 2010). Some research in this area has used unstructured and unmoderated class activities as a data collection method, as opposed to focus groups and interviews (Ashton, 2008), which can result in data being contextualized, less personal and honest. Other studies employ biased participant selection, such as Evaneglou et al.'s. (2008) longitudinal research where only participants who reported positive experiences of school transition were selected to participate in interviews, which means that findings cannot be generalised to all children. Longitudinal research is also limited and, instead, qualitative data has often been collated before or immediately following the transition during the 'honeymoon period' and, as a result, has not captured the complexity of school transition (Ashton, 2008).

Furthermore, many qualitative studies assessing primary-secondary school transition are disparate in terms of focus (Mellor & Delamont, 2011; Pratt & George, 2005), which creates indiscriminate lists of strategies to improve this period, but with no clear method of prioritisation (Evaneglou et al., 2008). Thus, as recommended by previous scholars, understanding children's, parents' and teachers' perceptions and especially their *emotional* experiences of the process of primary-secondary school transition is more important than unravelling individual factors that shape adjustment (Ashton, 2008; Graham & Hill, 2003). It has consistently been acknowledged that there is a great deal of work to be done in this area to fully understand this period from these stakeholders' key perspectives and insights (Hopwood et al., 2016). Moreover, without understanding how

children's, parents', and teachers' views of transition are related, efforts to improve the transition period can only be superficial.

Several environmental and individual factors are associated with primary-secondary school transitional adjustment, and there are limited links between theoretical and intervention transition research (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2005). Thus, the present research takes a holistic approach to understanding primary-secondary school transition by unravelling children's, parents' and teachers' retrospective experiences in the lead up to and over the transition period. Bronfenbrenner's Eco-Systemic Model of Development (1979, 2005), which acknowledges the multifaceted dynamic interactions between an individual and environmental systems, 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 period of time (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006). Primary-secondary school transition has been conceptualised as a 'multi-dimensional process' (West et al., 2010, p.45) and drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) theoretical framework, the present research adds to contemporary theory by looking deeper into both proximal (children's relationships with their teachers, parents, and classmates) and distal (educational policies and practices) influences, which impact children's, parents', and teachers' experiences in the lead up to and over the transition period.

The present research investigates children's, parents' and teachers' experiences of primary-secondary school transition using focus groups. Focus groups have been used minimally within this context, in comparison to one-to-one interviews (Rens et al., 2018). This is despite consistent recommendations endorsing their usefulness not only in evoking honest and decontextualised insight, but also for enabling individuals to talk about their feelings in an open, friendly and non-judgemental space (Williams et al., 2012).

In the present study, while Year 7 children (ages 11-12 years) participated in face-to-face synchronous focus groups, parents and teachers participated in asynchronous, online focus groups. To date there are no studies which have utilised online, asynchronous focus groups to assess parents' and teachers' experiences of primary-secondary school, despite the practicalities of this methodology for otherwise hard to reach and busy participants. While it will still be the case that those who are interested in

the topic will self-select to participate in the study, allowing participants to dictate when they will participate is likely to lead to higher levels of participation from a wider variety of participants. In addition, the anonymous nature of online formats has been shown to be non-confronting and stimulate honest sharing around sensitive topics (Coulson, 2005).

Thus, using focus group methodology, the present research aimed to answer the research question:

1. What are Year 7 children's, Year 7 parents' and Year 6 and 7 teachers' retrospective experiences of primary-secondary school transition in the West Midlands in the UK and how do they feel it could be improved?

2.2.   Method

2.2.1. Participants

Forty-five Year 7 children (twenty-three females and twenty-two males), aged eleven and twelve, from three different UK West Midlands secondary schools participated in seven child focus groups. This surpasses recommendations that between three to six focus groups are likely to identify 90% of the themes and reach data saturation for a given topic (Guest et al., 2017). Within one school, participants were split into three groups of eight (one of these focus groups was all male, another all-female, the other mixed). In a second school participants were split into two groups of six (mixed gender), and in the final school two groups of five and a group of four (mixed gender). The varying gender compositions of the focus groups reflects mixed evidence concerning the discussion of sensitive topics at this age under certain group conditions (Horner, 2000). To recruit a stratified purposive sample, local secondary schools' demographic and performance Ofsted Reports and NCOP (National Collaborative Outreach Programme) statistics were reviewed, and a top, medium and low scoring secondary school were selected which were situated in a range of areas across the city. Thus, it is assumed that a representative coverage of demographic characteristics and socio-economic status was included within the present sample.

Eight Year 7 parents (seven females, one male), eight Year 7 teachers (six females, two males) and eight Year 6 teachers (six females, two males) participated in three online

asynchronous focus groups (each participant group participating in a separate focus group). Parents and teachers were recruited from five secondary schools in the West Midlands and five primary feeder schools and were aged between 25 and 40 years old (mean age bracket 30–40). Primary schools were identified using schools' demographic and performance Ofsted Reports and NCOP statistics and where possible Year 7 parents and teachers were recruited from the three secondary schools in the West Midlands participating in the child focus groups. However, to provide an in-depth insight and good coverage of local primary-secondary school transition provisions conducted in schools across the area, an additional two UK secondary schools in the West Midlands were represented in the focus group discussions.

2.2.2. Materials

Focus group semi-structured questions were developed to guide both face-to-face and asynchronous discussions (see Appendix 2.1). The child, Year 6 and Year 7 teacher semi-structured focus group guides contained ten questions and the parent semi-structured focus group guides contained eight questions. All questions focus on stakeholders' experiences of transition, addressing their thoughts and feelings about the past and present, relationships, support, individual-level qualities, behaviour, identity and recommendations.

The content and structure of the semi-structured focus group questions were informed by the research question, in addition to Resilience theory (Ungar, 2008) and previous research. For example, in line with both, the semi-structured focus group questions addressed both internal and external protective factors, e.g. teachers were asked to comment on the qualities of well-prepared transfer children (see item seven), in addition to teacher-child relationships and school support (see item three and six). Moreover, all focus group questions were positively worded, and children were asked what they were excited about but also what they were not looking forward to (see items three and four). This is in line with recommendations from previous research (Symonds, 2015) and research since (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019) pertaining to the importance of reframing the discourse around primary-secondary school transition.

Prompts and follow up questions (mainly 'can you tell me more about that') were used where necessary. An additional two warm-up questions were used within the child

focus groups, to encourage the children to feel safe, confident and comfortable sharing experiences within the focus group environment, as informed by previous research (Heary & Hennessy, 2002).

2.2.3. Procedure

2.2.3.1. Child face-to-face focus groups

Following ethical approval from Keele University's School of Psychology ethical review panel (Appendix 2.2), headteachers from the selected schools were contacted via email with an attached covering letter providing a brief overview of the project (all components: child, parent and teacher focus groups). In the email headteachers were asked whether the school would be willing and available to participate in the research project and a meeting was arranged to discuss the practicalities. During these meetings, in addition to discussing the research, a convenient time during the Spring Term was arranged to deliver the recruitment presentation and facilitate the child focus groups. A ten-minute recruitment presentation was then delivered to all Year 7 children in class or assembly to discuss the research project; a PowerPoint presentation and script were followed to ensure that all information was conveyed and consistent across all three schools. Following the presentation, all Year 7 children were given a parent information letter and opt-in parental consent form with an attached headteacher covering letter to send home to parents.

From the children who returned the parental consent form indicating that they would like to take part and had parental consent to do so, class teachers randomly selected children for the focus groups, and where possible organised the children into groups of eight (this was not possible on the day of data collection in two of the schools, and children were grouped into two groups of six, a group of five and a group of four). This second tier of judgement was to control for individual differences such as personality characteristics and friendships groups, which have been shown to influence maximum output from discussions (Heary & Hennessy, 2002).

Once participants had been selected, two audio recorders were set up in a suitable room to capture the interaction. All participants were briefed prior to data collection using the same information and instructions. The children were also asked to adhere to key ground rules and informed assent from each participant was obtained. A

trained facilitator (DBS checked and experienced in facilitating focus groups with children around sensitive topics) and the principal researcher delivered all seven focus groups following the same semi- structured focus group schedule to maintain consistency. Once the allotted time ended (one hour) participants were thanked, debriefed and offered the opportunity to ask questions. They were also pointed to sources of support and were informed that they had a one-week time frame if they would like to withdraw their own data.

2.2.3.2. Parent and teacher online focus groups

Following the recruitment presentation all Year 7 children were handed a separate letter to take home containing information regarding the parent online focus groups. Headteachers from local primary and secondary schools were also contacted via email, providing a brief overview of the project, asking for the schools' willingness and availability for their parents and/or teachers to participate in the online focus groups. Parent and teacher letters were then distributed. In this letter, the research project was explained, and participants were asked to email the principal researcher within a week time frame if they were interested in participating. Self-selected participants who emailed indicating interest were then sent 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 link to a Qualtrics survey and were then presented with a short section of information and consent form to electronically sign. Until consent was elicited participants were unable to go any further and participate in the study. Participants who had given consent were then directed to the website: www.focusgroupit.com and presented with all eight/nine semi-structured focus group questions. As the focus groups were asynchronous, the questions were online for one week and parents and teachers could log in at any time during the week to respond to the questions. Participants were made aware in the information sheet that they could withdraw from the focus group at any time, without giving reasons, and could do this by exiting the browser. However, they were also informed that as an anonymous username was used, they could not withdraw consent for the use of their data once participation had begun as all data was unidentifiable. The principal investigator also moderated responses using prompts and follow-up questions (mainly why) where necessary and her supervisor was added as an observer to the group as a

second set of eyes to oversee the discussion and ensure a comfortable and conductive environment was maintained (and moderate if needed). Once the data collection week had terminated, participants were presented with an online debrief, pointed to sources of support, and an email address for parents and teachers to ask further questions.

2.2.4. Data analysis

Audio-recordings were transcribed by the principal investigator using verbatim transcription. Following a process of repeated reading, the transcribed data and recordings were read and listened to several times in isolation to ensure the transcriptions were accurate. This also enabled immersion and familiarisation with the depth and breadth of the dataset, adhering to Braun and Clarke's (2013) first phase of Thematic Analysis.

As the intent of the analysis was to describe, summarise and interpret surface level patterns in semantic content from the sample as a whole, a semantic and data-driven approach was taken, using inductive Thematic Analysis. This method was deemed appropriate for the present study as the 'rigorous thematic approach can produce an insightful analysis that answers particular research questions' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.97). Characterised by critical realism, a contextualist framework was chosen, as this epistemology was deemed necessary in order to acknowledge essentialist reports of individual experience, meanings and reality, but also recognise that broader environmental contexts, such as social influence and the school, can also impinge on such meanings. This approach was chosen, as the present study was not theory-driven, instead, the research purpose was to understand children's, parents' and teachers' experiences of school transition, what factors contribute to this and how this period can be improved.

Thus, taking this epistemological framework into account, following on from data immersion of individual transcripts, each individual transcript was coded to compare semantic similarities and differences across each group of transcripts (i.e. child or teacher). Codes were made thoroughly and consistently, to highlight and describe the content of phrases and sentences within the data that were considered pertinent to the research question and that stakeholder. This provided a condensed overview of the main points and common meanings. The codes were then analysed and combined at a broader level, using thematic mapping, to develop themes. These themes from each group of

transcripts were then brought together to create overarching themes which reflected discussions across the three groups, and three overarching themes were produced, see Table 2.1. The themes' external and internal homogeneity were then reviewed to ensure that they were accurate and valid representations of the dataset, exhibiting clear and identifiable distinctions between groups, but that they also cohered meaningfully. Themes were refined through discussion between the author and two of her supervisors.

Table 2.1

A thematic table to show themes and sub-themes

Child	Parent	Teacher
	2.3.1. Recognition of emotions	
2.3.1.1. Awareness of conflicting emotions	2.3.1.1. Awareness of conflicting emotions (their own and child's)	
2.3.1.2. Feelings of Loss	2.3.1.2. Feelings of Loss	
2.3.1.3. Repression (of feelings in self and others)	2.3.1.3. Repression (of feelings in self and management of repression in their child)	2.3.1.3. Repression (management of repression in children)
2.3.1.4. Management of emotions (in self)		2.3.1.4. Management of emotions (in children and parents)
	2.3.2. Managing relationships	
2.3.2.1. Friendships		
2.3.2.2.Reconfiguration (in seeking support)	2.3.2.2.Reconfiguration (relationship with school and child)	2.3.2.3. Relationship building
	2.3.3. Managing expectations	
2.3.3.1. Managing expectations (exposure-acceptance)	2.3.3.1. Managing expectations (of their children)	2.3.3.1. Managing expectations (conflicting views of when is the optimal transition time)
2.3.4. Academic pressure		

2.2.4.1. Qualitative trustworthiness

Recognising that qualitative research can be open to subjectivity and bias, at the outset of the project, steps were made to establish epistemological and personal reflexivity, which is paramount 'to explore the ways in which a researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research' (Willig, 2001, p. 10*). Considering epistemological reflexivity, and adhering to the Joanna Briggs Institute Critical Appraisal checklist, there is congruity between the stated philosophical assumptions and the research methodology, the research methodology and the research questions, the research methodology and data collection methods, and the research methodology and the interpretation of results. All of these elements were informed by psychological theory and prior research, and, as shown above in the method section, data collection and analysis are transparent.

Considering personal epistemology, at the outset of the project, the author wrote a personal reflexivity statement, outlining her experiences, perspectives and values pertaining to this research topic, in addition to outlining her ontological and epistemological philosophical assumptions. The author also kept personal notes throughout data collection and analysis. This documentation of reflexivity was to establish credibility and ensure that any biases held as a researcher did not skew the interpretation of what the research participants said to fit a certain narrative.

To further strengthen the integrity and trustworthiness of the research project, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework, which outlines four quality criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, was followed. Credibility refers to the 'adequate representation of the constructions of the social world under study' (Bradley, 1993, p. 436) and is improved when there is a 'transparent process for coding and drawing conclusions from the data' (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2016, p. 6). To ensure the present findings were credible, during data analysis, the author kept an audit trail, highlighting every step of data analysis. This audit trail was then checked by the researcher's two supervisors, establishing dependability. Focus groups were also ran until saturation was met, and the detailed audio-recordings were transcribed using rigorous verbatim transcription to further enhance the credibility of the present findings.

Identified themes were also triangulated for congruence through discussion between the author and two of her supervisors, establishing confirmability, or 'the extent

to which the characteristics of the data, as posited by the researcher, can be confirmed by others who read or review the research results' (Bradley, 1993, p. 437). The principal researcher also facilitated all focus groups using the same semi-structured focus group guide, to ensure that there was consistency. Document quality enhancement measures were taken such as the narrative, which is grounded in examples, and provides a coherent, convincing and authentic interpretation of the data. The analysis also provides impactful, evocative and descriptive data, enabling readers to evaluate the applicability of the data to other contexts, and establishing transferability.

2.3.   Results

Four main themes: *2.3.1. Recognition of emotions, 2.3.2. Managing relationships, 2.3.3. Managing expectations,* and *2.3.4. Academic pressure* were identified across the ten focus groups. As shown in Table 2.1, each theme has a differing number of sub-themes, which is a direct reflection of the naturalistic data, as is the final miscellaneous theme, *2.3.4. Academic pressure*. The themes are explored separately below, as are their corresponding sub-themes, using illustrative quotes from participants, see Table 2.2.

Table 2.2

Key of in-text transcript referencing

Transcript	Stakeholder	Pseudonyms
A	Parent focus group	Angela, Rachael, Jenny, Laura, Chloe, Kevin, Gaynor
B	Primary school teacher focus group	Kylie, Donald, Sally, Mathew, Lucy, Holly, Millie, Jane
C	Secondary school teacher focus group	Jessica, Gail, Karen, Simon, Brenda, Sally, Stephanie, Harrison
D	Mixed gender child focus group	James, Nora, William, Georgia, Alisha
E	All male child focus group	Simon, Edward, Ken, Fred, George, Joseph, David, Grant
F	All female child focus group	Sarah, Rowshi, Charlotte, Hannah, Jane, Lucy, Victoria, Jackie
G	Mixed gender child focus group	Joanna, Tobias, Carol, Simon, Tyson, Thirangi, Clarissa, Daniella
H	Mixed gender child focus group	Thomas, Jacob, Jodie, Lydia
I	Mixed gender child focus group	Peter, Molly, Miley, Dennis, Annie, Harry
J	Mixed gender child group	Kirsty, Aron, Leighton, Nissa, Rajat, Sophie

Key: (Child focus group H) equates to transcript H and (Parent focus group) equates to transcript A.

2.3.1. Recognition of emotions

Stakeholders' recognition of emotions in the self and others was dominant and reoccurring across focus groups and shaped by stakeholders': *Awareness of conflicting emotions*, *Feelings of loss*, *Repression* and *Management of emotions*.

2.3.1.1. Awareness of conflicting emotions

Although acknowledgement was made to primary-secondary school transition as a 'rite of passage' (Parent focus group, Angela), in the lead up to and during the transfer period almost all children and parents expressed experiencing conflicting emotions and

strong feelings of loss. Stakeholders could recognise these emotions, in addition to strategies employed to manage them (i.e. repression) in themselves and others.

Children. Children reported feeling unsettled in the six-week holidays prior to the transition to secondary school. During this time children faced mixed, conflicting emotions, such as nervousness vs. excitement: 'Erm it's a bit of excitement and a bit of stress and anxiousness' (Child focus group E, Joseph) and loss vs. progression: 'I was sad because I was leaving all my friends behind but then I was happy because of like, because a new beginning's happening in your life' (Child focus group I, Peter). These emotional conflicts were equally prevalent amongst girls: 'I was like really nervous and really excited at the same time' (Child focus group F, Sarah) and boys: 'some days you're excited and some days you are nervous' (Child focus group D, William) and shown to follow a trajectory, in that once one emotional conflict had been overcome, children were faced with another: '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' (Child focus group I, Molly).

Parents. Parents appeared to recognise their child's conflicting emotions: 'I ensured the conversations were positive and acknowledged his nerves/worries' (Parent focus group, Rachael), and the trajectory in which these feelings manifested leading up to the transition period: 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, Jenny). Verbal reassurance was deemed best to support children manage these conflicting emotions, although this was acknowledged as difficult: 'I think it is harder with the emotional side' (Parent focus group, Angela).

Parents were also negotiating their own emotional conflicts in accepting that their child was growing up and 'no longer in the primary school bubble' (Parent focus group, Laura) and letting go: 'I definitely agree that it is a process of letting go' (Parent focus group, Rachael). Similar to the trajectory in which children manage conflicting emotions, for parents, coupled with feelings of loss: 'It is obviously an end of an era, I think we were both sad to leave such a good primary school' (Parent focus group, Kevin), were feelings of apprehension: 'we were apprehensive about the move' (Parent focus group, Gaynor). The process of letting go was also 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 overprotective' (Parent focus group, Chloe).

2.3.1.2. Feelings of loss

The motif of loss was shown to be dominant and reoccurring across all focus groups, and central to parents' and children's experience of primary-secondary school transition and for this, merits its own sub-theme, to reflect the complexity and depth of the participants' feelings. For example, throughout the child and parent focus groups many closing motifs were used, the end of Year 6 frequently depicted as an upsetting time. This was often accentuated by primary schools' preoccupation with leaving: 'it always gets up to the leaving things and the end of year plays and assemblies and the SATs and things and it is all about leaving primary school and I don't think it is ever about starting a new school' (Child focus group G, Tobias), where the transition was portrayed as a sad parting, as opposed to a progression, or step-up.

Children. Children have spent a significant amount of time at primary school and grown up there, and it was common for children to depict leaving primary school as a personal loss: 'like you were leaving part of like your family behind, and you were leaving part of like yourself behind' (Child focus group H, Thomas). Losing support, especially from primary school friendships was a significant concern: 'like some friends they've been through with you since Nursery, all the way here, so you don't really want to lose them' (Child focus group I, Nora), although children 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' (Child focus group F, Lucy).

Parents. Parents not only acknowledged their child's loss: 'I think as soon as they start Year 6 they are thinking about leaving' (Parent focus group, Laura), 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, Gaynor), 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, Jenny).

Feelings of personal loss were enunciated the more parents viewed their child as too young: '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, Angela) 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, Kevin). This was also shown when support was lacking from the school: 'There was a number of visits, but I don't think this was enough' (Parent focus group, Jenny).

2.3.1.3. Repression

For children and parents, the notion of repressing emotions either from themselves or others, shaped their experiences and interactions over primary-secondary school transition. For children, repressive behaviours had a more self-care and coping purpose, especially in the lead up to the transition period. In comparison, for parents, concealing expressions of pent-up emotion from their child had a more protective purpose, specifically to prevent the transference of their transfer anxieties onto their child. These behaviours were reinforced environmentally in schools' transition provisions, particularly within primary schools where the delaying of transition support preparation was shown to implicitly encourage children to suppress their feelings towards the move to secondary school.

Children. For children, 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' (Child focus group G, Daniella), and mask feelings of vulnerability around classmates, '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' (Child focus group E, Fred). However, this strategy was also shown to be maladaptive and led to perceptions of being alone in feeling anxious about the transition: 'if you have a problem there is no point not saying because it will get worse inside you' (Child focus group G, Carol), and children acknowledged that a better solution was to acknowledge these concerns: 'You need to learn to face your problems, don't run away from them' (Child focus group E, Ken).

Nonetheless, children acknowledged that repressive behaviour was often motivated by feelings of powerlessness: 'we had to be happy because we can't change anything' (Child focus group G, Clarissa) and a lack of control: 'It was a fresh start and at

the same time like you don't have full control of it' (Child focus group F, Rowshi). The lack of and delaying of emotional support provision within the school environment was shown to reinforce these feelings and children 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' (Child focus group F, Charlotte). Children also felt the same approach was taken at home, through parents attempts to take their child's mind off the move during the holidays: 'because the first couple of days of the holidays I was really nervous' (...) 'so my family were taking me to different places' (Child focus group I: Miley).

Children were also shown to be aware of adults' feelings of loss. Children discussed primary school teachers' feelings of loss as being more explicit, which children felt should have been avoided as it portrayed the transition negatively:

> Maybe try not to show lots of like emotion on sadness, like instead of saying oh no you're moving to High school you're not going to see me, um, and like instead of doing that say you're moving to High school, like you're going to meet new friends and put a positive spin on it (Child focus group J, Sophie).

In comparison, children perceived parent anxieties to manifest more 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' (Child focus group G, Thirangi). This was shown to not only influence how children were feeling and their emotional self-management: acting differently 'will make them a bit more nervous' (Child focus group J, Leighton), but also impacted child-parent relationships: 'My Mum she's more strict now, she's like, she was calm before, but now she's like angry' (Child focus group F: Rowshi). Thus, common advice resolved around wishing adults would *suppress* their emotion, 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' (Child focus group E, David).

Parents. Parents recognised children repressing feelings of apprehension towards the move to secondary school: 'They love the independence, but it is harder with the emotional side'. (...) 'If they have a bad day now it can be more difficult to find out why' (Parent focus group, Gaynor). One of the main and most reoccurring repressed anxieties parents depicted managing was their child's fears of being alone in feeling anxious about moving to secondary school: 'My child seemed to get upset during bedtime the last couple of weeks of the summer holidays and seemed to think they would be the only one who was worried' (Parent focus group, Chloe). To help with this, parents emphasised the

importance of talking: 'Instil in your child that they are not the only ones who are scared, nervous, going to get lost, some friends might say they aren't when it's highly likely they are' (Parent focus group, Chloe). However, parents also emphasised the need for Year 6 teachers to supplement the emotional support work they do at home, within the classroom: '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, Laura).

Nonetheless, parents were also aware that they were repressing emotions, as there was a shared understanding that expressing feelings of negativity and apprehension towards the transition in front of transfer children could be harmful. Such behaviours were especially prominent amongst parents who expressed feelings of loss towards their child leaving primary school and who struggled to accept that their child was growing up and no longer in need of sheltered and supportive primary school child like parenting:

> I was very sad! I felt a little bereft at the thought of that period of his life ending and the thought of him becoming more independent and needing me less and less. We talked frequently about leaving and high school, but I ensured the conversations were positive and acknowledged his nerves/worries and tried to alleviate them by focusing on the new experiences he'd have and the new friends he'd make rather than dwelling on what he was leaving behind. (Parent focus group, Gaynor).

Here, Gaynor firstly expresses suppressed feelings of sadness 'bereft' and loss 'needing me less and less' and then renounces these feelings to express insincere displays of positivity and excitement: 'I ensured the conversations were positive' (...) 'rather than dwelling on'. This serves this clear purpose of repressing one's own feelings to protect their transfer child. 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' (Y7 Teacher focus group, Harrison) and transfer children: 'I don't think parents should stress that much, that gives kids more work' (Child focus group G, Simon).

Teachers. There was a divide amongst primary and secondary school teachers with regards to how to emotionally support children over the transition period, in that secondary school teachers favoured early onset transition emotional support provisions, whereas primary school teachers preferred more delayed approaches. This was often subject to the adverse effects the former can have on children's behaviour and performance towards the end of Year 6.

On the whole, primary school teachers felt that the summer term following exams 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' (Y6 Teacher focus group, Kylie). Provision prior to this was believed to create feelings of anxiety towards the transition:

> 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 (Y6 Teacher focus group, Donald)

In fact, even amongst teachers who discussed the impending transfer with their class, *supressing* unfavourable emotion or 'allaying fears' (Y6 Teacher focus group, Lucy) were endorsed explicitly as a good strategy: 'We also discussed their worries and what we can do to subdue those worries' (Y6 Teacher focus group, Millie).

However, primary school teachers also recognised the disadvantages of this strategy, as this delayed provision subtly encourages children to suppress their 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' (Y6 Teacher focus group, Mathew). Instead, primary school teachers discussed how early onset indirect transition preparations may avoid unnecessary upset and apprehension, but at the same time expose children to the skills needed for their next chapter: 'I think that indirect preparation would be the best way to prepare children without focussing on the move as an issue' (Y6 Teacher focus group, Jane). Secondary school teachers also favoured this approach: 'the earlier the transition, or 'drip feeding', the children get of their future transition to take place, the more familiar and less painful it will be for them to transfer' (Y7 Teacher focus group, Simon).

2.3.1.4. Management of emotions

Children had differing attitudes towards how their emotions should be managed over the transition period, and the effectiveness of this shaped teachers' practice. Teachers were also shown to help manage parents' apprehensions.

Children. Some children felt that extra support from teachers and classmates at school would have been beneficial over school transition to help them manage their emotions, as opposed to repressing them: 'just opening up and talking helps a lot with transition' (Child focus group F, Jackie). However, not all children felt this way and some

felt that although the primary school can help to encourage children to recognise their emotions, by providing them with transition worry books for example: 'They gave us like a Moving up to secondary school book so you'd write things what you were feeling and that helped' (Child focus group H, Jacob), or mindfulness lessons: 'I think they should do like destressing lessons, like you do like stuff like yoga or draw pictures and stuff and there is some music in the background and some dancing' (Child focus group E, Joseph), the school was unable to *fully* prepare children for the transition to secondary school: 'I feel like nothing, like nothing can really prepare you for High school. It is like a new world' (Child focus group E, Grant). Instead, children felt that adjustment was influenced by their 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' (Child focus group I, Dennis) and confidence: 'I dealt with my worries by being confident' (Child focus group G, Tyson), which was also discussed by Year 6 teachers: 'we discuss between staff some ways we can boost their confidence ready for their next steps' (Y6 Teacher focus group, Mathew).

Teachers. Across all focus groups it is clear that children's anxieties manifest externally in both the home: 'our parenting has been tested as the children have gone through their high school journey' (Parent focus group, Kevin) and school environment; teachers reporting the summer term leading up to the transition period being 'more fraught than usual' (Y6 Teacher focus group, Mathew). Within the school environment, teachers report managing children's internalising behaviours: 'some of the children get a little anxious towards the end of the summer term' (Y6 Teacher focus group, Kylie) and externalising behaviours: 'some children push the boundaries in terms of behaviour expectations' (Y6 Teacher focus group, Donald). These behaviours were motivated by children's readiness to move on: many children had 'outgrown the school and require more pastoral support to maintain focus' (Y6 Teacher focus group, Sally) 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' (Y6 Teacher focus group, Mathew). For example, teachers emphasised the importance of offering more specific support, particularly positive encouragement, for the children who were struggling: 'Some children become unsettled and need a lot more positive encouragement' (Y6 Teacher focus group, Millie).

Teachers recognised that parents can also face significant anxiety and the need to 'put their minds at rest about the move' (Y7 Teacher focus group, Stephanie). To do this, teachers emphasised the importance of fostering collaborative parent-teacher relationships to support parents' and manage their apprehensions:

> 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 (Y7 Teacher focus group, Sally).

This was often subject to experiences of parent transmission, in other words, parents' anxieties being shown in children, as articulated by one teacher: 'parent nerves and concerns can sometimes be evident in their children' (Y7 Teacher focus group, Stephanie).

2.3.2. Managing relationships

Acknowledgment was made of the importance of support over primary-secondary transition. For children support from classmates was especially important as discussed in sub-theme *2.3.2.1. Friendships*. However, relationships were also shown to be in a state of disjunction during this period, and ability to access support shaped by stakeholders' ability to reconfigure support networks, see sub-theme *2.3.2.2. Reconfiguration,* and negotiate new relationships, see sub-theme *2.3.2.3. Relationship building*.

2.3.2.1. Friendships

Children. For children, friends were their most dominant source of support over primary-secondary school transition, comparable to sibling relationships: 'you need friends, friends are like your brothers and sisters, you have to keep them with you' (Child focus group E, Joseph). Concerns regarding peer acceptance and making friends were shown throughout the transfer period. This began with restructuring of friendship groups in Year 6, which was a dominant strategy to form friendships 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' (Child focus group J, Rajat). Peer affiliation concerns continued into initial transition: 'the first thing you need to do is make friends and if you don't do that, it is your chance gone, everyone else has made friends and you may not get the second chance to make friends again' (Child focus group G, Daniella) and post transition,

where having friends was seen as a sign of adjustment: 'I think like people were settled in quite well because wherever I looked there were people chatting and being friendly' (Child focus group G, Clarissa). Throughout this time peer affiliation was motivated by four main factors: fears of being lonely, environmental concerns, social support, and confidence, which are addressed in turn below.

The fear of being unaccepted and 'being lonely at the start of the year' (Child focus group G, Carol) was especially daunting for children prior to the transition period: 'I need to make friends because I won't have anyone to be with' (Child focus group E, Simon). This was especially prominent amongst children who had made the transfer alone: 'I came on my own so I felt nervous on how I would fit in with friends and if I got lost who would I go to' (Child focus group D, Nora).

Making friends was often expressed as a medium to allay environmental concerns: 'I just made friends and they just made me more comfortable around school life and everything, so it was easier' (Child focus group I, Dennis), but also a necessity within the secondary school environment: 'you can't go through High school without friends' (Child focus group E, Simon).

Friends were depicted as a more relatable source of social support and protective buffers against the environmental demands of secondary school: 'she was entering the same world as me' (Child focus group F, Victoria). Friends were discussed as dominant figures to elicit support from: 'we all know what each other's going through' (...) 'so if you talk about it together then you can be a lot more confident' (Child focus group E, Charlotte). For example, children recollected confiding worries in their friends: 'I remember speaking to some of my friends in a group and just saying how nervous and scared I am' (Child focus group H, Jacob). Children also reported playing with friends as a medium to escape and take their mind off school concerns: 'I have a friend who lives quite close to me and if erm if I do feel quite stressed I just like I feel like I wanna do something and I just like play with him and just kinda get away from school' (Child focus group H, Jacob).

Friendships also had confidence serving properties: 'I don't really like change that much so like if you're with your friends it's a lot more reassuring' (Child focus group E, George), which was acknowledged by parents: 'My child didn't go to the high school with an established friendship group so found it quite difficult to gain confidence' (Parent

focus group, Rachael). Having friends was also shown to give children confidence to make more friends, or select true friends: 'To help me for the first few weeks you just need someone with you and when you know everyone and know everyone's name in your form you can really think who you want to be friends with' (Child focus group G, Clarissa).

When asked how to improve school transition, children expressed the need to be taught strategies on how to make friends prior to the transition: 'the [primary schools] could make you like more sociable' (Child focus group G, Carol). They also felt exposure to situations to test these strategies would have been helpful: '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' (Child focus group D, Georgia), and instead felt that their social concerns were misunderstood by adults:

> I think that parents should listen to us because I was like I need to make friends because I won't have anyone 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 (Child focus group F, Sarah).

2.3.2.2. Reconfiguration

Both parents and children discussed changes in their relationships with each other and the school. Their ability to reconfigure these changes shaped their adjustment.

Children. Year 7 children's adjustment was 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 children 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' (Child focus group D, James). However, some key barriers interfered with children's ability to reconfigure supportive relationships with secondary school teachers, 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' (Child focus group F, Sarah). Teachers being perceived as unapproachable: 'you feel like you can't go up to them and say something' (Child focus group F, Jackie) and unavailable to address their problem as a priority: 'you can go and talk but they won't sort it out straight away because they have other things to do'(...) 'I think they have less time to speak' (Child focus group F, Lucy) also hindered relationship formation. 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' (Child focus group G, Joanna).

Nonetheless, when asked how the transition period could be improved, children were more likely to express the need for primary school teachers to change and instil secondary school values, as opposed to the reverse: 'the primary school should start being more stricter because the children then know like the expectations of what High school want from you' (Child focus group J, Nissa). This suggests that children acknowledge the transition as a time of change, which includes reconfiguration of supportive relationships.

Strains in child-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' (Child focus group G, Tobias). Eliciting support from relatable others, such as older siblings, was favoured:

> I think it is a lot easier to talk about things with my sister because she is in Year 10 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 (Child focus group F, Victoria).

Children also reported reconfigurations in parents' management of school specific problems, which encouraged children to take greater responsibility for their actions once in Year 7:

> 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 (Child focus group I, Molly).

Children also reported being able to deal with their problems better as they get older and not needing as much support, which shaped reconfigurations in support networks: 'you are more mature in secondary school and don't have all those little worries and don't get worked up about the little things so you can sort of handle it a bit better' (Child focus group G, Clarissa).

Parents. Parents expressed changes in their parenting role to facilitate their child's growing independence and prevent straining the child-parent relationship: 'we changed the boundaries to accommodate them growing up' (Parent focus group, Jenny). This was discussed as especially important over more fraught periods where children are trying to

manage their emotions, while simultaneously adapting to their new environment and reconfiguring relationships: 'I thought my children were ready to move up. It is just dealing with them growing up. Dealing with the arguments, especially boundaries, testing my parenting abilities' (Parent focus group, Kevin).

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, Rachael). Although this was hard at first for parents: 'As in general you don't collect them, it's not as if you can speak to a teacher straight away to see how things had gone. I know I could telephone the school and of course speaking to my child. I have found it difficult to get used to' (Parent focus group, Gaynor). 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, Kevin).

Parents were also concerned about their child's safety, particularly them being looked after within the larger secondary school environment: 'my main concern this year is that he settles in and adjusts' (Parent focus group, Gaynor). This was also acknowledged by secondary school teachers: 'I think some parents worry their child's needs won't be met when they move from a year of 30 to 200' (Y7 Teacher focus group, Harrison). Nonetheless, parents' concerns were shaped by little insight and support: 'I think the problem lies in the communication between school and parent as there are lots of opportunities for children to re-adjust with the new setting but not as much for parents' (Parent focus group, Angela). For example, as with children, parents frequently expressed greater feelings of support when their child was at primary school: 'from the primary school it was great' (Parent focus group, Angela). Thus, establishing similar supportive relationships with their child's secondary school, that they had with their primary school, was an ongoing significant concern.

2.3.2.3. Relationship building

Primary and secondary school teachers were shown to have different approaches to building relationships with parents and supporting them over the transition period.

Teachers. When children move into Year 7, secondary school Year 7 teachers also encounter disjunction, as they negotiate and manage new support networks with Year 7 children and their parents. Communication is vital in order to build these relationships, and help children and parents reconfigure their new roles, as Year 7 children and secondary school parents.

Secondary school teachers recognise the significant role parents have in supporting transitioning children: 'Parents can have a huge impact with transition if they keep encouraging their child' (Y7 Teacher focus group, Jessica). They emphasised the importance of collaborative supportive parent-teacher relationships: 'developing good relationships with parents at transition evenings so that a collaborative approach is used from the first day' (Y7 Teacher focus group, Harrison). To do this telephone contact and meetings are favoured over the transition period: 'I tend to have a lot of telephone contact with parents over the first term, providing a reassuring ear or providing plans of actions for children that may not have settled in properly' (Y7 Teacher focus group, Gail), and perceived to be helpful for parents: 'My experience is that parents are incredibly supportive and appreciative of verbal feedback regarding their children' (Y7 Teacher focus group, Harrison).

Consistency: 'it is important for Y7 children to have a consistent form tutor who knows them well and who they trust to discuss their problems at both school and home' (Y7 Teacher focus group, Gail) and adopting a nurturing, supportive role: 'I tend to have a nurturing relationship with my children within the first term' (Y7 Teacher focus group, Stephanie) was deemed important to build relationships with Year 7 children. This was also reported in the child focus groups, where children emphasised the importance of primary and secondary schools having consistent standards: 'I think primary schools should set the same ground rules that you would find in High school so it's not a big difference' (Child focus group I, Sophie). However, as discussed in the child 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'(…) 'But I do think that would be beneficial for the transition teachers in secondary schools' (Y7 Teacher focus group, Brenda). Acknowledging this, secondary school teachers felt such exposure could be facilitated through written

activities at primary school, such as 'about me profiles' and 'thoughts about transition projects' which could be brought to secondary school with the child.

2.3.2. Managing expectations

Provisions employed to support children and parents can be far from cohesive across primary and secondary schools, which can shape their experiences of primary-secondary school transition, and especially how children's expectations are managed.

Children. Children recognised the importance and need for honest exposure prior to primary-secondary school transition to help manage their expectations: '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 and like how you should deal with it' (Child focus group D, Alisha). This was so children do not feel falsely prepared: 'Maybe like talk about how the school is because we basically just went into a transition without knowing' (Child focus group D, William), or shocked during initial transition: 'I think sometimes to not give you enough shock they need to say some of the things that you might be worried about' (Child focus group I, Dennis). This also helped to encourage children to accept the transition as something that was going to happen: 'you just have to face up to it' (Child focus group G, Clarissa), as opposed to forgetting about it, which is a strategy primary schools modelled: 'To make us feel a bit more happy for the rest of the days at primary school with all our friends, we had two teachers and as soon as we did the SATs we did nothing else but like, play I guess' (Child focus group I, Molly).

Children felt that this honest exposure should pertain to social changes (see *2.3.2.1. Friendships)*; environmental changes, specifically on open days where children expressed that visits should provide realistic insight into the day-to-day school environment: 'I think we need transition days to show the school for how it is' (Child focus group I, Dennis); and behavioural changes. For example, children discussed how primary school teachers falsely prepared children for changes in behavioural standards at secondary school and led children to fear that their current behaviour would not be accepted at secondary school, by using secondary school as a discipline, behaviour management tool: 'because loads of the teachers at our primary are like, they were like really strict and they were saying, 'ah the teachers are going to be stricter than us' and that got everyone really paranoid' (Child focus group I, Harry). Children also felt that

primary schools could help prepare them for organisational changes by providing children with first-hand practice: 'Just maybe in the last few weeks give us some books and trust us with them so we can bring them in and actually remember them because that will get us prepared for it' (Child focus group F, Charlotte).

However, children also felt that transition exposure should be sensitive to their emotional well-being and needs during the time:

> If they make too much of a fuss about it, then it does proper worry you, it's 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 (Child focus group H, Jacob).

Children also favoured gradual preparations and especially early onset preparation to manage expectations:

> I actually think it is better if they start at the start of Year 6 because if they do it like before it is going to be all about leaving, it is like leaving the end of primary and you are going to be really upset and worried about going somewhere else, so if you start earlier you will get calmed down and you are going to be all up for it (Child focus group G, Daniella)

as leaving transition preparations until the summer term was discussed as 'just added pressure' (Child focus group G, Clarissa).

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, Gaynor), in addition to their own, as parents did not want their child to pick up on any of their concerns (see *2.3.1.3. 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, Chloe). They also doubted their own ability to manage their child's expectations and common advice to future transfer parents was to help children manage expectations more, in addition to endorsing positivity around other components of the transfer: 'We discussed it but looking back we should have managed their expectations' (Parent focus group, Gaynor).

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, Rachael),

compared to parents who have already negotiated secondary school transition: 'We've been through this process twice before with our older children so knew what to expect' (Parent focus group, Jenny). To alleviate this, parents discussed the need for greater parent-teacher communication across schools (see *2.3.2.2. Reconfiguration*) and greater physical exposure to the secondary school environment prior to the move, especially if this was gradual: 'I think the visits my child had were very useful but I think they should have been over a longer period so that children are more comfortable moving around the school' (Parent focus group, Kevin).

Teachers. Primary and secondary school teachers' main role over the transfer period is to manage both children's and parents' expectations. Primary school teachers recognised the importance of secondary school exposure to aid management of expectations: 'I think the more they can know about their new school the better. Often it is the unknown that is most daunting/frightening' (Y6 Teacher focus group, Donald). However, teachers discussed how they used subtle indirect preparation strategies to manage children's expectations: 'we do not explicitly prepare our children for the movement to Year 7' (Y6 Teacher focus group, Sally). This strategy may be due to prioritisation of SATs exams: 'there is room for primary schools to start transition work earlier but tests do get in the way' (Y7 Teacher focus group, Lucy), 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' (Y6 Teacher focus group, Kylie).

As discussed above, for children, first-hand exposure into the secondary school environment is shown to help manage expectations, and Year 6 teachers talked about subtle strategies they employed to expose children to the secondary school environment prior to the transfer: 'I think that indirect preparation such as visiting the laboratories in the high school, playing in sport tournaments at the high school, or having lessons from a visiting high school teacher is the best way to prepare children without focussing on the move as an issue' (Y6 Teacher focus group, Mathew). Such exposure was shown to even shape school choice decisions: 'we have in the past spent time at the nearest high school during the autumn term which caused many children and their parents to choose that high school for their children' (Y6 Teacher focus group, Mathew), demonstrating the significance of this form of preparation.

For secondary school teachers, their practice was influenced by how expectations had been managed at primary school: 'Children that expect bigger changes and having to take on more responsibility settle in far quicker and primary schools that give out homework and consequences usually send out pupils that get on board with this quickly and meet deadlines' (Y7 Teacher focus group, Karen). Children's mind-set and degree of personal preparation also heavily contributed to their ability to adapt, and secondary school teachers felt this could be fostered at primary school:

> 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 (Y7 Teacher focus group, Jessica).

As a result, secondary school teachers felt that primary schools could help more with this: 'I feel that more personal preparation and then reflection could help children in their transition as well as helping staff know how to support the various needs and concerns of children leaving one teacher and moving onto another' (Y7 Teacher focus group, Simon).

2.3.4. Academic pressure

'Academic pressure' was only discussed in the child focus groups, and thus worthy of a theme but only in that both parents and teachers did not mention this as being of central importance over the transition period.

Children. Academic pressure and the need to perform was shown pre, during and post transfer, and underlined experiences of primary-secondary school transition. Pre-transfer, the centrality of academic performance was shown through the dominance of SATs, in that once these tests were over children felt like that there was no longer any purpose to Year 6: 'after SATs it was like there was no point of it [year six]' (Child focus group E, George). This attitude was reinforced within the primary school environment, as children reported a lack of teaching following the testing period. Children nonetheless felt that this did not prepare them for secondary school academic standards and instead emphasised the importance of academic continuation following SATs:

> It was much fun when they were like taking us all on the trips but while they were doing that they were also not giving us homework to make it more fun for that last bit, but it would have really helped because then we are doing like no homework and then if you come to here you get like a piece of homework every day. So, I guess even though as boring as it sounds maybe getting more homework to like prepare for High school (Child focus group I, Harry).

When children were asked what they were mostly not looking forward to on entry to secondary school, fears of 'the work being too hard' (Child focus group G, Tobias), having lots of homework: 'it was a bit nerve wrecking that people had so much homework' (Child focus group E, Ken) and maintaining academic achievement in tests: 'I get really stressed about tests especially about GCSEs and stuff' (Child focus group I, Annie) prevailed. This was elevated and reported in one school where children had to pass an entrance exam to attend the secondary school: 'The thing that was worrying me the most was passing the test' (Child focus group I, Molly). In this school, academic concerns, especially regarding competition: 'you want to go to the top again and to be a prefect or something and since you are the youngest you have to work really really hard and also to get a job as well' (Child focus group I, Dennis), and emphasis on success: 'you have to crack on and do your work now or else in the future you won't get anywhere' (Child focus group I, Harry) was more pronounced.

Post-transfer, pressure to succeed once again becomes a significant cause of stress: 'now that I am in high school, I obviously still stress about homework and tests' (Child focus group I, Dennis). Although it was clear within the parent focus groups, that achievement was not a priority: 'my main concern this year is that he settles in and adjusts, I am not too concerned about how he performed in January tests' (Parent focus group, Gaynor), children did not feel this way. Perceptions of disappointing parents by not academically performing at secondary school was a significant concern: 'say I got a bad mark my parents told me off' (Child focus group G, Tobias) especially amongst children who reported their relationships with their parents to be conditional and dependent on their grades: 'you just need to do well in lessons and then we will be proud of you' (Child focus group F, Rowshi). This was shown to only put additional pressure on children to perform:

> I get really stressed about tests especially about GCSEs and stuff and so is she [mum]. High school is getting serious and primary school is finding your bearings and stuff and high school you have to crack on and do all your work now or else in the future you won't get anywhere, what you have to do is getting serious (Child focus group E, Grant).

When children are already feeling academic pressure, further pressure from parents was perceived to be harmful, causing greater anxiety: 'if your parents do the same to you then it is double pressure and your brain will literally explode' (Child focus group E, George). This was elevated when parents adopted academic comparison

parenting strategies: 'If your parents like say what other children got puts you under pressure, so it is better for them to focus on you than other children' (Child focus group G, Joanna), which children reported influenced their motivation and self-esteem: 'one thing most parents do is compare you with other children, which puts the child, instead of grading them up, puts them down' (Child focus group G, Tobias). However, it is important to note that not all children felt this way, and some children felt pressure from parents was beneficial, especially with regards to homework: 'so that's helped me massively because I definitely would not have been able to keep on top of my homework if it wasn't for my mum' (Child focus group I, Peter).

2.4.   Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate children's, parents' and teachers' current experiences of school transition using focus group methodology; a research method which has received limited empirical interest within the field. This is despite consistent recommendations endorsing the need to elicit first-hand, up to date insights into this period and the usefulness of focus group methodology in doing this. This research also set out to understand how children, parents and teachers feel the transition period could be improved, as again without hearing the voices of key stakeholders, and establishing effective lines of communication to understand common but also differing challenges faced over this period, efforts to improve the transfer period can only be superficial.

A strength of the present research is the simultaneous exploration of three unique stakeholders' experiences of the transfer period, which has been recommended by previous scholars (Ashton, 2008), to provide a more holistic, detailed and in-depth exploration of this period. As shown above, children's, parents' and teachers' experiences of school transition were similar, in that all were shown to navigate an analogous process where they manage (either their own or others') emotions, relationships, and expectations. This was shown to be reflective of how closely related children's, parents' and teachers' experiences are over the transfer period, which is consistent with previous research (Zeedyk et al., 2003). Nonetheless, children, parents, and teachers also have different transition experiences, which is shown in the differing number of sub-themes.

2.4.1. Social support

Peer acceptance was a dominant concern for children before, during, and after the transfer period, shaping their appraisals, experiences, and feelings of adjustment, which has been shown in previous research (Weller, 2007). For example, children with good quality close friendships over the transition period are consistently shown to exhibit superior perceptions of their new school environment (Kingery et al., 2011), become more involved in school activities (Schneider et al., 2008) and make greater academic progress (Kingery et al., 2011). The latter outcome is especially significant in the context of the present study where children felt that adults were more concerned about their academic progress than social adjustment. For example, the sub-theme *2.3.2.1. Friendships* was only discussed in the child focus groups, and it was clear across the transcripts that children's concerns about making friends were misunderstood by parents and teachers. This adds to existing literature, demonstrating the disparate attitudes children and adults hold towards peer relationships (Evaneglou et al., 2008).

Extending on the above, children commonly suggested that schools could assist in transition by focussing on supporting children to manage changes in classmate relationships. These findings are also in line with recent government initiatives, such as Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (Wigelsworth et al., 2012) and Targeted Mental Health in Schools initiatives (Wolpert et al., 2013), which highlight the importance of facilitating and promoting children's social adjustment. In addition, the present findings add to recommendations for educational professionals to achieve a better balance between attention to academic and social concerns in school transition support programmes (Galton et al., 1999). For example, in the present study, the theme *4. Academic pressure* was only shown across the child focus groups. This suggests that transfer children are either overestimating academic pressure they receive by adults, or adults do not feel they are putting academic pressure on children during this time. Thus, greater communication is needed over the transfer period to alleviate disjunction in expectations and subsequent pressure perceived by transfer children.

2.4.2. Communication across stakeholders

The present findings also emphasise the significance of close collaboration over the transition period between parents and educational professionals, but also primary

and secondary school staff, to aid adjustment to secondary school for all stakeholders. As discussed in themes *2.3.2. Managing Relationships* and *2.3.3. Managing Expectations,* and in line with previous research (Tobell & O'Donnell, 2013), communication disjunctions across primary and secondary schools, can lead to greater environmental, academic and social discontinuities and represent barriers impeding smooth transition practices. This was shown to impact all three stakeholders, preventing relationship formation between schools, parents, and children, in addition to shaping appraisals and behaviour over the transfer.

In line with this, efforts to bridge discontinuities were discussed as a priority, especially amongst both primary and secondary school teachers, which provides support for Hopwood et al.'s (2016) Australian interview study findings where all primary school teachers and 71% of secondary school teachers discussed the need for increased communication between primary and secondary school staff. However, as shown in the present research, barriers, such as time and competing pressures, were shown to prevent this, which impacted not only teachers' practice but also children's and parents' transition experiences. Thus, as discussed in the recent Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Education (2018) report, greater long-term attention needs to be placed on primary-secondary school transition and supporting key stakeholders, such as teachers, during this time to ensure practices are as smooth as possible.

For children, seeking support from teachers at primary school was deemed easier, as primary school teachers were perceived to be more open, approachable and available, which is in line with previous research (Bru et al., 2010). In comparison, both children and parents discussed how the secondary school environment cannot only undermine relationship formation, but also their ability to seek support, which is in line with previous findings (Powell & Marshall, 2011). For instance, the greater number of secondary school teachers and the more formal approaches to teaching were shown to be at odds with practices, standards and the culture of care ethos children were accustomed to at primary school. As shown in previous research, and in the present study, this can be subject to secondary school teachers adopting more disciplinarian and policing as opposed to supportive roles (Powell & Marshall, 2011). Nonetheless, these findings are concerning, as children who perceive adults as available, open to communication (Maltais et al., 2015) and more importantly involved in their school life, show superior adjustment

(Duchesne & Ratelle, 2010). Taken together, these findings provide greater support for Tobbell and 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 children and their teachers.

For parents, establishing supportive relationships with their child's secondary school was a significant concern (see *2.3.2.2. Reconfiguration*) and can be exacerbated if they feel their child is not ready for secondary school or do not feel the school communicates well with them, which is consistent with previous research (Zeedyk et al., 2003). However, teachers discussed the difficulties building relationships with both parents and children subject to their workloads, despite wanting to, but also parents' inability to at times adjust to different parent-teacher relationships now their child is in secondary school. Taken together, these findings emphasise the importance of improving communication channels between parents and secondary schools to help parents reconfigure their changing role in nurturing their child's developing maturation. These findings provide support for Keay et al.'s (2015) review recommendations which outline the importance of schools understanding and working with parents.

Despite parents and children experiencing very similar concerns over the transition period, both parties were not aware of this in the present research. This was often subject to communication absences, system disjunctions (as discussed below) or fears of transference (especially amongst parents), which limited both parties' ability to raise their concerns with one another. However, as shown in the theme *2.3.1.3. Repression*, suppression can also cause stakeholders to feel alone and unsupported in feeling apprehensive during this period (Zeedyk et al., 2003). Moreover, regardless of how hard parents and children tried to repress and conceal pent-up anxieties, whether to protect the self, or others, this was rarely successful and can have negative outcomes. For example, parents and children were shown to be aware of and influenced by each other's' emotions, especially anxiety with letting go for parents (Lucey & Reay, 2000), and share common appraisals, such as loss. These findings are in line with Bronfenbrenner's Eco-Systemic Model of Development (2005), demonstrating how person and environmental factors, especially relationships, are nested and exert differential levels of influence, shaping perceptions, behaviours, coping and adaption. Thus, taken together, these findings have useful implications for intervention research, as focussing efforts on

each party individually may not be desirable for school transition experiences to be improved and, instead, encouraging parents and children to have open communication channels, may help stakeholders feel supported.

2.4.3. Timing of emotional-centred support

Furthermore, within primary schools, the timing of emotional-centred transition provision was perceived to be discordant with transfer children's need to access support and instead encouraged suppression of anxieties towards the move until the final term. This has also been shown empirically, schools often favouring formal school choice and organisational preparations for secondary school transition, which can also vary considerably in content and focus (Evangelou et al., 2008) and prioritising national assessment targets (McGee et al., 2004). However, it is worth noting that discussion of behavioural concerns in shaping these decisions has not been made until now. Nonetheless, this reactive approach to secondary school transition, can, as shown in the present research, lead to a build-up of heightened anxiety and rush in the summer term immediately prior to the transfer (Zeedyk et al., 2003) and the behavioural issues these delayed provisions intended to avoid. Thus, these findings emphasise the need for Year 6 teachers to integrate transition support provision throughout the transfer year to address anxieties presented and prevent children repressing them (Zeedyk et al., 2003). Although, caution should be made when generalising these findings to school transitions made cross-culturally where children do not sit national assessments prior to the transfer period, these findings add to the broader transition context by demonstrating the importance of acknowledging children's needs.

As discussed in this chapter, and in support of empirical findings (Frederickson & Joiner, 2002) acknowledgement of one's own and other's emotions plays a fundamental key role in adjustment processes, resilience research showing that failure to talk, or translate anxieties into language can inhibit coping strategies (Pennebaker et al., 1990). This was recognised by children and parents in the present research, who specifically expressed the negative implications of schools delaying or neglecting transition support provision, and unwillingness to discuss the emotional side of moving to secondary school. These findings corroborate previous research findings, for instance McGee et al.'s (2004) survey study found 45% of parents to report their children needing help talking about

their feelings in preparation for the transfer, 14% asserting that greater communication and explanations between teacher and child could help alleviate apprehension and anxiety. Thus, in line with Eccles and Midgley's (1989) SEF theory, which emphasises the need for gradual and continuous developmental change, these findings add to existing literature emphasising the need for Year 6 teachers to integrate emotional-centred transition support provision *throughout* the transfer year, for both children and parents (McGee et al., 2004).

2.4.4. New insights

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 children 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 time. For example, children 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, which demonstrated the need for stakeholders to be mindful and not overly protective, cautious, or anxious when discussing primary-secondary school transfer and to instead help children work through perceived transition challenges by taking a nurturing, empowering and child-centred approach.

Gradual preparations were also deemed best and raised as critical by both secondary school teachers and children in the present study but have so far been unsupported empirically and practically. Resonating to the sub-theme *2.3.1.3. Repression* it is plausible that open and honest gradual discussion may avoid repression behaviours and uncontrolled suppressed feelings indirectly leaking out (Vassilopoulos et al., 2018). For example, children who receive greater emotional support from teachers, report greater self-esteem and lower depressive symptoms (Symonds & Galton, 2014). This can also shape behaviours in the classroom (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020).

2.4.5. Limitations

Nonetheless, this research is not without its limitations, one of which is that all stakeholders were reporting retrospective transition experiences. Thus, it is plausible that post-transition experiences, forgetting and selective retrieval inherent in retrospections being constructed within present contexts, may have influenced recollections and perceptions of support pre-transfer. However, given that the present research was conducted mid-way through Year 7 this is unlikely. This is especially considering the anonymous and decontextualized nature of the online parent and teacher focus groups, which possibly aided the sharing of more personal feelings, particularly amongst these stakeholders where greater stigma can be attached to parents' inability to adapt (Eccles & Harold, 1993). Although used minimally within this context, online formats have been shown to be non-confronting and stimulate greater likelihood of participants sharing honest, sensitive issues (Coulson, 2005), and as a result using this methodology is one of the strengths of the present research. Furthermore, although caution was made to not over-represent their voices, it is worth noting that there was a greater proportion of children 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, the data shows that in order to improve the primary-secondary school transition period, acknowledgement that children, parents and teachers all have a stake, and play a fundamental role in negotiation of this emotionally challenging period, is paramount. In fact, to make any significant change to how school transition is managed, enhancing communication across systems and stakeholders is imperative, so all stakeholders are on the same page. Given the limited research which has explored proximal (children's relationships with their teachers, parents, and classmates) and distal (educational policies and practices) influences which impact transitional experience and adjustment in the UK, the present study has made preliminary progress in understanding this period from the perspective of three distinct stakeholders and made suggestions for how to improve it. 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 children over this critical period, which is discussed in further detail in *Chapter 5.*

Chapter 3: US Schools Case Study (Study 2) - When is the 'optimal' time for school transition? An insight into provision in the US

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3.1 Background

As discussed in *Chapter 1*, there is wealth of research demonstrating the negative short- and long- term impacts school transition can have on transfer children's academic, social and emotional well-being (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). This is especially common when there is a lack of support provision. Shedding light on this, *Study 1* has made a unique contribution to primary-secondary school transition research, in being the first study, to my knowledge, to simultaneously compare children's, parents' and teachers' first-hand experiences of primary-secondary school transition and how they feel this period can be improved. It was concluded that greater communication is needed across systems (primary and secondary schools) and stakeholders (children, parents and teachers), and transition support needs to be sensitive and child led.

However, in order to provide this support effectively there is a need to understand why transfer children struggle and how to prevent this, which this chapter will explore by reporting a study that examined differences in transition preparations and experiences by children's age and the impact of navigating a previous transition. 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). One of the reasons 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 the 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 been praised, in comparison to secondary schools, for providing children with consistency (in terms of being taught by the same teacher and in the same school environment) and having more focussed supportive pastoral environments. This can be significant for children during early pubescent years (see *3.1.3. Puberty*) (Crook, 2008); the Year 6 to Year 9 Middle school period often depicted as the 'make it or break it years' (Beaty, 2019).

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 children 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, children's developmental age and maturation, competing pressures, puberty and specialised support, can also shape this.

3.1.1. Developmental age and maturation

In line with the Developmental Readiness Hypothesis (Ge et al., 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 as children who are more mature, exhibit superior emotional intelligence (Adeyemo, 2005), or have been exposed to previous transition (Jordan et al., 2010), generally find school transition easier. Children with these 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 at age 11 or Junior High school at age 12 prior to High school at age 14) although dated, supports this and suggests that the younger children are when they transition schools, the more likely they are to experience emotional adjustment problems (Simmons, et al., 1973). For example, Simmons et al.'s (1973) cross-sectional research found a sharp rise in self-image perceptions between 12- and 13-year olds, when children transitioned from

Elementary school to Junior High school, but not at age 14 when children transitioned from Junior High to High school.

3.1.2. Competing pressures

In the lead up to primary-secondary school transition in the UK, transfer children face competing pressures, from academic stress 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 et al.'s Depleted-Resource Hypothesis (2007), over time, frequent concurrent stressors can significantly draw on self-regulatory capacities and disrupt cognitive processing, especially if children do not have an 'arena of comfort' or element of consistency in their life (Simmons & Blythe, 1987, p.346).

The dangers of navigating cumulative change in early adolescence have been shown empirically, such as in Simmons and Blythe's (1987) longitudinal comparison research, which investigated the impact of negotiating multiple life changes on various psychosocial and academic adjustment outcomes. To do this, children of the same age in different school systems (two-tier vs. three-tier) in the US were compared. It was found that children negotiating concurrent life transitions were more at risk, especially if transition from Elementary to Junior High school was one of these events. For example, these children were shown to exhibit lower self-esteem, academic and social adjustment than children remaining in K-8 Elementary schools. Further support has been shown in the context of primary-secondary school transition. For example, Rice et al.'s (2011) longitudinal study found that the number and not severity of school concerns during this time predicted peer problems, generalised anxiety and depression. Taken together these findings illustrate how school transition can negatively impact children's emotional

adjustment, particularly self-perceptions, and the need for children to have an 'arena of comfort' in their lives when negotiation of multiple changes is unavoidable.

3.1.3. Puberty

Support for the superiority of sequential as opposed to simultaneous change is also shown when considering puberty. The typical age for puberty to begin is 11 for girls and 12 for boys (NHS, 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. For example, both puberty and school transition are salient maturity status markers (Symonds, 2009). Pubescent changes can pose significant challenges to children's self-concept and self-esteem (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006), in addition to causing changes in children's behaviour and expectations (Symonds, 2009). The same can be said for the environmental reorganisation indicative of school transition, which has been shown to also produce feelings of irrelevance and anonymity (Evans et al., 2010). However, when the two 'key rites of passage' (Eccles & Harold, 1993, p.90) are navigated simultaneously, these changes are shown to be more difficult and have a greater impact on children's academic and social coping and self-esteem, than either individual change (Ng-Knight et al., 2016).

Early pubertal developing girls have also been shown to find school transfer more difficult and report higher depressive symptoms, lower-body image and lower self-worth following school transition (Simmons & Blythe, 1987). Extending this 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. Together, 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 & Warren 1989); thus, navigating these two 'key rites of passage' (puberty and transition) together is high risk. 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 & Harold, 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 reports of social embarrassment, low self-body image and self-esteem were more prominent amongst girls who were negotiating puberty and transitioning schools. Nonetheless, as acknowledged by Symonds (2009) the influence of puberty on transition is hard to assess, given that puberty onset varies in timing and consistency. Thus, taken with the small sample, caution is needed.

3.1.4. Specialised support

Schools are central to the lives of children and their families. The school environment can be considered a social determinant of mental health, by presenting both triggers and protective influences, but also a strategic setting for mental health promotion, protection and maintenance. For example, educational practitioners are considered to have a "frontline role" in supporting children's emotional well-being (DfHSC & DfE, 2018, p.9), and teachers are often the first adults to recognise changes in children's mental health functioning (Greenberg et al., 2017).

Since the publication of the Department of Health and Social Care and Department of Education Transforming children and young people's mental health provision: a green paper (2018), which raised the importance of supporting children's mental health within the school environment, there has been more attention placed on the need to support children's emotional well-being during challenging periods such as primary-secondary school transition

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 (Coffey, 2013), and can have a stronger effect on transitional adjustment than developmental characteristics (Anderson et al., 2000) and parental reassurance (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2011). However, emotional-centred transition support 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 increased 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, as can reductions in resources to support them (Trotman et al., 2015). See Bagnall (2020) for a full outline of limitations pertaining to emotional-centred primary-secondary school transition interventions, and *Chapter 5* for further discussion.

In comparison, 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 DfHSC and DfE (2018) policy paper.

This transition support is a significant contrast to the UK, where transition liaison roles are often given to a Year 6 and 7 teacher who already has 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. This would seem to be a significant resource that could be replicated from the US to the UK system, 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.

3.1.5. Rationale

In sum, in order to improve children's emotional experiences of school transition, and inform support provision in the UK, there is a need to explore how this period is navigated cross-culturally across different transition systems (three-tier and two-tier education systems, early and delayed onset times). This will enable us to better understand which school system is best for children (two-tier or three-tier) and the optimal timing for school transition, in addition to differences in transition preparations and experiences reflective of the age and type of transition made, which to date is underexplored.

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 children 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, p. 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 in the UK. 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, as shown in Symonds (2009) longitudinal research study, where 11 year olds in secondary school conceptualised their identity as 'half child, half young adult', whereas 11 year olds in Middle schools were either uncertain about their age status, or perceived themselves as children (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 *3.1.3. Puberty*), on top of school environment changes.

Comparing children within different school systems in one US state, Northern California, which contains districts aligning with both systems (three-tier [Middle and Junior High schools] and two-tier [K-8 Elementary schools]), allows exploration of differences in transition preparations and experiences reflective of the age and type of transition. For example, children within Northern California transition to High school at age 14, later than children in the UK who transition at age 11. Additionally, schools can follow either a two-tier or three-tier school system. 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 K-8 Elementary schools within two-tier school systems will have a wider age range of children than Middle and Junior High schools within 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 in which children transition to secondary school in the UK (see Table 3.1), 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, 2007), 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. As discussed above, schools in the US also employ school counsellors to help support school transitions, which has useful implications for the UK, especially given the recent publication of the DfHSC & DfE (2018), which emphasises the importance of supporting children's mental health within the school environment.

Table 3.1

A comparison of UK and US school systems, showing children's ages, year groups and transition onset times

Age	*10-11*	*11-12*	*12-13*	*13-14*	*14+*
UK year group	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10+
UK school system	Primary school	Secondary school	Secondary school	Secondary school	Secondary school
US Grade	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9+
US K-8 school system	Elementary school	Elementary school	Elementary school	Elementary school	High school
US Middle school system	Elementary school	Middle school	Middle school	Middle school	High school
US Junior High school system	Elementary school	Elementary school	Junior High school	Junior High school	High school

Furthermore, despite consistent recommendations endorsing the importance of obtaining first-hand insight about transition from a range of key stakeholders (especially children, parents and teachers) (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016), to date, there is minimal research which has done this. See Bagnall et al. (2019) and *Chapter 2* for a full outline of current literature and primary-secondary school transition qualitative research study limitations. Nonetheless, as acknowledged in *Chapter 2,* without exploring a range of stakeholders' lived experiences, efforts to understand and improve the transition period can only be superficial. For example, perceptions of school context, have been shown to differ across multiple informants (Kim et al., 2014), as can the value placed on support figures, as shown in *Study 1* where peer support was shown to be misunderstood by adults.

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 & Midgley, 1989). For example, during school transition, transfer 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 to cope with and adjust to, in comparison to the consistency inherent in remaining in pre-transition schools.

However, except for the interview research conducted 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 et al., 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 transfer 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 UK. However, their findings are limited subject to the small sample size, and interview design limitations (situating the interviews in school inhibited discussion of out-of-school issues). 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 case study sought to do this, by exploring the 'optimal time' for school transition. Extending *Study 1's* focus group research*,* especially the usefulness of simultaneously comparing three unique stakeholders' first-hand experiences of school transition, insight from children, parents and school staff in the US was obtained using focus groups, interviews and observations. The following research questions were addressed:

1. How are educational transitions managed and supported in the study districts within Northern California 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) in the study districts within Northern California in the US?

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 in the study districts within Northern California in the US?

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 in the study districts within Northern California in the US?

Through inclusion of 'multiple sources of information' (Creswell, 2013, p. 97), case studies can provide a holistic, in depth contextual analysis of both the process and outcome of a phenomenon within its real-life context (Tellis, 1997). This robust research method has direct implications for education research yet has been rarely used to investigate school transition. Shedding light on this absence, the present research used an exploratory-explanatory case study design to examine how educational transitions are managed and supported within one state in Northern Californian Elementary, Junior High and High schools. Given that the American education system is 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 stratified if schools in other states were sampled. Thus, the school districts sampled in the present study were selected on this theoretical basis.

3.2. Method

3.2.1. Participants

Participating children were aged between 11 and 15 years and were recruited from seven schools (one Elementary school, two Middle schools, two Junior High schools and two High schools) situated across four school districts within Northern California in the US. Given that US education systems are decentralised and highly diversified dependent on state, focussing solely on one state allowed focussed comparison of school systems, which would have been difficult and less stratified if schools in other states were

sampled. Thus, the school districts sampled in the present study were purposively selected on this theoretical basis to enable comparisons of transition preparations reflective of the age, system and type of transition the child made. For example, one school district aligned with the three-tier Middle school system, one school district aligned with the three-tier Junior High school system and two districts aligned with the two-tier K-8 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.

Five Grade 6 (three females, age 11 and 12), twelve Grade 7 (four females, age 12 and 13) and twenty-six Grade 9 (13 females, age 14 and 15) children 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 female) participated in interviews. See Table 3.2 for a breakdown of participant numbers in each focus group/interview from each school system.

Table 3.2

Composition of the focus groups and interviews

Transcript	Stakeholder	Transition school system attending or attended (number of participants)	Pseudonym
<u>A</u>	Parent group interview	K-8 (2)	1, 2
<u>B</u>	Grade 6 student focus group (mixed gender)	Middle school (5)	Mike, Sarah, Natalie, Evan, Micaela
<u>C</u>	Grade 6 Teacher	Middle school (1)	N/A
<u>D</u>	Grade 6 Teacher	Middle school (1)	N/A
<u>E</u>	Grade 7 child focus group (mixed gender)	Middle school (4)	Dylan, Cole, Jamie, Hannah
<u>F</u>	Grade 7 child focus group (mixed gender)	Middle school (4)	Gabe, Sophie, Gabriella, Lucy
<u>G</u>	Grade 7 child focus group (all male)	K-8 school (2), Junior High school (1), Middle school (1)	Gabe, Trent, Sean, Cody
<u>H</u>	Grade 7 Teacher	Junior High (1)	N/A
<u>I</u>	Grade 7 Teacher	Middle school (1)	N/A
<u>J</u>	Grade 9 child focus group (all male)	K-8 (2), JH (2)	Joe, Jason, Jake, Cole
<u>K</u>	Grade 9 child focus group (all female)	K-8 school (1), Junior High school (1), Middle school (1)	Grace, Kendal, Tiffany
<u>L</u>	Grade 9 child focus group (mixed gender)	Junior High school (5) Middle school (5)	Zac, Kylie, Sophia, Gabe, Jessica, Jennifer, Jude, Cole, Mike, Jamie
<u>M</u>	Grade 9 child focus group (mixed gender)	K-8 school (9)	Lola, Tyler, Alice, Sophie, Myles, Seb, Savannah, Hannah, Taylor
<u>N</u>	Grade 9 Teacher	High school (1)	N/A
<u>O</u>	Grade 9 Teacher	High school (1)	N/A
<u>P</u>	Middle school counsellor interview	Middle school (1)	N/A
<u>Q</u>	Junior High school counsellor interview	Junior High school (1)	N/A
<u>R</u>	High school counsellor group interview	High school (3)	Tracy, Dave, Cassandra

Key of in-text transcript referencing. (C) Transcript C. [K-8] K-8 Elementary school, [JH] Junior High school, [M] Middle school. Some pseudonyms are not applied (e.g. teachers) to preserve their identities, when this would be revealed through their gender.

3.2.2. Design

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

3.2.3. Materials

Focus group and interview semi-structured questions were developed to guide discussions (see Appendix 3.1). The child semi-structured focus group guides contained ten questions, the teacher interview guides contained 11 questions and the parent interview guides contained eight questions. All questions focus on stakeholders' experiences of transition, addressing their feelings about the past and present, thoughts about transition timing (e.g. age) and school systems (e.g. number of transitions made), relationships, support provision, individual-level qualities, behaviour, identity and recommendations.

Similar to *Chapter 2,* the content and structure of the semi-structured focus group and interview questions were informed by the research questions, in addition to Resilience Theory (Ungar, 2008) and previous research (Symonds, 2015), in that questions addressed both internal and external protective factors and were positively worded.

3.2.4. Procedure

Once, the project proposal for the present research study was submitted and approved (Appendix 3.2) by Keele University's Research Governance Ethical Review Panel, Principals from targeted districts were contacted via email with an attached covering letter, providing a brief overview of the project. In the email Principals were asked whether the school would be willing and available to participate in the research project. Following this, interested Principals were then sent relevant research materials, given the opportunity to ask questions and asked to electronically sign a consent form to give permission for the research to take place in their school.

3.2.4.1. Focus groups and interviews

Once parental consent and child assent had been obtained, eight focus groups were conducted, with Grade 6 (one focus group), Grade 7 (three focus groups) and Grade 9 children (four focus groups) from K-8 schools, Middle schools, Junior High schools and High schools. There was an average of six children per group, which is deemed optimal for this age group (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Within some focus groups, children were grouped according to the school system they attended (e.g. all Grade 9 children who had previously attended a K-8 school) or were attending (e.g. all Middle school children). In other focus groups, children within the groups had attended different systems. See Table 3.2. for a breakdown of participant numbers in each focus group from each school system. Three focus groups (focus group G, J and K) were also conducted outside of school, extending one of the limitations of Symonds and Hargreaves (2016) interview research, where it was suggested that situating the interviews in school may have inhibited discussion of out-of-school issues. For these focus groups, the same procedure discussed above was followed.

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 3.2. Parents and school staff firstly received an interest consent form with an attached information sheet, and further instructions and liaison took place via email, to organise the logistics of the interviews (date, time, place).

Prior to data collection all participants were briefed. The children were also asked to adhere to key ground rules. Written informed consent from each participant was obtained, which included agreeing for their quotes to be used. The focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded, and transcripts were anonymised at source, as participants were asked in the briefing prior to data collection to not disclose their names or any identifiable information. To protect participants' identity, this auditory data was then stored on password protected computers, of which only the principal researcher, a professional transcriber and her supervisors had access to. The principal researcher delivered all focus groups and interviews following the same semi- structured question schedules (Appendix 3.1). Prompts and follow up questions (mainly can you tell me more about that?) were used where necessary. 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 own data.

3.2.4.2. Observations

To further understand how school transition is directly and indirectly presented within the day-to-day learning environment, 24 classroom observations were conducted over the three week research project: four observations (two in the morning and two in the afternoon) with each Grade (Grade 6, 7 and 8) in one Middle school, the same (two in the morning and two in the afternoon) in one Junior High school within Grade 7 and 8 lessons, and another four (two in the morning and two in the afternoon) in Grade 8 lessons in one K-8 Elementary school. Prior to this, teachers were sent an information sheet, given the opportunity to ask questions, and asked to electronically sign a consent form to give permission for the research to take place in their class. As the lessons were overt, the principal researcher was introduced to the staff and children as a Keele University PhD student spending time with their class to look at their school transition preparations.

To further inform understanding of the research area and more formal elements of data collection (interview and focus groups), the principal researcher also attended other events, i.e. awards ceremonies. Where practical the principal researcher was introduced at these events, before observations were made. Where not possible, verbal consent was obtained using verbal protocol caveat from people present in the observations if they exerted a dominant presence, e.g. at parents' events verbal consent was obtained from parents if notes were made on a discussion that they were having with a teacher, who had already given informed consent to be observed. During all observations written field notes were made (full field notes were written up afterwards). To protect the well-being of participants all data was recorded anonymously (i.e. no information was recorded in field notes that allowed for the identification of individual identity).

3.2.5. Data Preparation

3.2.5.1. Focus groups and interviews

Audio-recordings were transcribed by the principal investigator and a professional transcriber using verbatim transcription. Following a process of repeated reading the transcribed data and recordings were read and listened to several times in isolation to ensure the transcriptions were accurate. This also enabled initial immersion and familiarisation with the depth and breadth of the data, adhering to Braun and Clarke's (2013) first phase of Thematic Analysis.

3.2.5.2. Observations

During each observation, detailed field notes were taken. To ensure that the observation data was as in-depth and rich as possible, field recordings included *observation notes, methodological notes, theoretical notes,* and *personal notes* to capture interaction and immersion. Firstly, *observation notes* were taken to capture direct observations, which ranged from environmental setting descriptions (classroom ethos), to language (spoken and unspoken e.g. body language) and behaviour (peer to peer interactions) observations. In addition to this, *methodological* and *theoretical* notes were also made, which allowed for recording of conceptual thoughts, and early identification of themes and patterns within the data (Sangasubana, 2011).

Moreover, as direct observation can be open to personal perspective, bias and validation, to mitigate such concerns at the outset of this project a reflective statement was written to identify and acknowledge preconceptions (Wolcott, 2008). *Personal notes* were also taken throughout data collection, to ensure that interpretations were based on that of the school culture as opposed to personal bias. In sum, taking copious notes, from many angles, enhanced the validity of the research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016), and, following each observation and further reflection, full field notes, which were both descriptive and reflective, were written in a narrative form. When read and re-read in isolation and together, narratives from each observation aided the process of data-immersion.

3.2.6. Data Analysis

As the intent of the analysis was to describe, summarise and interpret surface level patterns in semantic content from the sample as a whole, a semantic and data-driven approach was taken, using inductive Thematic Analysis. Aligning with the rationale discussed in *Study 1*, a contextualist framework was chosen, characterised by critical realism, as this epistemology was deemed necessary in order to acknowledge essentialist reports of individual experience, meanings and reality, but also recognise that broader environmental contexts, such as social influence and the school, can also impinge on such meanings.

Thus, taking this epistemological framework into account, following on from data immersion, the data were coded for units of meaning. The focus groups, observations and interviews were each coded separately at this stage, which enabled flexibility. Codes were made thoroughly and consistency to highlight and describe the content of phrases and sentences within the data that were considered pertinent to the research question and that stakeholder. This provided a condensed overview of the main points and common meanings. Similar and relevant codes across transcripts and narratives were then analysed and combined into themes or 'coherent and meaningful pattern(s) in the data' (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 120), at a broader level, using thematic mapping. The most predominant themes were those, which emerged as most prevalent and important across interviews and focus groups, but also shown in the observation narratives.

Dominant semantic differences across stakeholders were also considered and reflected in the sub-theme headings. For example, the theme *1. Magnitude of school choice decisions* was dominant across transcripts and narratives; however, stakeholders had different views regarding which school system is best, as reflected in the sub-headings *Adults perceptions* and *Children's perceptions*. Transcripts and narratives were continually consulted to ensure that all themes were fully explored, and understandings were driven by the data. The themes' internal and external homogeneity were reviewed to ensure that they exhibited meaningful links and relationships, but also demonstrated clear and identifiable distinctions. Themes were refined through discussion between the author and two of her supervisors.

The same approach that was taken to establish qualitative trustworthiness in *Study 1*, outlined in *Chapter 2*, was also replicated throughout the present study. Further

measures which were taken in the present study to enhance qualitative trustworthiness included: prolonged engagement during data collection through the persistent observations (some of which were recorded using verbal protocol caveat), enhancing the credibility, transferability and authenticity of the research. Furthermore, when presenting the findings, document quality enhancement efforts included providing thick and vivid observation descriptions, enhancing the transferability and authenticity of the research.

3.3. Results

Five main themes: *1. Magnitude of school choice decisions; 2. Managing children's emotions and appraisals during the Middle school years; 3. Transfer timing and developmental readiness; 4. Transition support* and *5. Academic pressure*, were identified across focus groups, interviews and observation narratives, as shown in Table 3.3. Each theme has a differing number of sub-themes, and all are explored separately below in narrative order, using illustrative quotes (see Table 3.2 for key).

Table 3.3.

A thematic table to show themes and sub-themes

3.3.1. Magnitude of school choice decisions		
3.3.2. Managing children's emotions during the Middle school years		
3.3.2.1. Emotional instability and the need for consistency		3.3.2.2. Exposure, self-assurance and confidence
3.3.3. Transfer timing and developmental readiness		
3.3.3.1. Maturation		3.3.3.2. Self-advocacy and independence
3.3.4. Transition support		
3.3.4.1. Ethos of gradual change	3.3.4.2. Specialised support	3.3.4.3. Reconfiguration of supportive relationships
3.3.5. Academic pressure		

3.3.1. Magnitude of school system choice decisions

Choice is at the forefront of the US education system, and US parents select a school system (either: two-tier or three-tier), in addition to a specific school, for their child to attend prior to High school transition. The significance and magnitude of this

decision, for children, parents and educational professionals working with these stakeholders, ran across focus groups, interviews and classroom observations, underpinning school transition experiences. 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 the three-tier system where children make a prior transition to Junior High (at age 12) or Middle school (at age 11). 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 to negotiate adolescence: '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).

Parents. 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]). However, for these reasons school choice can implicitly postpone the parental letting go process, parents' shown to select K-8 schools with the hope to maintain their child's innocence and childhood and to prevent them growing up too soon: 'it kept them [their child] more innocent and then they have more compassion and they're not trying to do things too soon' (Parent B: 2 [child attending K-8]).

Nonetheless, while selecting K-8 systems may prolong parental letting go processes in the short term, when children transition to High school, parents will have to undergo this process at a delayed rate alongside their child who perhaps may not be as prepared as other children who have navigated previous school transition (see *3.3.3. Transfer timing and developmental readiness*). Moreover, the two parents that participated in the interviews both had children navigating the two-tier school system, and had limited insight into three-tier systems, which as discussed by one High school teacher can be problematic and lead to false perceptions of three-tier school 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]).

Teachers. Middle and Junior High schools were also favoured by teachers who taught Middle school aged children. This was discussed in line with the younger cohort on K-8 campuses and the lack of transition, which was 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]) as 'they [children] don't have it all together' (Grade 6 Teacher D [M]). 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 to redirect feelings of emotional instability (see *3.3.2.1. Emotional instability and the need for consistency)*.

Children's perceptions. Children on the whole, favoured three-tier systems, as they felt Middle and Junior High schools were more attuned to their development during that time, 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 child K, Kendall [navigated JH]).

Children 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 child K, Grace [navigated K-8]).

In line with this, Grade 9 High school children reported school choice systems to shape adjustment prior to and on entry to High school. For example, children who had navigated K-8, two-tier systems were perceived to stand out from peers by being less prepared: '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 child K, Jennifer [navigated K-8]) and mature: '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 child K, Kendal [navigated JH]).

Summary. The decision about which school system to choose has a significant bearing on how children feel in their sense of self (especially maturity), perceptions of support (children 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. For teachers this preference is shaped by behaviour management concerns, whereas for parents K-8 Elementary schools are deemed more nurturing and child-like and thus believed to subdue maturation and implicitly prolong parental letting go processes. In comparison, children preferred three-tier systems, often regardless of the system they had navigated, which is discussed in more detail below.

3.3.2. Managing children's emotions during the Middle school years

As discussed above, central to school choice decisions in the US are perceptions of how to best support children during early adolescence (11-14 years). Adults felt children needed consistency during this time, in other words needed a constant school environment and stable support from the same, trusted school staff. In comparison, children 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 in two/three years. While the previous theme outlines stakeholder attitudes towards the different systems, the themes below summarise perceptions of *how* the different systems can best support children.

3.3.2.1. 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 and feel a sense of uncertainty in understanding their sense of self. This was expressed by both adults: 'I think they are still trying to mature and figure themselves out' (Grade 7 teacher I [M]) and children: 'when you're 11 you know you're immature or you don't really know you're immature but you are' (Grade 9 child L, Sophia [attending JH]).

Emotions can also be unstable and impact day-to-day school life during this time, which was shown in the observations through emotional outbursts, and parents, teachers and counsellors reported Middle school aged children as being harder to manage both inside and outside school. This was shown to be elevated the younger the children were on entry to Middle school: 'the 6th Grade (11-12 years) is always like the rough group' (Grade 7 teacher I [M]). As a result, adults reported changes in their relationships with children and altering support provision to manage their behaviour, (see *3.3.4.3. Reconfiguration of supportive relationships*). Adults also felt that the younger, child-like climate on K-8 Elementary school campuses could help children manage the expression of these feelings: 'I think it would be better to have younger kids that they could kind of mute it somewhat' (High school counsellor R, Dave).

There was also a sense of uncertainty towards the efficacy of the three-tier education system 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)

Heightened emotional outbursts were shown in the observations to be especially prominent in Middle and Junior High schools where children have to navigate simultaneous change, in this case the environmental and social changes inherent in moving schools, in addition to developmental changes associated with growing up: '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 comparison, K-8 schools were deemed superior in providing children with much needed consistency and stability 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 children 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 and like

you should still have time when you know you can just be free, not have to stress about things (Grade 9 child K, Tiffany [navigated M]).

3.3.2.2. Exposure, self-assurance and confidence

For children, Junior High schools (transition at age 12) and Middle schools (transition at age 11) were perceived as 'mini High schools' (Grade 7 child 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 child J: Cole [navigated JH]). In comparison, children felt immature within K-8 Elementary schools: 'we were kind of babied' (Grade 9 child M: Seb [navigated K-8]) and expressed being ready to move on: 'I'm so ready to move on, I'm so ready to get out of here' (Grade 9 child M: Taylor [navigated K-8]). This was also raised by school counsellors: 'I do think it is a good time to transition because they're already feeling it anyway' (Middle school counsellor P).

Children who were attending three-tier systems also felt more confident transitioning to High school: 'I think I am going to find it easier going to High school by going Middle school' (Grade 7 child 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 child B: Evan [attending M]). This was often because Middle and Junior High school children felt comfort in being exposed to transition challenges and gaining transition skills through their transfer to Middle or Junior High school. This included making new friends: 'you have this good two years where you really get to know your friends and then it makes the jump to High school a whole lot smoother' (Grade 9 child L: Sophia [attended JH]), learning how to move between lessons and building relationships with several teachers: 'they're exposed to like how your classes are going to go like period and you're going to get exposed to different teachers' (Grade 9 child L: Jessica [attended M]). Gained transition skills were also acknowledged by staff: 'it takes a sense of maturity to go around from classroom to classroom and you know there's your responsibility in them increased' (Junior High school counsellor Q).

In comparison, children who had attended K-8 schools reported feeling disadvantaged and less prepared for the transition to High school, by not having the same transition exposure as children who had attended three-tier school systems: '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 child M, Sophie [navigated K-8]). This was also raised by teachers:

> there's just a bigger leap, there's a bigger gap between K-8, your 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 your little (Grade 7 Teacher I [M]).

As a result children expressed the need for K-8 schools to be more preparatory: 'Yeah I went to a K-8 and I wish they would have split it up and made it more of a Middle school, then like they know what to do when they reach High school' (Grade 9 child 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 child's maturity: '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 child K, Grace [navigated K-8]). Others also felt that High school transition cannot be fully anticipated: 'until you're having to do it you just don't know what you don't know' (Grade 9 child M: Seb [navigated K-8]).

Taken together, on one hand previous transition can provide children with exposure to some transition discontinuities that they may experience at High school and through successful navigation of these changes, children can gain transition skills, providing a sense of self-assurance and confidence. However, until children have transitioned to High school, it is unclear what preparatory emotional self-management skills will be of use and thus the transition period cannot be fully anticipated or modelled.

Summary. It is clear that 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 three-tier school systems provide children with transition exposure through prior transition to Middle or Junior High school, in preparation for High school transition.

3.3.3. Transfer timing and developmental readiness

Children's readiness to make a smooth transition was discussed as being strongly related to their *3.3.3.1. Maturation* and *3.3.3.2. 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.

3.3.3.1. 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]). Children's developmental readiness for school transition, and especially their maturation, was also shown to heavily contribute to this: 'I can't imagine my 6th or when I had 7th graders in the past being around you know older kids because I think they are still trying to mature and figure their selves out. So, I think it makes a difference, I think they're too immature' (Grade 6 teacher C [M]).

However, children's maturation, not always correlated with age, and instead was shaped by their coping resources: '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 you know, they are fine going into 6th grade' (Junior High school counsellor Q). This was also acknowledged by children: 'it depends on the kid that's going through it, because like some situations may be better than others like, some of them might not be able to handle the different school' (Grade 7 child E: Dylan [navigating M]) and parents: 'for my 14 year old moving into 9th Grade, he's now ready, he's ready for that switch' (Parent A: 1 [child navigated K-8]).

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 a period of dramatic growth for children in terms of their emotional development, and especially maturation: 'as 6th Graders they're still kind of maturing' (...) 'when they come in they are immature but then as the year progresses they become more mature' (Grade 6 teacher D [M]). As a result of this, one academic school year is shown to make a huge difference with regards to children's maturity and readiness to make a smooth transition and adjust to the transfer. This was expressed by both teachers: 'the children who come in 7th Grade are much more prepared than the children who come in 6th Grade' (Grade 7 teacher I [M]) and counsellors: 'I think one year makes a difference you know, they're like I say the maturity level and skill-set, I think one year can make a difference' (Junior High

school counsellor Q). Given that Grade 6 is homogenous to the age in which children transition to secondary school in the UK (Grade 6 = Year 7), this one-year timing has significant cross-cultural implications.

It was clear through the observations that several age-related factors contribute to children's transition readiness, especially between Grade 6 and 7. For example, within Middle schools, there were distinct social differences between Grade 6 and Grade 7 children, in that Grade 7 and 8 children tended to socialise and integrate with each other, whereas Grade 6 children tended to play (which was a lot more physical than the Grade 7 and 8 children) with solely Grade 6 children. Grade 6 children were also reported to be social outcasts by staff:

> socially there's just such a big difference between an 11-year-old and a 13-year-old so they tend to be social outcasts among the other grades. The 7th graders and 8th graders tend to integrate a little bit and be friends with each other, but the 6th graders are totally isolated (Grade 7 teacher H [JH]).

This was also subtly expressed by the Grade 6 children within the focus groups as when they were asked to offer advice for future Grade 6 transfer children, the older, more developed Grade 7 and 9 children were discussed as a concern, and avoidance strategies dominated: 'stay brave, don't let the older grades get to you' (Grade 6 child B: Mike [attending M]).

However, there were also advantages in transitioning children at Grade 6 to Middle school, as opposed to Grade 7 to Junior High school, 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).

3.3.3.2. Self-advocacy and independence

While early-onset transition programmes at Grade 6 (11 years) can help develop and support children's maturation and coping skills, it was clear that the older children 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 um you know to the challenges' (Junior High school counsellor Q). These skills shaped social interactions, Middle school children (age 11-14) needing more support in solving peer disagreements: 'they're having trouble with friends or just trouble trying to figure out where they fit in because it can get overwhelming' (Middle school counsellor P), than High school children (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]).

Similarly, the older the children 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 mum because I thought she was going to get mad about what I say and now she understands' (…) 'I feel like you learn to appreciate them more as you grow up' (Grade 9 child 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 child L, Jessica [navigated M]). This was also acknowledged by adults: 'it's more the hormones' (…) 'Now I feel like she will open up to me more, whereas before she'd just yell and scream at me and tell me I'm mean' (Parent A: 1, [child navigated K-8]).

The older children were, especially once at High school, the more likely they were to discuss the importance of the 'emotional parts to growing up' (Grade 9 child K, Kendal [navigated JH]) in both focus groups and day-to-day discussion shown in the observations. This suggests that once at High school, children 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 in their future' (Grade 9 child L: Sophia [navigated JH]). N.B. It is important 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.

3.3.4. Transition support

Transition support was portrayed as vital pre, during and post school transfer. Pre-transfer, timely information and advice to help parents and children accept the imminence of their next passage (as opposed to fearing it) was perceived to be useful to establish an *3.3.4.1. Ethos of gradual change*. To provide this support, schools employ school counsellors, as discussed in the sub-theme *3.3.4.2. Specialised support,* which aids *3.3.4.3. Reconfiguration of supportive relationships.*

3.3.4.1. Ethos of gradual change

Children discussed school transition as seamless and linear as opposed to a series of transition disruption spikes, especially if they had navigated a three-tier school 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 child J, Jason [navigated JH]). 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 and continuation. This was especially 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 children could visit prospective High schools. This helped to position each transition as a 'step up', as acknowledged in the focus groups: 'Looking back on it, it's very preparatory, like it's preparing you for High school' (Grade 9 child L: Jude [navigated JH]).

Educators also emphasised the importance of gradual transition provision throughout the transfer year to prevent a build-up of anxiety for both staff and children prior to the move: 'I think you can stress a child out and that's when you see children 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]). To aid this, end of school

year events that were linked with moving on, such as leaving ceremonies, were phrased as 'recognition nights' or 'awards ceremonies' to position transition as a promotion, progression and continuation, as opposed to a goodbye, which is commonly shown in UK Year 6 leaving assemblies. At these events, the children's achievements at the school they were leaving, were celebrated and their time at the school recognised, and there were no expressions of sadness, again a contrast to UK leaving assemblies, see *Study 1*.

3.3.4.2. Specialised support

School counsellors conduct the majority of parent and child transition adjustment support work within schools in the US, which 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 child group sessions, which were 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), which can be unsettling for children: 'For parents I think sometimes its fearful for change can be fearful and I think that can confuse the child' (Grade 9 teacher O [H]). This support can also aid letting go processes for parents: 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]).

To support 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 age 14, in that younger children received more hands-on support provision, subject to the competing emotional challenges faced at this age (see *3.3.3. Transfer timing and developmental readiness*): '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]).

3.3.4.3. 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 parents' and children's ability to negotiate and manage new support networks with the transfer school. Advocating decision-making and help-seeking behaviours within Elementary and Middle schools to help prepare children for their next chapter 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, I think that's so important' (Grade 9 teacher N [H]). Schools also emphasised the importance of transitioning parents too and regular communication was paramount to help parents adjust to the move and provide them with timely information: '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]).

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 children receive specialised support (for children tailoring support to their age-specific and developmental needs being paramount) and 3. there is open communication across stakeholders so all are able to reconfigure supportive relationships.

3.3.5. Academic pressure

Academic performance underlines children's, parents' and school staff's experience of school transition, and across transcripts and observation narratives these values are endorsed explicitly through competitive classroom behaviours and implicitly through teaching practices and conditional parenting behaviours.

For all children, regardless of the age in which they transition schools, academic achievement and meeting the performance standards and expectations of their next school is a predominant source of stress: 'I was not looking forward to advanced classes' (Grade 9 child L: Jude [navigated JH]). However, given that in US High schools children are held back a year, or have to retake a class, if they do not get sufficient Grades, which is a stark contrast to Middle and Junior High school, where academic dips are more reversible as children move up Grades regardless of their attainment, these concerns are not

unfounded. As a result negotiating this change can be hard for Grade 9 transfer children, especially when they are facing additional adjustment concerns: 'I knew it was going to be like a tonne of work but like I was going to do it [transition] regardless, it's not like an option to do it or not but I just wasn't looking forward to it' (Grade 9 child J: Jason [navigated K-8]).

It was clear that this academic progression was also concerning for Middle and Junior High school staff, and teachers emphasised the importance of children's mind-set and values: 'so much of it is the value children themselves place on education' (Grade 7 teacher I [M]). To help children, staff endorsed self-help mindsets as opposed to self-defeating and handicapping behaviours: 'you need to get that mindset so instead of thinking well if I get this failing Grade I'm going to move forward anyway, I said at some point you're going to get to 9th Grade and that is going to stop' (Junior High school counsellor Q). Teachers also practically prepared children for the differing academic standards they would encounter at High school by providing children with more homework: 'they were giving us more and more homework as we got closer' (Grade 9 child L: Jamie [navigated JH]) and adjusting teacher-child relationships: 'they would kind of treat us like we were High schoolers already in 8th Grade' (Grade 9 child L: Sophia [navigated JH]) as the transfer approached.

Teachers also discussed how children's attitude towards academics was also shaped by parent support, which could be helpful: 'it was insanely helpful for me, like them pushing me so much I probably wouldn't have got a 3.25, I probably would have gotten below 3.0' (Grade 9 child, J: Jason [navigated K-8]), but could also be unhelpful, if support was conditional: 'It depends on the grades I'll get, I mean if I do good they're happy and then if I don't do as good then it is kind of rough' (Grade 9 child L: Jamie [navigated JH]).

3.4.   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 comparison to the age in which children transition schools in other countries, is early. Thus, the present study specifically wanted to examine the significance of transfer timing on children's

adjustment by contrasting differences in transition provision and preparation, dependent on the child's age at transfer. As children in schools within 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 'optimal age' for school transition, in addition to examining the impact of navigating a previous school transition on future transition. The four research questions outlined at the start of this chapter are now addressed in turn.

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

Prior to selecting a school for their child to attend, parents in the US must also select either a two-tier 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, in the meantime these findings clearly demonstrate the need to think about how to manage educational transition and support transfer children, especially 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 shown to be shaped by parents' appraisals towards the different school systems (two-tier vs. three-tier), especially with regards to how their child will be supported and the environment their child would be exposed to, which was not always well-informed. This again has useful implications when considering secondary school choice decisions in the UK, which are also often made by parents (McGee et al., 2003), but nonetheless can have a significant impact on children's short- and long-term adjustment (Bywater & Utting, 2012). This demonstrates the need to support parents from as early as Year 5, when 79% of parents are already considering secondary school

transfer (McGee et al., 2003), to ensure all stakeholders feel supported and equipped to make informed decisions and manage this period (Bagnall et al., 2019).

In line with the three-pillar strategy outlined in DfHSC & DfE (2018), 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. Thus, while teachers in the US face similar time and workload pressures to teachers in the UK, school counsellors in the US provide children with specialised and targeted 1:1 support, so teachers can focus on their work within the classroom. This is a sharp contrast to the UK (Symonds, 2015), but nonetheless something that could be applied through these reforms. For example, there was a more open approach to mental health discussed within the US focus groups, interviews and in observations, and it is plausible that having someone immediate to talk to may have contributed to this and helped to position emotional well-being as a priority. This meant that children were more likely to self-advocate and seek support when needed, although this is also dependent on children's maturation and age (see theme *3.3.3. Transfer timing and developmental readiness).*

Another key recommendation discussed in *Chapter 2* was the need to provide Year 6 children with gradual and sensitive transfer support. This was also clearly shown in the current study as within the US schools, transition was portrayed as an educational continuation and progression, as opposed to a loss, which directly contrasts with how secondary school transfer is discussed in the UK (see findings from *Study 1*). Thus, the present findings provide support for Symonds' (2015) review regarding not only the need for socio-emotional transfer support interventions, but also the need for continuity and progression in the lead up to and over this period.

Finally, regardless of transition timing academic achievement and performance is a significant stressor for children, but also parents and teachers and shapes how they support transfer children. This parallels *Study 1's* findings**.** Nonetheless, it is shown consistently empirically, that drops in academic achievement follow educational transition, regardless of the age in which the transfer is made. When combined with pressure from home and school, this can lead to academic frustration and impact children's appraisals towards school and the self (Richardson, 2002). Thus, efforts should be made both within the home and schools to prevent this. In the context of the UK, Middle schools were once favoured for this reason, as within the Middle school

environment younger children are shielded from the examination pressures faced by older children within secondary schools, and instead greater focus is placed on the child's individual learning. However, from 1990 it was widely asserted that Middle schools were inconsistent with the National Curriculum and attendant testing arrangements and overall Middle school children were shown to underperform on Key Stage Three tests (Crook, 2008). Taken with the evidence presented in this chapter and *Chapter 2* suggests the need to revaluate academic testing in the broader context of children's development.

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)?

Middle and Junior High schools were often portrayed as 'mini-High schools' where children are in more of a concentrated space of similar aged children and greater 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 discussion of High school transition is minimal.

As a result, Middle and Junior High school children are exposed to more mature behaviour, and their independence and maturation is fostered differently than K-8 schools where children are granted greater responsibility over others, such as leadership positions, but not regarding themselves, especially pertaining to High school transition readiness. Middle and Junior High schools were discussed as more preparatory for High school transition, often because these children had greater transition exposure, whereas children who attended K-8 Elementary schools discussed feeling less prepared and confident about High school transition. Thus, 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 [age 11] or Grade 7 [age 12] vs. Grade 9 [age 14]) at which children navigate transition shape their experiences and adjustment?

For all stakeholders, later educational transitions were less traumatic and easier to negotiate. As discussed in theme *3.3.4. Transition support*, this was because the older children are at transition, the more opportunity they have had to develop superior self-

advocacy capabilities, especially in their ability to acknowledge their need for support and seeking it. Children are also better able to manage environmental and social disruptions the older they are, and thus need less hands-on emotional support to manage these changes when transition is made later.

Even the difference of one academic school year, between Grade 6 and 7 (between age 11 and 12), was discussed as making a huge difference in children's maturity and readiness to transition schools, which is in concordance with previous research (Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010) and sheds greater light on Ge et al.'s (2001) Developmental Readiness Hypothesis. As raised by teachers in the present research, but also previous studies (Ng-Knight et al., 2016), this may be in part subject to the fact that Grade 6 and 7 children are also facing additional competing pressures, associated with puberty, during the transfer period, which draws on children's resources. Taken together, 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 the earlier age of 11.

Nonetheless, as discussed below there is value in children making a previous school transition prior to High school transfer, 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 (age 11) or Grade 7 (age 12) 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 children to have exposure to transition experience to prepare them for High school transition, and the need to maintain consistency to help children emotionally during this vulnerable time. Attitudes were split across stakeholders, children 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 children's 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 et al., 2018). Thus, one of the key strengths of the present research was obtaining first-hand insight into the transition period from children and using this, in addition to acknowledging parental and teacher concerns, to make recommendations on how to improve this period. In line with this, one recommendation of the present study is for future interventions to recognise the value of children's 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 to a new house or the birth of a new sibling.

Moreover, it is important to note that the impact of transfer timing on adjustment 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 children need this. For example, as raised by children in theme *3.3.2.2. Exposure, self-assurance and confidence,* transition cannot be fully anticipated or modelled and while transition to Middle or Junior High school can be helpful in providing children with transition change and challenge, these experiences can also be argued as superficial in helping children to anticipate what High school transfer will be like. As shown in previous research, transition adjustment can be context dependent (Vaz et al., 2014) and shaped by children's appraisals (Mandleco & Peery, 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 child and provide support within school and home environments that is responsive to children's changing developmental needs.

3.4.1. 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 to some extent shape their child's developmental and educational trajectory and match their child's schooling to the specific needs and disposition of their child. Nonetheless, as discussed above, 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 (see *Study 1* findings). The specialised support children received in the US for transition from school counsellors, would also be very welcome in the UK educational system, to take pressure off already stretched teachers (Jeffery & Troman, 2012).

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 children 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 (children, parents 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 children are. Secondly, past transitional experience (in the present study this was the transition from Elementary to Middle or Junior High school at age 11 or 12) can make

future transition easier (in the present study High school transition) by providing children 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 systems. This has useful implications for transition provision once children are at High school, and the need for an individualised 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) SEF theory.

Broader developmental changes are also likely to influence adolescents' adjustment (Žukauskienė, 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 well-being across time from a developmental perspective (Realo & Dobewall, 2011), which can be a constraint given that school transition is acknowledged as a process of assimilation, extending over a prolonged period of time (Rice et al., 2011).

Nonetheless, as demonstrated in González-Carrasco et al.'s (2017) recent longitudinal study, high self-reports of subjective well-being are shown to start declining between age 11 and 12, which directly corresponds to the age at which children 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 children's 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). Moreover, 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. Furthermore, while children were selected at random to participate in the present study by class teachers, it may have been that the children 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 children and parents, also contrasts greatly with UK schools.

In sum, in order to improve primary-secondary school transition in the UK, acknowledgement that children, parents 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 children's 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 ages 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 children's adjustment.

Chapter 4: UK Special School Case Study (Study 3) - What emotional-centred challenges do special schools face over primary-secondary school transition?

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N.B. The research presented in this chapter is under review. Bagnall, C. L., Fox, C. L. & Skipper, Y. (under review). What emotional-centred challenges do children attending special schools face over primary-secondary school transition? *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs.*

4.1.   Background

Primary-secondary school transition can be a challenging and uncertain time for all children, as shown through the first-hand insight shared in *Chapters 2* and *3*. Yet, to date, we have a limited empirical understanding of children's emotional experiences over primary-secondary school transition and how they are supported. This gap is widened when considering the perspective of children with pre-existing emotional difficulties, such as children who face social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD), who may be additionally vulnerable during this time. Understanding how children with SEBD cope with the added apprehension and anxiety that comes with primary-secondary school transition and how they are supported, can inform emotional-centred support provision more generally to help children who also face emotional difficulties during this time but may express them at a lesser degree. This chapter sets out to do this by examining what additional emotional-centred challenges children with SEBD face over primary-secondary school transition and how they are supported, in order to make recommendations to improve this period.

Drawing on findings discussed in *Chapter 3*, school transition is easier when it matches children's disposition and needs, which was shown to be when children are older, have been exposed to previous transition and are well supported. Resonating to insights from Resilience Theory discussed in *Chapter 1,* and findings from *Chapters 2* and *3,* children who face external risk factors, such as lack of social support (West et al., 2010), or risk factors at the individual level, such as: limited coping skills, poor

psychosocial skills or special educational needs (SEN), are particularly vulnerable (Neal et al., 2016).

However, as discussed below, there are dangers in attributing risk to categories of children based on shared characteristics such as SEN, as this does not take into account a) individual experience: children with limited exposure to previous transition experiences are shown to find this period more difficult (see *Chapter 3*), b) interpretation: children's interpretation of the school environment can shape their adjustment (Groom & Rose, 2005), and c) individual agency (Vassilopoulos et al., 2018), in other words children's ability to cope. Moreover, SEN is not a homogenous group and children with SEN can face different difficulties, which may differentially shape their emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transition. SEBD is a specific special educational need (SEN) and children with SEBD are believed to experience greater emotional difficulties. However, to date, there is no research which has specifically focussed on children with SEBD over primary-secondary school transition. Therefore, this chapter will firstly discuss research which has investigated the experiences of children with SEN over primary-secondary school transition, before discussing children with SEBD more specifically, followed by the method and findings of the present study.

4.1.1. Children with special educational needs (SEN)

Within the UK, 14.6% of school children have a statement of SEN (DfE, 2018), which is defined as: 'learning difficulties sufficient to require their school or school district to provide additional special educational support' (Neal et al., 2016, p. 2). Although, not all children with SEN face difficulties over primary-secondary school transition, a significant proportion do, which has led scholars to believe that SEN can be a direct and indirect risk factor. In support of SEN as a direct risk factor, children with SEN report more anxieties and perceive changes associated with primary-secondary school transition more negatively both pre and post transition than mainstream peers (Hughes et al., 2013). In line with the notion of SEN as an indirect risk factor, children with SEN are also more susceptible to individual-level vulnerabilities, discussed above, such as poor social competence, flexibility, self-esteem and self-regulation, in addition to higher internalising and externalising problems (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012).

Yet, our understanding of the experiences of children with SEN over primary-secondary school transition is limited as few empirical studies account for SEN populations in research designs; Neal et al. (2016) found only 17% of primary-secondary school transition studies to include children with SEN within samples. This is concerning given consistent evidence that children with SEN are particularly vulnerable to poorer primary-secondary school transition experiences (Hughes et al., 2013), and may need additional, and potentially differentiated support. Neal et al.'s (2016) longitudinal study, which evaluated the impact of pre-existing cognitive, behavioural and systemic primary-secondary school transition interventions in reducing post-transition anxiety amongst children with and without SEN, found support for this. Findings demonstrated that systemic intervention, which focused on creating consistency across primary and secondary schools to decrease anxiety, was shown to do the reverse amongst children with SEN only and predicted higher post-transition school anxiety for children with SEN. In comparison, the same intervention predicted lower post-transition school anxiety for children without SEN. Due to the small sample size, no firm conclusions can be drawn as to what components of the systemic intervention were associated with transition anxiety amongst children with SEN in comparison to peers without SEN.

Nonetheless, Neal et al.'s (2016) findings are consistent with Maras and Aveling (2006) in suggesting that children with SEN may need different and more tailored support interventions than mainstream peers. For example, it is well-established that children with SEN require differentiated teaching approaches, modified to consider their specific needs and Statement of Needs (denotes the level and type of support the child needs, including provision of specialist resources). Thus, this same personalised, tailored approach is likely to be required within transition support intervention. This can be understood with reference to Eccles and Midgley's (1989) Stage Environment Fit (SEF) theory, which suggests that positive outcomes are most likely to be achieved when opportunities provided (e.g. interventions) 'match' the developmental needs of the child. This theory is also discussed in more detail in *Chapter 3*.

Furthermore, SEN is not a homogenous group and there are dangers in attributing risk to categories of children based on shared characteristics such as SEN. For example, there can be differences in the nature and number of specific difficulties (e.g. lower self-esteem, social skills deficits) children with SEN face, which can differentially shape

transition outcomes. Therefore, in future transition research, there is need not only to employ broader inclusion criteria so that children with SEN are represented in study samples, but within the SEN sample there also needs to be more narrow group comparisons between children with different types/severity of SEN. Understanding these risk factors will help the design of support intervention.

4.1.2. Children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD)

Children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD), which are commonly defined as 'behaviours or emotions that are outside societal norms (…) that negatively affect a child's educational functioning' (Soles et al., 2008, p.276), are one SEN group believed to be especially vulnerable over primary-secondary school transition. Once at secondary school, children with SEBD report: lower levels of happiness, inability to communicate with their parents, little affiliation to school, lack of inclusion and lower support from teachers, parents and peers (Currie et al. 2015). In addition, children with SEN are also more at risk (seven times more likely) of exclusion over primary-secondary school transition (Bailey & Baines, 2012).

The number of children identified as having SEBD is continually growing (Cooper, 2006) yet support provision to ameliorate the difficulties these children experience within educational settings lags considerably behind (O'Connor et al., 2011). Thus, greater research is needed, especially given that the expression of SEBD can be shaped by context, specifically school-level factors, such as the school climate and ethos which has the potential to disenfranchise these children (Mowat, 2019). Furthermore, early adolescence is believed to be a critical period to intervene to prevent school exclusion and maladjustment (Mowat, 2019); thus, effective support provision for children with SEBD over primary-secondary school transition can be critical.

Nonetheless, to date there is no research which has specifically focussed on the experiences of children with SEBD in the lead up to and over primary-secondary school transition, which parallels broader educational research and practice, where the voice of children with SEBD is heavily underrepresented. This is concerning as children with SEBD exhibit lower feelings of school belonging and are more likely to be at the receiving end of punitive and exclusionary practices, which can only lead to further feelings of disempowerment (Mowat, 2019).

In the context of primary-secondary school transition, children with SEBD face specific difficulties, such as difficulty in managing strong emotions and behaviours. Therefore, there is reason to believe that these children are more likely to be vulnerable during this high-risk time and in need of additional support. Thus, it is particularly important that greater attention is placed on understanding the experiences of children with SEBD over primary-secondary school transition and how to support them. Moreover, while primary-secondary school transition represents a critical period for all children, for vulnerable children, successful navigation can have even greater consequences and provide a turning point in nurturing resilience and coping skills (Neal & Yelland, 2014). Thus, the present research has both short- and long-term positive ramifications.

4.1.3. Rationale

As discussed in *Chapter 1*, to date we have a limited empirical understanding of children's emotional experiences in the lead up to and over primary-secondary school transition and how they are supported. This gap is widened when considering the perspective of children with added emotional difficulties, such as children with SEBD, who may be additionally vulnerable during this time, yet their voices are chronically underrepresented in research and practice. Thus, this present case study will shed light on this research gap by taking a holistic approach to examine one special primary school's transition provisions to answer the research question:

1   What emotional-centred challenges does one special school, which specialises in supporting children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties face over primary-secondary school transition?

As raised by Bagnall et al. (2019) and discussed in *Chapter 2,* Bronfenbrenner's Eco-Systemic Model of Development (1979, 2005), which acknowledges the multifaceted dynamic interactions between an individual and environmental systems, provides a useful theoretical framework to guide investigations into primary–secondary school transition. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) theoretical framework, the present research adds to contemporary theory by examining both proximal (children's relationships with their teachers, parents, and classmates) and distal (educational policies and practices) influences to explore what provisions are currently being used to support the emotional well-being of children with SEBD over primary-secondary school transition within the

special school and the challenges the school face in doing this. As raised in *Chapter 3*, case studies are advantageous in providing holistic and detailed contextual insight into real-world phenomena, drawing on multiple sources, yet have been rarely used to investigate school transition. Thus, the present study makes further contributions to the field in mobilising an underused, yet valuable research design.

Practically, some interventions have been developed to counter the negative outcomes children commonly experience over primary-secondary school transition (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). However, emotional-centred support provisions are limited in number and face key challenges in both mainstream and special schools (White, 2020). See Bagnall (2020) and *Chapter 5* for a full outline of limitations pertaining to emotional-centred primary-secondary school transition interventions. Thus, understanding how children with added emotional difficulties, such as SEBD, are supported and cope with transition anxieties, on top of their pre-existing difficulties, has additional useful implications for emotional-centred transition provisions that can be employed in mainstream schools to support transfer children who face similar concerns, but often express these to a lesser degree. Thus, the present research study has additional implications in contributing to our limited understanding on how to support and improve mainstream children's emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transition, and will additionally answer the research question:

2. What can we learn from special schools in how children's emotional well-being is managed and supported over primary-secondary school transition, to inform emotional-centred support provision in schools?

4.2.   Method

4.2.1. Case description

The present case is a special school located in the West Midlands, which has a population of 50 children aged between four and 11 years old, who have SEBD and often have additional needs in areas of communication, interaction, cognition and learning. The school offers day and residential provision. All children attending the special primary school have been referred from local authorities, which have their own individual criteria for requesting a placement; although most commonly this is following needs unable to be

met in mainstream schooling. Every child admitted to the special primary school will have an Emotion, Health and Care (EHC) plan statement, which outlines the child's special educational needs, the support they need, and how this will help them reach their full potential.

Children attending the school receive child centred, specialised provision to meet their individual social, emotional and behavioural needs. For example, children at the school are taught in small class sizes of seven pupils. This was discussed as essential to provide a nurturing, caring and familiar environment, where the aim is that children feel safe, a sense of belonging and their voice is heard, which is important for them to reach their full potential academically and emotionally. Within each class, there are always two members of school staff on hand, to provide high levels of supervision, and staff are extensively trained in interventions to support children who have difficulties in managing their behaviour and emotions. While children attending the school are taught all components of the national curriculum, and whenever possible all Year 6 children sit national assessments at the end of the year, at the centre of the curriculum there is significant focus placed on supporting children's emotional development and self-regulation, more so than mainstream schooling. Children's behaviour and emotional well-being are assessed using standardised assessments on a week-by-week basis, to ensure the children attending the school receive targeted and up-to-date provision.

Reintegration into mainstream school is considered a pertinent goal for staff at the school especially in time for the transition to secondary school, which is deemed a critical period in doing this. However, reintegration into mainstream schooling is not considered the only goal and may not be possible for all children. Instead, greater focus is placed on supporting children emotionally so that they feel settled and safe at school, as it was discussed by staff that only under such conditions can children thrive academically and behaviourally. Children who do transition to mainstream secondary school from special primary schools are said to make an 'enhanced transition' and receive greater support.

The present study set out to evaluate the school's existing primary-secondary school transition provisions. It was discussed that efforts to support the transition to secondary school are variable year upon year, practitioners consistently trialling different approaches to unravel the best way to support transfer children during this critical

period. For example, when primary-secondary school transition preparations are initiated too soon, staff discussed how children's behaviour, academic progress and emotional settlement can spiral, but equally when provisions are left until the summer term of Year 6, children can feel overwhelmed and unprepared for their move ahead, which again can negatively affect their adjustment and behaviour in Year 6 and 7.

This academic year, primary-secondary school transition discussions began mid-way through Year 5, where Year 5 parents were invited to a secondary school placement meeting, with the primary school's Head Teacher to discuss their child's upcoming transition to secondary school. In this meeting the child's EHC assessment and plan was discussed, alongside their most recent behaviour, academic and psychometric assessments, in addition to a brief testimony from the child depicting their feelings and wishes towards secondary school placements. During this meeting all reports were considered, and an individual plan of action formulated for each child, which most often was for the parent(s) to firstly attend some secondary school open days (mainstream and special placements if appropriate) without their child to fully research potential options. A further meeting was then arranged early in Year 6 to discuss favoured placements and how to discuss primary-secondary school transition with their child.

Provisions to prepare children for secondary school, and the timing of when to initiate this support in Year 6 were shown to differ, dependent on whether the child was moving to a special or mainstream secondary school placement. For example, children making an 'enhanced transition' to mainstream secondary school received greater, one-to-one, specialist support from the Transfer Support Team (TST), which is a specialist team the school employ to support mainly mainstream school transitions. To do this, TST staff firstly facilitate 'moving on' sessions in small groups of no more than three children and then begin individual taster days where a TST staff member and the child visit a placement school, usually the targeted secondary schools' feeder primary school, in preparation for their transition to mainstream secondary school. These visits then gradually increase at the pace of the individual child, to the point where the child attends a week at the mainstream school without the TST staff member and potentially finishes Year 6 at this school to build peer relationships and become acclimatised to mainstream school in preparation for secondary school transition.

In comparison, children transitioning to a special secondary school placement, receive less support from the TST, especially if the child is transitioning to the special school's feeder special secondary school. This is because majority of children from the present special primary school transition to the same feeder special secondary school (each year between one-third to one-half of Year 6 pupils), which is within the same school trust. This school also specialises in supporting children with SEBD, and offers very similar support to the special primary school, including having their own TST who are in regular contact with the primary school and provide bridging activities. Thus, instead of one-to-one visits, children attend group move up days with their classmates who will also be attending this school.

4.2.2. Sample

Six Year 5 children (all male) participated in observations; 11 Year 6 children (10 males) participated in photo-elicitation focus groups and observations; two Year 5 class teachers participated in observations; two Year 6 class teachers participated in observations and one participated in an interview; one primary and one secondary school Transition Support Team (PTST, STST) teacher participated in observations and an interview; and six parents participated in observations.

4.2.3. Design

Using a qualitative longitudinal 18-month case study design, data collection methodologies included ethnographic observations (beginning mid-way through Year 5 when secondary school placement meetings began and then scattered over the Year 6 transfer year), child photo-elicitation focus groups (two in the summer term of Year 6) and adult one-to-one interviews (three conducted in the summer term of Year 6).

4.2.4. Procedure

Prior to data collection, ethical approval (*Appendix 4.1*), Headteacher consent, parental opt-in consent and participant consent were obtained. Participants were also briefed and asked to adhere to key ground rules which included to not disclose names or any identifiable information to maintain confidentiality. To protect participants' identity, audio-recordings and transcripts were anonymised at source and stored on password

protected computers. Once the allotted time ended participants were thanked, debriefed, offered the opportunity to ask questions and pointed to sources of support.

4.2.4.1. Photo-elicitation focus groups

Due to the children's limited sociolinguistic repertoire and difficulties sharing feelings, photo-elicitation focus groups were conducted. To do this, following a briefing meeting, Year 6 children had one week to take ten photographs (using a disposable camera provided), which reflected their feelings and experiences leading up to primary-secondary school transition. These photographs were then developed and used to guide the focus groups and help to stimulate discussion.

Two photo-elicitation focus groups were conducted, one with six and the second with five Year 6 children. The focus group participant numbers are consistent with previous research and considered optimal for this age group, given the topic under investigation (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990) and the children's additional special educational needs.

The child photo-elicitation focus groups were unstructured and participant-led each child discussing why they had taken each photograph and what it symbolised. Prompts and follow up questions were used where necessary, e.g. if you are happy to, please can you tell me a bit more about this photograph, and when unrelated discussion began to unfold the focus was politely brought back to the study.

4.2.4.2. Interviews

Twenty-minute interviews with three members of staff were conducted, which were delivered by the principal researcher using semi- structured question schedules and prompts and follow up questions (*Appendix 4.2*). The Year 6 teacher semi-structured focus group guide contained 11 questions, the Year 7 teacher interview guide contained 10 questions and the TST staff member interview guides contained nine questions. All questions focus on practitioners' experiences supporting children and parents over primary-secondary school transition within the special school, addressing child behaviour, relationships, support provision and additional support, roles, individual-level qualities and recommendations. Similar to *Chapter 2,* the content and structure of the semi-structured interview questions were informed by the research questions, in addition to Resilience Theory (Ungar, 2008).

4.2.4.3. Observations

In total eight overt observations (four in the morning and four in the afternoon) were conducted with each Year 6 class (48 hours of ethnographic classroom observations in total), over 12-months to examine school transition provisions within the special school. The classroom observations in the present study allowed the researcher to make contextual notes on the organisation of the school day, interactions between children and children and teachers, in addition to transition preparations in the day-to-day classroom environment.

Observations were also conducted during: three Year 5 placement meetings (with the Headteacher and Year 5 parents), one Year 5 secondary school parent visit (with Year 5 children and their parents), one secondary school move up day (with Year 6 children and teachers), and two TST members (PTST and STST) were shadowed for two full school days. These observations informed understanding of the research area and more formal elements of data collection (interview and photo-elicitation focus groups). To protect the well-being of participants all data were recorded anonymously.

4.2.5. Data preparation

During each observation, detailed field notes were made, replicating the methodology discussed in *Chapter 3*. Audio-recordings were transcribed using verbatim transcription.

4.2.6. Data analysis

Transcribed data and observation notes were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2013) six stages of Thematic Analysis, replicating the procedure discussed in *Chapter 3.* Aligning with the rationale discussed in *Chapter 2*, a contextualist framework was chosen, characterised by critical realism, as this epistemology was deemed necessary in order to acknowledge essentialist reports of individual experience, meanings and reality, but also recognise that broader environmental contexts, such as social influence and the school, can also impinge on such meanings.

N.B. the same approach that was taken to establish qualitative trustworthiness in *Study 1,* outlined in *Chapter 2,* was also replicated throughout the present study, including the

additional measures that were discussed in *Chapter 3* to enhance qualitative trustworthiness.

4.3.   Results

Four main themes: *4.3.1. Conflicting emotions, 4.3.2. Timing vs. Time of transfer provision, 4.3.3. Balancing children's short and long-term emotional well-being* and *4.3.4. Child centred provision* were identified across the focus groups, interviews and observations. These themes are introduced below in narrative order. As shown in Table 4.1 each theme has a differing number of sub-themes, which are discussed separately below using illustrative quotes from participants, see Table 4.2.

Table 4.1

A thematic table of themes and sub-themes

4.3.1. Conflicting emotions	
4.3.1.1. Nervousness vs. Excitement	4.3.1.2. Loss vs. Progression
4.3.2. Timing vs. Time of transfer provision	
4.3.2.1. Timing of when to begin transfer provision	4.3.2.2. Time for gradual provision
4.3.3. Balancing children's short and long-term emotional well-being	
4.3.3.1. Safety and belonging	4.3.3.2. Psychosocial adjustment vs. Reaching potential

4.3.4. Child centred provision		
4.3.4.1. Tensions around continuity of support	4.3.4.2. Stretched workloads	4.3.4.3. Consideration of past experiences

Table 4.2

Composition of the focus groups and interviews

Transcript	Pseudonyms
Child Focus Group 1	Child 1, Child 2, Child 3, Child 4, Child 5
Child Focus Group 2	Child 6, Child 7, Child 8, Child 9, Child 10, Child 11
TST (Transition Support Team) interviews	Primary Transition Support Team staff member (PTST), Secondary Transition Support Team staff member (STST)
Year 6 Teacher Interview	Year 6 Teacher

*Children participating in the photo-elicitation focus groups were identified as Child 1, Child 2 etc. to preserve their identities as opposed to pseudonyms as there was an unbalanced gender composition across the focus groups.

4.3.1. Conflicting emotions

In the lead up to primary-secondary school transition almost all children in the focus groups, and parents in the Year 5 placement meetings (where the child's parents and Headteacher met to discuss the child's secondary school placement), expressed experiencing conflicting emotions of N*ervousness vs. Excitement* and *Loss vs. Progression*. These conflicting emotions were also shown in the observations and voiced by school staff in their one-to-one interviews.

4.3.1.1. Nervousness vs. Excitement

Children commonly shared pictures which represented conflicting feelings of nervousness: 'I took pictures of racing cars as I am a bit nervous about moving to mainstream school' (Child 2) and excitement: 'I took a picture of Christmas as I am feeling really excited now because I am moving onto secondary school' (Child 2). Children's conflicting feelings were also evident in their behaviour, such as on move up day, where children expressed feelings of excitement leading up to the day, but on the day were visibly nervous. For example, one child was sick on the journey to the secondary school, another would not stop talking until he got there when he became shy and withdrawn, and one child did not want to go. These conflicting feelings continued throughout the day, each new experience initially bringing feelings of nervousness, until the children felt settled (often following reassurance from staff at primary school). Staff discussed these

difficulties in line with the children's additional needs: 'Well transitioned pupils have the ability to try and be open to trying new things and meeting new people but that can be hard for children with emotional problems to build attachments and they can struggle' (Year 6 Teacher). Some children felt confident disclosing how they felt:

> I took a picture of a fidget spinner because when you go to a place where you are really excited but scared as well you can feel like weird in your stomach and my stomach was spinning so I took a picture of a fidget spinner (Child 6).

Other children found this difficult and either struggled to put into language how they felt: 'I have bubby feelings inside my body about going to secondary school' (Child 4), generalised them: 'people sometimes feel scared' (Child 9), or masked them, one child using an orange metaphor: 'I have got a picture of oranges here to represent nervousness because oranges are actually hiding under their skin' (Child 5). This was also shown in the observations, as children commonly concealed how they felt in class, and on transition visit days, refusing to talk to staff, until these emotions were too difficult to handle and resulted in uncontrollable outbursts. This was discussed by the children, one child comparing his feelings to a light switch: 'I took a picture of this light switch because it is emotions that come on and off' (Child 6).

To manage children's conflicting feelings towards primary-secondary school transition, staff discussed the need to balance direct strategies, such as move-up days: 'Maybe a couple of open days in the summer might be a good thing so they can touch base a little bit more in the holidays, where they haven't got the other boys around' (STST), and indirect preparations. Indirect preparations included skills workshops to help children to manage their emotions: 'these children are so emotional and can lack resilience, we have had visits (transition days) in the past and it has caused a problem, whether we do a workshop, I don't know it is a tricky one isn't it' (Year 6 Teacher).

4.3.1.2. Loss vs. Progression

Feelings of loss and progression was evident across focus groups, interviews and observations and shaped experiences of primary-secondary school transition and how it is managed. For children losing *Friendships* was a significant concern. For adults supporting children, the child's *Readiness* to move on shaped how progression was supported (*Supporting progression)*.

Friendships. Losing friends was very concerning for children: 'I am worried that I might not see my friends because I have got some like best friends here and I might not see them at my new school' (Child 4), which was coupled with worries about not making new friends at secondary school. Reminiscing about primary school friendships was as a result a dominant coping strategy: 'if you are afraid that you will never have friends again think about your old friends at [named primary school]' (Child 9).

Readiness. For children who were ready to move on feelings of loss: 'This last picture is of my three sisters and me looking really sad and this represents sad as I have only been at this school for three years and a half so I wish I had more time' (Child 1), were overridden by expressions of impatience: 'I took a picture of a clock, it represents impatience because I am pretty excited to go to secondary school' (Child 4), and optimism: 'I thought if I took a picture of a thumb up it represents that you can do it' (Child 11). These children saw secondary school as a progression and time of growth: 'I took a picture of a butterfly because like a caterpillar turns into a butterfly, it's like me being the caterpillar moving up to secondary school and turning into a butterfly' (Child 6) and discussed wanting to make the most of their last year of primary school: 'enjoy your last year because you are not able to come back, because you can't turn back time, so have as much fun as you can before you leave' (Child 10).

For children who felt less ready, often because they were less informed about their transition (see *4.3.3.2. Psychosocial adjustment vs. Reaching potential*), expressions of loss: 'I am a bit upset and scared about leaving school' (Child 1), loneliness: 'mine is a picture of a dark forest representing that I am about to leave school' (Child 5) and regret that they had not moved to the special primary school sooner: 'I took a picture of my angry hulk because I am angry that I didn't get to stay in this school for long enough to properly get into it' (Child 4) prevailed. It is worth noting at this point that there was no difference in feelings of settlement amongst children transitioning from the special primary school to mainstream vs. special secondary schools.

Supporting progression. In the placement meeting observations parents were concerned about how to manage their child's feelings towards secondary school, as they feared unsettling their child and affecting their current emotional stability. As a result, delaying preparations and not including children in transition discussions until decisions had been made was a dominant strategy: 'there is communication that happens between

myself and the TST and parents about visits, but they [parents] are sort of reluctant to include their child' (Year 6 Teacher).

To help children manage feelings of *progression vs. loss*, the schools' TST, who symbolised a bridge for their next chapter: 'I think it is good if you have a team like we have, outside the classroom because erm they see us as being the bridge to mainstream school or moving on' (PTST), provided moving on sessions in groups and 1:1. Teachers discussed how TST support would be helpful in all schools, not just special schools: 'I think ideally all schools should have TST that work out the best plan to move children on and I think not to do it as a whole class, to do it in little groups of children' (Y6 Teacher). Communication between stakeholders, especially parents, was also consistently discussed as important in managing feelings of *progression vs. loss*: 'they need to be encouraging, my experience is that if parents are on board, and you have got good communication, are all in agreement and working together towards a common goal, this ultimately impacts the child' (Year 6 Teacher).

4.3.2. Timing vs. Time of transfer provision

Balancing *timing* of when primary-secondary school transfer preparations should be initiated, and *time* to prepare children gradually for the move to secondary school, was discussed as sensitive and an ongoing dilemma subject to change each year to match cohorts' needs. However, what remained consistent was consideration of children's specific additional emotional needs and their ability to cope.

4.3.2.1. Timing of when to begin transfer provision

For educational practitioners, there was uncertainty around the *timing* of when to initiate primary-secondary school transition preparations subject to the difficulties children at the school face managing emotions: 'these children are so emotional and can lack that resilience' (Year 6 Teacher). Lessons learnt from past cohorts also shaped decisions:

> A couple of years ago we were asked to not come in so early as it left them with a few weeks of the boys being really unsettled, they were ready to move on, they were cutting their ties with the relationships they had got and it was making it quite hard for everybody and for other children (STST).

The impact of poor transition provision *timing* and especially the impact of visit days on children's behaviour in the classroom was very important in shaping these decisions. As the transition period approached, emotional unsettlement was visible in the observations through changes in the Year 6 children's behaviour in the classroom, most children unable or lacking motivation to focus on classwork and displaying acting-out behaviours. One Year 6 class teacher described this as 'year six itus': 'so if we talk about the transition period, when I call it year six itus, they struggle towards the end knowing that they only have x number of weeks left' (Year 6 Teacher). As a result, TST staff discussed how the children's class teachers set the pace of provisions: 'they [class teachers] know the children, they know what is best so we have started to go as and when they feel fits.' (STST).

It was clear that there were individual differences in how children responded to the *timing* of transition provision, particularly direct preparations such as visit days if not handled sensitively:

> I think either they were excited to be going and that was it they had enough of [named school], but more often was the case that they may not have had a positive experience which then created a problem psychologically in the children here, because they don't want to leave and were quite anxious and worried going (Year 6 Teacher).

For some children knowing which secondary school they will be attending and visiting whilst still in Year 6 helped them feel more emotionally settled and in control of their next move: 'we have one girl and since she found out where she was going her behaviour has improved because she felt settled and before that she was like where am I going, where am I going' (Year 6 Teacher). Nonetheless, it was clear that not all children were fully informed about their transition to secondary school and felt uncertain: 'I have a picture of what's meant to be all black but it didn't come out right and it was meant to be representing confusion because I am kinda confused of what I am going to be doing next year' (Child 3).

Enhanced transitions. For children making enhanced transitions (transition from the special primary school to mainstream secondary school), they attended visit days to mainstream primary schools to reintegrate them into mainstream schooling in preparation for secondary school. Nonetheless, these visits, if regular and prolonged, could also disorient children when they returned to the special primary school: 'I think we have arguments for children that are so settled when they have their transition, that

when they come here, they almost don't need to be around the other children' (Year 6 Teacher). Thus, the *timing* of when to initiate reintegration visits to mainstream primary schools can be crucial in terms of children's day-to-day adjustment for the remainder of the Year 6 transfer year.

4.3.2.2. Time for gradual provision

School transition was discussed as best placed when there is *time* for gradual transfer provision. In fact, the need for *time* to gradually prepare children for transition, was discussed as being more important than transition *timing.* However, Year 6 has a timescale, in that secondary school choice decisions need to be made and transfer preparations initiated, which means that practitioners don't always have a lot of *time* to gradually prepare children for their next chapter, in line with their specific needs:

> we have transitions from pupils quite young back into mainstream schools and they have worked really well because you are not on a timescale with them, because obviously now when they are in Year 6 going into Year 7 you haven't got all the time to do it, that is our window of opportunity, and it will end there, whereas if we do it earlier, we can do it very gradually and slowly (PTST).

Children were shown to pick up on this lack of *time* and feelings of rush and pressure towards transition:

> I took a picture of an exclamation mark because transition is coming but probably in your head there will be sentences like oh my god where am I going? What will I do? And at the end of those questions there will probably be an exclamation mark, so I took a picture of one (Child 6).

It was clear in the observations that class teachers favoured gradual, open and transparent approaches when discussing transition in class, and teachers regularly signposted similarities between primary and secondary school in lessons. This was also discussed in the interviews: 'I say this is your last year, it's up to you how you want your year to go and then as we get closer I say we have so many weeks left, we only have four days left etc.' (Year 6 Teacher). The same approach was taken to support parents: 'yes we start the moving on sessions and talking to parents as early as we can so we can prepare' (PTST) and during move-up days. For example, in the observations it was clear that the pace of the move-up day was deliberately staggered: the children firstly taken on a school tour with their class teacher and a familiar TST teacher to ensure the children felt safe, which the students valued: 'when teachers take us around they can see what it is like and give us their opinion' (Child 7). The Year 6 children's teachers then gradually left when the children were comfortable.

The same approach, but with greater 1:1 support, was taken when children were making enhanced transitions, the children given *time* to acclimatise to mainstream school at their own pace: 'we have taster sessions where we go and have a look around and then start having a break time and slowly increase it that way to suit them and their needs' (…) 'it just naturally happens that way so there is no pressure on the child and obviously if they are not happy, or you can see that they are uncomfortable, you can come away' (PTST).

4.3.3. Balancing children's short and long-term emotional well-being

Educational practitioners discussed facing a conflict in balancing children's short-term emotional well-being in the here- and- now, by helping them feel a sense of *4.3.3.1. Safety and Belonging* at primary school, but also their long-term emotional well-being, by preparing them for secondary school where support may be inequitable. Similar concerns were raised when considering secondary school placements, see *4.3.3.2. Emotional settlement vs. Reaching potential*.

4.3.3.1. Safety and belonging

Feeling *safe* and a *sense of belonging* at school, was discussed as paramount for children to feel settled in primary school, especially subject to breakdown of previous school placements: 'we do everything in our power in terms of our school community to make sure that these children have a positive impact and a positive sort of vibe about the school because they used to go to other schools where they struggled' (Year 6 teacher). This was discussed by parents in transition placement meetings, where they outlined how their children's self-esteem, anxiety and problem behaviour (especially self-control) improved greatly following transition to the special school as their child felt *safe* and 'fitted in'. Teachers also discussed the bond children have with the school: 'they form such an attachment to the school, I don't think there have been many cases where children come here and have not brought in to everything that we offer them' (Year 6), but were concerned that this may not be matched at secondary school: 'there is an argument that we do them a little bit of a disservice because we do such a good job' (PTST).

Although indirectly, children discussed fears of safety: 'I took a picture of my dog and she makes me think that when I am going to secondary school I will feel safe because

whenever I need her or when I am in danger she is always there for me' (Child 8); belonging: 'I took a picture of a sofa because I feel comfy here' (Child 10); and support: 'it is a picture of two owls together, this makes me feel like say I had a really close friend that might go to my next secondary school then I will know that there is someone to be there to care about me' (Child 1) at secondary school. To support children to establish feelings of safety, belonging and support at secondary school, TST staff from the feeder special secondary school regularly visited the special primary school: 'I have been popping in so most have seen me before they have aged to come here which I think settles them as well' (STST).

4.3.3.2. Psychosocial adjustment vs. Reaching potential

In placement meeting observations, parents discussed conflict between wanting their children to feel emotionally settled at secondary school, which they felt would be better nurtured within a special secondary school, but also wanting their child to not miss out on opportunities, especially academic ones, mainstream schools could offer. Transitions to mainstream secondary school were called *enhanced transitions* and discussed as risky, as if unsuccessful they could emotionally unsettle children and negatively impact their child's emotional well-being:

> they [parents] have concerns about re-integrating into mainstream because if it doesn't work out it is another transition and I say this particular boy is showing real resilience and I think it is worth taking the plunge, but it is your decision as it can swing the other way (Year 6 Teacher).

These fears were coupled with the fact that if enhanced transition was unsuccessful, transitioning back to special school education, especially the special primary schools' feeder special secondary school, which is highly subscribed, would be unlikely: 'if it doesn't work it is another transition that may not be appropriate' (Year 6 Teacher).

Class teachers also discussed parents and children having distorted and biased experiences of special school education by solely attending the present special primary school, which was very supportive, and feared that their current expectations and standards would not be matched at special secondary schools: 'I have worked in other special schools and it [named primary school] is very different from them, just because you are going to another special school it does not mean it will have the same ethos and environment that this has' (Year 6 Teacher).

Although children gave a written statement outlining what secondary school they would like to attend, children did not attend placement review meetings or visit days where parents considered potential secondary schools. This was to prevent fears of offering false-hope and disappointment, if adults decide that a placement is discordant with their child's needs. This was especially noticeable if parents were considering enhanced school transitions, which children perceived as more worrisome, given their past experiences of placement breakdowns (see sub-theme *4.3.4.3. Consideration of past experiences*).

However, children discussed wanting to be part of these decisions: 'take us on a visit to our new school as opposed to letting just parents do it' (Child 3), and felt that visits would help them feel more settled: 'in visits, you get to see the building and don't get scared' (Child 9). This lack of voice, led to feelings of uncertainty: 'I took a picture of a blank wall because it represents my mind being blank as I don't know' (Child 6) and anxiety: 'I took a picture of sand because I felt like this is like my mind thinking what will I be doing, where will I be going and stuff like that' (Child 8).

4.3.4. Child centred provision

Children's individual vulnerabilities, triggers and *4.3.4.3. Consideration of past experiences* were at the centre of support provision within the special school and underpinned preparations for secondary school. However, this also contributed to *4.3.4.1. Tensions around the continuity of support* when the children left the special primary school and *4.3.4.2. Stretched workloads.*

4.3.4.1. Tensions around continuity of support

At the special primary school, the children receive significant hands on support to enable day-to-day school functioning, which is unlikely to be equitable at secondary school:

> they are provided with everything, like they don't even have to take a pencil to school, or a pair of trainers, everything is provided, which is good when they get here because that is what they need, they don't need anything else going on in their head they just need to try and access everything as smoothly as they can without having to think of all those things, but obviously when they move on that is quite a different thing (PTST).

However, dependence on such support can be problematic when the children transition to secondary school: 'I can see that children can be quite stressed moving on because they see it as such a big move, it is that growing up bit, that piece of where they have been in a secure environment and moving on to the unknown and these schools can be massive' (PTST). Tension arose when SEBD children were treated differently than other children at mainstream secondary schools when they faced emotional problems, as staff from the specialist primary school discussed being called upon when problems occurred to provide support for the child and staff:

> Just because he has come from a special school doesn't mean if he is having a wobble, he needs more support than other mainstream children. I didn't think it was right when he was struggling for me to go in and I spoke to mum about that, I said I don't mind speaking to him if you feel that is essential but from my perspective I think he needs to speak to his staff and make a success of it (Year 6 Teacher).

4.4.3.2. Stretched workloads

Across interviews, meetings and observations it was clear that the TST were stretched: 'I think we need more transition staffing and we need more bodies to go and support these children at schools' (Year 6 Teacher), which affected morale: 'I find it hard and a bit frustrating because I want to do more' (PTST). It was also raised that workloads can be variable annually dependent on cohort needs, especially how many children are making enhanced transitions and need 1:1 re-integration provision: 'For me it is just about having a few extra bodies to facilitate transition to mainstream, but should we employ someone and next year we might not have any' (Year 6 Teacher).

Lack of time, although crucial for staff to recognise SEBD children's individual needs, vulnerabilities and build rapport: 'it takes a period of time to build that relationship to know and to pick up on subtle changes and experiences' (PTST), was discussed as being especially difficult this year. This interfered with staff's ability to best support transfer children:

> I think to have a bit more time to do it and maybe more staff because that has been a bit of shame this year, last year I had one child on transition and that worked really well and this year I have had two and I don't think I have been able to give as much to them. I had to share my time which has been a shame, I wish there was two of me (PTST).

TST staff also discussed the level of support they could provide being dependent on existing workload pressures which was not always in concordance with children's

needs: 'it depends on when they are brought to the transition team and our workload on when we can do it and sort out a place for them to go. But as soon as we have the availability to support them, yes, we start moving on sessions' (PTST). Stretched workloads were also discussed as being time dependent, greater pressure closer to primary-secondary school transition:

> certainly as it gets to the crunch end, the busy season as you like, the managers that came into the meetings was like I need support, I need people to go in and support this boy because I have got these children, I have got my team who are there, and they can't be at two places at once (Year 6 Teacher).

4.4.3.3. Consideration of past experiences

The circumstances which bring children to the special primary school can vary (see *4.2.1. Case description*); thus, consideration of children's past experiences were central in transition preparations: 'try to find out the child's individual past (…) then try to find the right place for them, and doing it at the right pace for the child' (PTST).

One of the main concerns for transfer children and parents when considering transition, was the possibility of past events being revisited at their new placement. This included fears of reintegration with peers from their previous school placements: 'making other friends I might know from my old school that didn't come here is worrying' (Child 5), but also ex-children from the special primary school: 'I am not looking forward to seeing all the other people that left last year at secondary school' (Child 3).

School staff discussed the need for sensitivity, taking into account past experiences and relationships, within school placement preparations: 'we find a school that we think is going to suit them because obviously due to their past experiences, we have to be careful which ones we identify' (PTST), and on visit days, especially to mainstream schools:

> because of course you are taking them back to mainstream and some of the children they won't have seen for quite a few years and they recognise each other and sometimes that can be good, but sometimes not good and it is the effect that can have on the child (PTST).

School staff also discussed how parent anxieties can also be picked up on by their children and shape their attitudes towards the transition: 'obviously parents have had a bad experience as well and sometimes they will say things around the child that obviously affects how the children perceive mainstream school, so erm it can be quite difficult' (PTST). Recognising the stake that parents can have in shaping children's concerns, staff

at the school discussed the need to support parents through meetings, emails and telephone conversations:

> Parents can have a huge role in the children's views of the school, the more time you spend with them and the more you can get from them directly affects the children. If they have got negative views obviously put those at ease and if they are positive just keep them that way (STST).

4.4.   Discussion

To date we have a limited understanding of children's emotional experiences over school transition. This gap is widened when considering the experiences of children with added emotional difficulties, such as SEBD, and how they are supported. To shed light on this, the present case study drew on 'multiple sources of information' (Creswell, 2013, p. 97), including interview and focus group transcripts and observation narratives, to examine *what* provisions are currently being used to support the emotional well-being of children with SEBD over primary-secondary school transition within the special school, the challenges the school faces in doing this, and the implications this has for emotional-centred support provision that could be employed in schools more widely. This holistic, in depth contextual analysis was guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) Eco-Systemic Model of Development, which acknowledges that both person and environmental factors, are nested and exert differential levels of influence, shaping perceptions, behaviours, coping, and adaption.

As discussed in *Chapters 2* and *3,* focus group methodologies are underused within this field in comparison to quantitative survey-based designs (Riglin et al., 2013), which is surprising given that this method can evoke honest and more in-depth contextual insight, as shown in the present study. Moreover, as shown in the present study, focus groups can be useful in facilitating discussion with more disfranchised samples, such as children with SEN and especially children with SEBD, whose voices are significantly underrepresented both in schools and research (Mowat, 2019). Thus, by directly asking children with SEBD to share their first-hand experiences, the present study has immediate implications in empowering our participants but has also made significant contributions to the field in elucidating the importance of valuing children's voice in educational research and practice.

Resonating to recommendations proposed in *Chapter 2* regarding the need to establish a balance between exposure and consistency in transition support provisions, which again would not have been clear without obtaining first-hand insight from transfer children, this same conflict is of concern when considering transition provision for children with SEBD. However, whereas it was children who voiced the need for transition exposure to follow a continuum with a clear limit in the mainstream focus groups in *Study 1*, it was school staff and parents in the present study who held greater reservations regarding *when* children should receive transition support provision (see theme *4.3.2. Timing vs Time of transfer provision*), *how* this should be done (see *4.3.3. Balancing children's short and long-term emotional well-being*) and *what* is the appropriate level of exposure (see theme *4.3.4. Child centred provision*). While, this caution was discussed in relation to children's pre-existing emotional problems, previous school experiences and the implications too much transition exposure could have on children's short- and long-term adjustment, children in the meantime discussed feeling voiceless and uncertain about their futures.

This notion of powerlessness is not uncommon for children with SEBD, as child voice opportunities both in schools and research are less popular and perceived as more challenging for children with SEN (Thomas & Loxley, 2007). Nonetheless, restricting child voice opportunities for vulnerable groups of young people, especially in the context of high-risk situations such as primary-secondary school transition, supports 'deficit' and 'problematising' agendas and leads to further disempowerment (Trotman et al., 2015). This is especially concerning when considering children with SEBD who are shown to be least listened to, empowered, liked and more at risk of exclusion (Lewis & Burman 2008), as shown in the present research.

Nonetheless, children with SEBD can be argued to be the best beneficiaries of child voice opportunities (Caslin, 2019; Norwich et al., 2006) and a strength of the present research was the child focussed photo-elicitation methodology, which helped the children to be heard and aided construction of unanticipated and meaningful responses. For example, it was clear in the present research across the child focus groups that the children had a greater emotional understanding of primary-secondary school transition than adults may have realised. The children were also aware of transition provisions and discussions their elders shielded them from, such as parent secondary school visits, which

the children voiced that they would have liked to have been part of to provide them with a greater understanding and *exposure* of their next stage in education.

Thus, by listening to children, educators can gain a deeper insight into children's understanding of events that are important to them, and adjust provisions to meet their needs, as opposed to being overly protective, cautious or anxious, which in the context of primary-secondary school transfer provision can have negative implications on their adjustment as shown in previous research (Hammond, 2016), and found in *Study 1.* In addition, giving children a voice in decisions that affect them can help children feel more in control, which for children with SEBD can be crucial and have a significant impact on their emotional well-being (Norwich et al., 2006). For example, in the present study it was clear that children's lack of involvement and voice in school choice placement decisions, which their parents and teachers ultimately made for them, contributed to feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty about transition, as the children could not anticipate changes, such as: friendship disruptions. Thus, taken together, these findings provide greater leverage for the need to obtain first-hand insight from all stakeholders, including children, to fully understand and improve primary-secondary school transition.

Moreover, our empirical understanding of how to support children who face additional difficulties over primary-secondary school transition lags far behind that of children in mainstream schools (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006), and for children with SEBD this is non-existent. This research gap may be due in part to assuming SEN is a homogenous group, which can lead to an inconclusive picture on how to support specific SEN populations, as children with SEN face varying strengths and difficulties that can differentially shape primary-secondary school transition adjustment (Maras & Aveling, 2006). Thus, by specifically investigating how children with SEBD cope with primary-secondary school transition and how they are supported, the present research has made preliminary, but nonetheless unique progress in demonstrating the importance of investigating narrower and more homogenous samples. This can help to ascertain a clearer picture of how to support more vulnerable children during this period in both mainstream and special schools.

That being said, there can be vast heterogeneity within SEBD samples, even when sample sizes are moderate, as shown in the present sample of eleven children. For example, as discussed in sub-theme *4.3.2.1. Timing of when to begin transfer provision,*

while some children felt more at ease following visits to their secondary school, for other children this exposure was more harmful and impacted their day to day functioning for the remainder of the Year 6 transfer year. Thus, whilst children with SEBD on the surface may comprise a homogeneous group, as discussed repeatedly by TST practitioners in the present study, each individual child will have unique needs. This is subject to their specific vulnerabilities, triggers and past experiences, that have a significant stake in shaping their experiences and readiness for primary-secondary school transition provision. Thus, as implemented in the present special school, there is no 'one size fits all' approach to support children with SEN, and more personalised, idiosyncratic approaches are often best suited, which resonates to Eccles and Midgley's (1989) SEF theory, that outlines the importance of the *match* between children's developing needs and opportunities afforded to them by their social environments.

However, while it is well established that SEN children receive differentiated and modified teaching approaches to support their learning in the classroom both in mainstream and special schools, implementing tailored primary-secondary school support provisions are not always practical. This is especially problematic in mainstream schools, especially given pre-existing pressures teachers already face (Trotman et al., 2015) but such intensive one-to-one support can also be problematic in special schools, as shown in the present study. As discussed in the sub-theme *4.3.4.2. St*retch*ed workloads,* staffing pertaining to school transition was especially stretched this academic year, as there were more children than usual negotiating an enhanced transition to mainstream secondary school, and limited time allowances to spend preparing each child individually. Thus, further research is needed to help schools revitalise transition support programmes, in both mainstream and special schools, so that provision is sustainable.

In comparison to the findings from mainstream schools in *Studies 1* and *2,* the children, in addition to their parents and teachers, at the present special school, placed greater emphasis on the importance of children feeling safe and a sense of belonging at secondary school (see subtheme *4.3.3.1. Safety and belonging*). In fact, this concern was shown to override all other concerns and shaped decisions that implicated children's short- and long-term emotional well-being. These findings provide further validation for the need to ensure that primary-secondary school transition support provision is sensitive, which is discussed in both *Chapters 2* and *3.*

However, educational practitioners also raised concerns that the intensive support children with SEBD receive at the special primary school, which they initially need to feel emotionally settled within school, especially considering past unsuccessful school placements, is unlikely to be matched at secondary school and can lull children into a false sense of security. This has been supported empirically, as children with SEN are shown to negotiate more structural changes in support over primary-secondary school transition than their non-SEN peers, which can lead to lower post-transfer ratings of school adjustment (Hughes et al., 2013). For example, Bailey and Baines' (2012) longitudinal research found that the more favourably children with SEN reported resilience factors, such as Trust, Support and Comfort pre-transition, the lower their rating of school adjustment after transfer. It was argued that this may be subject to the larger amounts of time children with SEN spend being supported by familiar adults in the primary environment, and their dependence on this support, which when no longer available post-transfer, can cause children with SEN to experience more adjustment difficulties. The present research extends these findings.

These findings may also be indicative of differences in how children with and without SEN perceive their own adjustment and their environment. For example, drawing on Bailey and Baines' (2012) findings it may be that children with SEN are underestimating secondary school challenges, by holding different appraisals and expectations to children without SEN. Children with SEN may also use different criteria to assess adjustment based upon personal expectations, or may lack the skills to adapt, possibly subject to their previous overreliance on support, as shown in the present study. Thus, to improve the transition period there is a need for primary and secondary schools to work together to ensure that children are met with a degree of continuity, which shares parallels with what was discussed in *Chapters 2* and *3.* For children with SEN, a more co-ordinated approach between primary and secondary schools during transition is especially needed during this time. This is in line with previous research which has shown the degree of collaboration across primary schools and their feeder secondary school to be indispensable in ensuring effective transition processes for all children, but especially children with SEN (McCauley, 2010).

Comparable to *Study 2* and in contrast to *Study 1*, children freely discussed their feelings towards moving to secondary school in the child focus groups, even if they were

unsure how they felt. On one hand this may be indicative of the photo-elicitation method which can help children construct more thoughtful answers. For example, in the present study the children had a full week to think about how they felt towards primary-secondary school transition and how they were going to present this in the focus groups; in comparison, in *Studies 1 and 2*, children answered similar questions within the moment in their focus groups. Nonetheless, given the children's additional special educational needs, in addition to children with SEBD's lack of voice within educational research and policy (DfHSC & DfE, 2018), the decision to facilitate photo-elicitation focus groups was to provide the children with a greater a sense of autonomy and ownership over their feelings by being able to present them through the medium of photographs.

However, the children's more open attitudes towards mental health may also be indicative of the additional support children receive in special education to help them acknowledge and self-regulate their emotions, which may help to position mental health as less of taboo. Understanding the mechanisms through which special schools facilitate this, has useful implications for mental health literacy provisions in mainstream schools for both staff and children, especially in light of recommendations discussed in recent policy (DfHSC & DfE, 2018).

The present research is not without its limitations. One such limitation was the study's single case study design. On one hand this was needed to provide detailed, longitudinal contextual insight into a marginalised population, which to date has received limited empirical attention. This was facilitated through the observations, which were conducted at varying time points over the Year 6 transition year to investigate change in transition experiences and practices. However, the single case design limits the generalisability of the present findings to wider schools as caution is needed when adopting practice from one context to another. Thus, there is need for further research with more special schools to strengthen confidence in the credibility and robustness of the present findings.

Moreover, although all relevant participants who had a stake in primary-secondary school transition provisions were sampled using a given medium (focus group, observation, interview) in the present case study, conducting interviews with Year 6 parents at the special school would have provided a clearer picture of their experiences and appraisals. For example, in parallel with findings from *Study 1*, school staff discussed

how parent anxieties, especially towards reintegration into mainstream school could be picked up on by their children and shape their attitudes towards the transition. These findings extend previous research which has shown parent anxiety and influence to be stronger amongst SEN populations (Neal et al., 2015). Therefore, in future transition support interventions there is a need to prevent this transmission, by also understanding parent concerns and providing support for them. While it was not feasible in the present study to conduct interviews with parents, subject to limited resources and competing pressures in the Year 6 transfer year, this is potential valuable insight that needs to be considered in future work.

In sum, the present study has made a significant contribution to the field by demonstrating the importance of investigating how children with more specific SEN difficulties, such as SEBD, cope with primary-secondary school transition and how they are supported, which to date is limited (Mowat, 2019). Understanding how children with added emotional difficulties are supported and cope with transition anxieties, on top of their pre-existing difficulties, can inform wider emotional-centred transition provision. Given, that emotional-centred support provisions are limited in number and face key challenges in both mainstream and special schools (Bagnall, 2020), these findings have significant practical implications. Finally, by using a case study design (which is underused within this field), the present research has made two further unique contributions to the field. Firstly, the present research adds to contemporary theory by recognising both proximal (children's relationships with their teachers, parents, and classmates) and distal (educational policies and practices) influences which impact SEBD children's experiences of primary-secondary school transition and how they are supported. Secondly, the present research makes further contributions to the field by mobilising an underused, yet valuable research design.

Chapter 5: Evaluation of TaST (Study 4) - an emotion-centred intervention to support children over primary-secondary school transition

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5.1. Background

Primary-secondary school transition is acknowledged as the biggest discontinuity children face within formal education (Zeedyk et al., 2003), which 'too many' children find difficult (Ofsted, 2015, March). As discussed in *Chapter 1*, during this time children navigate simultaneous changes in their academic, social and physical school environment, often alongside biological changes associated with puberty. Negotiating, these multiple changes, during a critical period in their development, can heavily draw on children's ability to cope, and compromise their emotional well-being in the short and long term (White, 2020).

In the short term, leading up to and during initial primary-secondary school transition, many children report feelings of stress and anxiety (White, 2020). This was also shown in the focus group research, as found in *Study 1* and *Study 3* of this thesis, where transfer children discussed feeling nervous, anxious and unsettled leading up to and during initial primary-secondary school transition. Research has suggested that this is often due to a mismatch between the anxiety children experience during primary-secondary transition and the emotional skills they can draw on to cope (Zeedyk et al., 2003). This was again supported by findings from *Study 1* and *Study 3* where children discussed the importance, but also difficulty in managing their emotions over primary-secondary school transition. *Study 2* sheds further light on these findings, outlining how children's developmental readiness for school transition, which included being emotionally stable, mature and exhibiting good coping skills and self-advocacy, significantly shaped their adjustment to the new school environment and their emotional well-being.

Furthermore, research has shown that children who feel that they had underestimated the importance of the socio-emotional aspects of the transition when in Year 6, or exhibit personal vulnerability factors, such as poor coping efficacy, experience a poorer transition to secondary school and report more problems settling in (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). This is not uncommon over primary-secondary school transition in the UK and can result in many children being insufficiently prepared for transfer challenges (van Rens et al., 2018). Thus, there is more that needs to be done to support children's *emotional* well-being during this time. This is recognised by key stakeholders, including parents and children, as shown in *Study 1,* where both transfer parents and children discussed the importance and need for emotional-centred discussions leading up to the transition within primary schools, but also empirically. For example, McGee et al.'s (2003) survey research found 45% of parents to report their child needing help talking about their feelings in preparation for primary-secondary school transition and Evan's et al.'s (2018) review found 21% of transfer children to report their primary school to not prepare them for secondary school. It is perhaps not surprising then that 15% of the sample reported not settling well into their new school. Taken together there are two main issues that need to be addressed. Firstly, there is need for support intervention over primary-secondary school transition that has an explicit focus on children's emotions and how to manage them. Secondly, there is need to understand and measure potential change mechanisms, targeted through support intervention, such as internal and external protective factors, including coping efficacy and social support, as discussed in *Chapter 1* and targeted in the present TaST intervention.

Moreover, despite in 2007 transition becoming a mandatory area examined in UK OFSTED inspections, a policy change which was introduced to prevent variability in how primary and secondary schools raised transition issues with transfer children (Ofsted, 2007), Government reports are still reporting primary-secondary school transition as a period 'not handled well' (Ofsted, 2015, March, p. 65). The quality of transition between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 is reported to be still 'much too variable' (Ofsted, 2015, September, p. 21) and arrangements for transfer as a result 'weak in over a quarter of the schools visited' (Ofsted, 2014, p. 21). As a result, it has been acknowledged that there needs to be 'a greater focus on transition periods in children and young people's lives' as current transition interventions 'do not give enough importance to improving resilience

and well-being and how schools and colleges might be supported in this role' (DfE 2018, p.13).

This is unsurprising as within schools more pressing academic and procedural demands such as national assessments, heavy staff workloads and difficulty finding space within the overcrowded curriculum (McGee et al., 2003) can mean that transition arrangements are often neglected or left until the summer term just before children make the transition. This reactive as opposed to preventative approach to emotional-centred school transition support is largely inconsistent with Coleman's (1989) Focal Theory of Change, which emphasises the importance of gradual developmental change when negotiating multiple discontinuities, and can lead to a build-up of heightened anxiety and rush immediately prior to the transfer, as found in *Study 1*. Thus, there is need to design emotional-centred transition interventions which consider school systems and cultures. This is what the present emotional-centred intervention, TaST, discussed in this chapter, aimed to do.

In summary and recognising that successful navigation of transition establishes the foundations for future and lifelong well-being, transition periods, such as primary-secondary school transition, are effective points to introduce and deliver intervention programmes (Kessler et al., 2005). At face value there appears to be clear global literature investigating primary-secondary school transition, especially in the past ten years (White, 2020). However, what is often neglected is that this research is limited in terms of: *context*, especially difficulties translating interventions from one setting to another; *content*, in that few studies have investigated children's emotional well-being (as discussed in *Section 1.2*)*, and few interventions are theoretically informed. All of which are discussed in more detail below**.

5.1.1. Context limitations

Significantly more school-based transition research is conducted in the US and transition intervention evaluations are particularly limited in the UK. Given that children transition schools at a later age in the US, and, as a result of being older, are more likely to find school transition easier (see *Study 2*), existing transition research and interventions have limited implications for the UK. Thus, from here forward this chapter will predominantly focus on primary-secondary school transition intervention research

conducted in the UK. For any studies included that are not UK-based, the country will be mentioned. See *Chapter 3* for further discussion of UK-US transition comparisons.

In the context of UK transition interventions, despite best efforts to do so, many programmes do not translate from one context to another and often require an element of adaption. Adaptation can lead to better intervention implementation and subsequent outcomes; in the context of primary-secondary school transition this would involve recognising school-level competing pressure in the Year 6 transfer year, such as the need to redirect resources to prioritise national assessment targets. However, caution is needed as with the greater the number of adaptations, there is increased risk that key intervention components will be changed, and impact lost.

5.1.2. Content limitations

5.1.2.1. Emotional-centred research

As shown by Jindal-Snape et al.'s (2020) international review and Symonds' (2015) national review, programmes to support children's emotions over primary-secondary school transition are minimal. For example, in Symonds' (2015) review, out of the fifteen programmes shown to offer social support over primary-secondary school transition, none of them offered socio-emotional support. Instead, most research in this area tends to look at dips in educational attainment, and social adjustment, which has created a partial picture of the emotional challenges children face over primary-secondary school transition and specifically the emotional-centred support children may need to manage this period, which this thesis has set out to improve. For example, many intervention programmes focus more on the practicalities of the transition and preparing children for the new ways of learning (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). What is often neglected is the fact that emotional well-being is directly linked with children's academic functioning (Vassilopoulos et al., 2018).

Furthermore, amongst the limited number of emotional-centred transition interventions administered within schools to support primary-secondary school transition, most are associated with challenges or methodological constraints. For example, many evaluations of interventions are small scale (Green, 1997), vague with regards to reporting participant numbers (Coffey, 2013), or employ biased participant selection (Evangelou et al., 2008) which limits conclusions that can be drawn. Longitudinal

research is also limited (Riglin et al., 2013), and instead researchers often employ single snapshot designs where data is collected before or immediately following the transition, which does not reflect the complexity of this period (Ashton, 2008).

In sum, we have a partial picture of the emotional challenges children face over primary-secondary school transition and specifically the emotional-centred support children may need to manage this period. The present thesis has shed light on this research gap. Firstly, *Studies 1, 2* and *3* examined transfer children's, parents' and teachers' experiences of school transition and the challenges they face, in both the UK and US using both focus group and case study methodology. This insight then informed the design and delivery of the present intervention, which is called Talking about School Transition (TaST). See Bagnall (2020) for an overview of how the three preliminary studies, in addition to a thorough literature review mapped onto the design and delivery of the five-week TaST intervention. TaST, discussed below aims to narrow this research gap by providing teacher led emotional-centred support over primary-secondary school transition within the school environment.

5.1.2.2. Theoretically informed research

Using expert consultation and an extensive literature review, Rice et al. (2015) developed the Primary Intervention Strategy Questionnaires to identify approaches commonly used by primary schools to support children leading up to primary-secondary school transition. Approaches were shown to align with three main theoretical underpinnings: systemic approaches (focus on bridging discontinuity across primary and secondary school and widening children's social support networks), cognitive strategies (address children's negative thoughts about transition and address unrealistic concerns) and behavioural approaches (reduce anxiety through familiarisation to the new school environment). In their evaluation, Rice et al. (2015) found only systemic approaches to be positively associated with improvements in children's post-transition school anxieties, once controlling for baseline concerns. Moreover, no approach was shown to be effective in reducing generalised anxiety.

However, findings from Rice et al.'s (2015) research needs to be interpreted with caution, as it is unclear whether participants were rating activities within programmes which contained a combination of systemic, cognitive and behavioural approaches, or participants were rating a programme which aligned with one approach, e.g. a solely

cognitive intervention. The latter would ensure more robust findings as it is plausible that all three approaches have direct and indirect effects, e.g. first-hand exposure into what the secondary school environment is like facilitated through a behavioural approach, may help to settle children's expectations and address unrealistic expectations, which would align with a cognitive approach.

In fact, a common limitation across transition intervention research is that there is often little clarity of the theory underpinning the intervention. This can pertain to the overarching foci of the intervention as discussed above, but also extend to the session content, which can often go beyond and have unclear links with the theoretically informed programme approach. This was shown in Bloyce and Frederickson's (2012) targeted intervention, which, despite having the overarching focus of improving anxiety and school concerns amongst children identified as vulnerable, programme sessions focussed on general organisational, social and academic transition challenges, and little attention was placed on children's emotional well-being. Within their report there was no discussion pertaining to how this session content was informed, and which components of the programme were critical to the outcomes achieved. This lack of clarity is problematic for the field, contributing to indiscriminate and uninformed strategies to improve primary-secondary school transition.

Moreover, for practitioners implementing programmes, this lack of clarity can lead to uncertainty pertaining to what worked to bring about change, and can limit the efficacy and uptake of programmes. Thus, for the present TaST intervention, theory informing the programme and key components, in addition to places where the intervention could be tailored to meet individual class' needs were clearly presented in the TaST lesson plans, and teachers delivering the programme were also met with in order to go through the TaST materials. This approach is in light of research (see *5.1.3.3. Teacher-led interventions and recognition of school-level pressures,* below) which has shown that when teachers feel confident with the theory informing programmes (Humphrey et al., 2013) and reasons why certain elements need to be covered, programme effectiveness is improved (Goncy et al., 2015).

In addition, there are limitations in how intervention programmes are assessed. For example, in her recent evidence review, White (2020) highlighted the lack of rigorous outcome evaluations undertaken in the UK, of intervention programmes that aim to

support children's mental health and well-being over primary-secondary school transition. For example, many evaluations of programmes are to date, small scale, in that samples are limited in number (Coffey, 2013), use biased recruitment methods, comparison groups are non-equivalent (Evangelou et al., 2008), or they pay little attention to school differences, which limits the conclusions that can be drawn about what works. As discussed above, longitudinal research is also limited and reliance on single snap-shot designs is problematic and does not reflect the complexity of this period, especially the temporary honeymoon period children experience during this time (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016). Thus, as will be discussed below, the evaluation of TaST utilises a longitudinal design and a control group. The programme is also theoretically informed, and discussion of the theoretical underpinnings and evidence supporting the design of TaST is clearly presented and in the public domain (Bagnall, 2020).

5.1.3. Intervention design considerations

Designing and implementing school-based interventions can be challenging and complex. Researchers need to consider decisions pertaining to the design of the intervention, such as the intervention approach (top-down or bottom-up design), inclusion criteria (universal or targeted), who delivers the intervention (teacher vs. researcher led) and school-level factors. These intervention design decisions, often heavily influenced by context, shape the intervention's integration and usability within real-world settings, as addressed below.

5.1.3.1. Bottom-up vs. Top-down approaches

Bottom-up and top-down frameworks pertain to the intervention's level of input from stakeholders. The former bottom-up approach favours flexibility and local adaptation through the inclusion of multiple stakeholders (e.g. policymakers, educational professionals, parents) as equal partners (especially if a co-creation design is selected) in the formation and delivery of interventions. In comparison, top-down approaches favour adherence to pre-existing structured and standardised evidence-based templates and detailed manuals. Both approaches have advantages, but can also present challenges, often dependent on context.

Top-down 'manualised' intervention designs often have greater internal validity, fidelity and lead to larger effect sizes. By following the same prescribed and structured

intervention materials, these programmes overcome constraints of becoming diluted and guidance modified or ignored; thus, they can be replicated more consistently across schools. However, the lack of flexibility, in addition to the significant cost and time implications associated with top-down approaches, particularly when led by external programme deliverers, can result in intervention outcomes being short-lived and unsustainable.

In contrast, bottom-up collaborative approaches which follow 'loose enabling frameworks' (Weare, 2010) and recognise that every school is different, with their own challenges are often more sustainable. This is especially important considering in recent years school staff are expected to engage with an increasing number of initiatives, which has led to 'initiative overload' (Ofsted, 2014) and reluctance to invest time and resources in projects that might be short-lived. Thus, when designing intervention programmes, it is paramount that programmes provide implementers with a shared understanding of which evidence-based elements need to be present and are key to intervention success, and which can be modified to take into account schools' limited time and financial resources, high teacher turnover and competing demands (Trotman et al., 2015). To do this increasing partnership and collaboration between researchers and educational professionals is important.

Thus, the design and delivery of TaST followed a bottom-up approach, in that all intervention materials were informed through consultation with educational practitioners in addition to preliminary research, which explored key stakeholders' experiences of primary-secondary school transition, see *Studies 1, 2* and *3*.

5.1.3.2. Targeted vs. Universal designs

Intervention designs can either be targeted (narrowly focussed, aimed at specific individuals within the population), or universal (broad approaches that target the whole population). Amongst the limited studies which have utilised targeted and universal approaches in the context of primary-secondary school transition, findings are mixed (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020), as discussed below.

Over the past ten years there has been an exponential growth in the popularity of universal intervention approaches, which dominate in both primary (61.2%), and secondary schools (64.4%). This is unsurprising as universal programmes are not only in

line with governmental inclusive education notions (Booth & Ainscow, 2011), but also deemed more cost and time effective. For example, universal interventions can reduce symptomology for all children, even children identified as 'at risk' (Barrett & Turner, 2001) and are in line with Merrell and Gueldner's (2010) 'immunisation theory', which is the notion that early universal preventative provision can effectively 'immunise' all children from later difficulties. Both of which are especially important in our present climate where educators must prioritise and effectively implement evidence-based approaches that produce multiple benefits for all children.

Universal interventions delivered to whole cohorts of children are also more accessible, deemed less stigmatising by both parents and children and receive greater support, as it is deemed undesirable for children to miss out. In Barrett and Turner's (2001) universal Friends for Children cognitive-behavioural intervention programme, over 85% of approached parents expressed interest in the programme and gave parental consent, which is significant given that attrition because of parents not giving consent can be up to 1/3 for targeted interventions (Askell-Williams et al., 2013). For example, Humphrey and Ainscow's (2006) targeted Transition Club intervention, which focussed on improving educational, social and personal skills amongst children who were academically underachieving over primary-secondary school transition, were only able to obtain parental consent from 38 out of 60 children identified as 'at risk'. This may have been because targeted children were taken out of class for a significant amount of time, which, for underachieving children who were already academically behind, is undesirable.

Nonetheless, despite the limited sample size, findings from Humphrey and Ainscow's (2006) targeted Transition Club intervention showed a herd effect in that children who participated used the skills they had learnt to help children who had not participated but were struggling to adjust. This suggests that targeted interventions can have wider benefits and may overcome the shortcomings of universal interventions, where there can be difficulty assessing their impact on more vulnerable children when sample sizes are small. Thus, overcoming barriers that prevent access and participation in targeted interventions is crucial.

Bloyce and Frederickson's (2011) targeted Transfer Support Team (TST) intervention, which provided tailored transition support to 457 children identified as 'vulnerable' over primary-secondary school transition, provides further support for the

usefulness of targeted interventions. The evaluation found that pupils receiving the TST intervention showed a greater reduction in transition school concerns following the six-week project than the control group (who were identified at baseline as not vulnerable) exposed to normal secondary school preparations. Moreover, children in the intervention group also showed statistically significant reductions in broader measures of emotional adjustment and well-being assessed using the SDQ scale following the programme. However, as the comparison group were not asked to complete the SDQ subscales and were not followed up into secondary school, it is unclear whether observed improvements were attributable to the intervention or would have happened anyway.

Shepherd and Roker's (2005) targeted pyramid group intervention, had a very clear foci and was designed to specifically develop self-confidence, interpersonal and coping skills amongst 80 Year 6 children identified as vulnerable (based on parent and teacher reports and child self-reports) over primary-secondary school transition. The intervention had a positive impact on a range of factors, including children's appraisals towards secondary school and perceptions of settlement, both pre and post transition. However, these findings should be taken with caution subject to the limited sample size (only nine children participated), lack of control group (meaning that it is not known whether children's anxiety and concerns reduced more or less than they would have without any intervention) and in terms of the scales that were used, which relied on three-point (happy, neutral and sad smiley face) Likert scales. Furthermore, in line with the discussion above pertaining to the potential stigmatisation associated with targeted interventions, there was a mixed response from the children pertaining to their participation in the Pyramid Clubs, in that some children felt stigmatised as a result of taking part, whilst others felt envied. This is a significant concern, and one of the reasons why the present TaST intervention aligns with a universal design.

In sum, and in line with inclusive education policies, evidence suggests that when well-designed and supported, universal school-centred interventions are inclusive and can help more vulnerable children alongside their classmates within the classroom setting. Thus, the TaST intervention was developed to be delivered on a universal, whole-class basis, which avoids the stigmatisation inherent in more targeted approaches. In addition, TaST benefits from all children taking part in universal emotional-centred support intervention, so that less vulnerable children, who may exhibit superior

protective internal (e.g. coping efficacy) and external resources (e.g. social support) (see *Chapter 1*) can support their more vulnerable peers through what they learn.

5.1.3.3. Teacher-led interventions and recognition of school-level pressures

Developing interventions that can be delivered at scale by less expensive and more sustainable local providers, such as teachers, is consistently highlighted as a priority in government reforms (DfHSC & DfE, 2018), in addition to research (Fairburn & Wilson, 2013). Overreliance on external providers as implementers can be a barrier to dissemination of school centred intervention research and impede progress. However, equally, teachers' ability to sustain high-quality implementation, comparable to external deliverers, over time is limited, and researcher-led interventions generally obtain superior adherence, competence, session coverage and content completion fidelity assessments, than teacher led-interventions (Patel et al., 2013). Nonetheless, this is often subject to school-level pressures teachers face, especially pertaining to limited time and resources.

Furthermore, teachers have: greater rapport and influence within their class, more extensive expertise in behaviour management, are better equipped to meet the specific learning needs of their classes (Low et al., 2014), and are also favoured by parents as deliverers (Barrett & Turner, 2001). Teachers can also lead to a change in school culture and practice by making links and translating programme targets outside intervention lessons. Moreover, it is usually teachers delivering school-based interventions when programmes are disseminated, and teacher fidelity assessment scores are often more ecologically valid and representative of long-term intervention success and scalability when interventions are implemented in the real-world (Diedrichs et al., 2015). Thus, given that in the long-term it is most often teachers delivering interventions, improving 'goodness of fit' between the programme and school needs is central for intervention sustainability.

In the context of primary-secondary school transition, academic pressure associated with national assessments and heavy staff workloads, can result in difficulty finding space within the overcrowded curriculum for emotional-centred transition support until the summer term just before children make the transition, which can lead to a build-up of heightened anxiety and rush, as shown in *Study 1*. This reactive as opposed to preventative approach is largely inconsistent with Coleman's (1989) Focal Theory of

Change, which emphasises the importance of gradual developmental change, and the need for more support when rapid change cannot be avoided.

Lack of resources can also be a key constraint, which can add to the marginalisation of pastoral support within schools. For example, Bloyce and Frederickson's (2012) resource-intensive primary-secondary school transition support intervention which focussed on small groups of vulnerable pupils, consisted of a senior educational psychologist, five assistant educational psychologists, a specialist service co-ordinator and six part-time teaching support assistants, which was a significantly high-level of support and buy in (in terms of personal time and resources) from stakeholders. As shown in Bloyce and Frederickson's (2012) evaluation of previous transition interventions, this high level of input from stakeholders is not uncommon, and out of the seven studies reviewed, at least four consisted of programmes that had a duration of 15 sessions or more.

In sum, and informed by the above literature, to enhance the intervention's sustainability and scalability, TaST was designed to be delivered by Year 6 class teachers, over the duration of a school term as part of Year 6 children's Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) curriculum, which builds on the short-comings of previous 'one-off' mental health workshops delivered by external facilitators. TaST is also a standalone legacy project and uses minimal resources, teachers given guided lesson plans, PowerPoint lesson slides and workbooks for their class.

5.2.   TaST Intervention

In sum, interventions imposed on schools with little consultation, as opposed to those that adopt bottom-up or co-creation designs, can impede the intervention's sustainability, which is concerning considering schools' limited time and financial resources. Similarly, programmes that are targeted at particular children as opposed to universal designs can be difficult for school buy-in, as educators must prioritise and effectively implement evidence-based approaches that produce multiple benefits for most, if not all children. Moreover, overreliance on external providers as opposed to teachers as implementers can be an additional barrier and impede progress. Furthermore, emotional-centred support over primary-secondary school transition is minimal in both schools and research. Thus, the present emotional-centred support

intervention, TaST, uses a bottom-up design, is universal and teacher led. TaST also aims to overcome the methodological limitations discussed above and narrow the research gap in emotional-centred support over primary-secondary school transition by aiming to improve children's emotional well-being in preparation for the transition to secondary school.

TaST is a five-week intervention, which was deemed necessary to cover all key elements and try to accommodate the programme within one school term and is in line with previous transition intervention research (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012). Moreover, each of the five intervention lessons (which were delivered on a weekly basis) lasted approximately one hour, which is considered an optimal length for children of this developmental age (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). The lessons have three main foci:

(1) Helping children to position the transition as a progression as opposed to a loss to support children's emotional well-being in the here and now at primary school.

(2) Building children's coping skills (including their coping efficacy) to support children's emotional well-being looking forward to secondary school.

(3) Emphasising the importance of social support, how this may change at secondary school, and how to cope with this to continue accessing social support to nurture children's short- and long-term emotional well-being.

Incorporated in each session are a variety of individual, group and class-based activities which aim to improve children's spoken and written emotional expression in preparation for the move. In order to support children's emotional well-being, as shown through the foci above, TaST focuses on supporting the development of children's internal protective resources, namely their coping efficacy, but also encourages children to draw on the support they can receive from parents, teachers and classmates to scaffold these skills. The content, delivery and evaluation of TaST was informed by a thorough literature review (see *Chapter 1*), in addition to the three preliminary research studies, discussed in *Chapter 2, 3* and *4*. Findings from these studies and how they map onto the design of the TaST intervention are discussed in detail in *Appendix 5.1* and are published in the *Pastoral Care in Education* research journal (see Bagnall, 2020).

Each session has a lesson plan script *(Appendix 5.2)*, accompanying PowerPoint presentation slides *(Appendix 5.3)* and each child works from a transition workbook

(Appendix 5.4). Other components of the sessions, such as questioning and answering whole class activities can be tailored according to the needs and responses from the class. Furthermore, there is an element of flexibility in the final two weeks of the intervention, as in week four and five, Boulton's (2014) cross-aged teaching techniques (CATZ) are used. Cross-aged teaching is a new technique where older students teach and pass on their knowledge to younger students. In order to teach younger children effectively, older children must firstly master their own learning, and then teaching reinforces this knowledge, as children are required to rework and make links with their existing understanding (Boulton, 2014). Thus, in TaST CATZ aimed to consolidate the children's learning from the structured activities and discussion sessions incorporated in the previous three sessions and further develop the children's coping efficacy and improve their emotional well-being. Table 5.1 shows a breakdown of the foci and activities in each intervention lesson.

Table 5.1

The structure of the five-week TaST intervention, including session foci and corresponding activities

Week	Foci	Activities
Week 1	Progression vs. loss	• Continuum activity • Primary school progression worksheet • Life transitions worksheet • Worry box introduction
Week 2	Coping strategies and resilience	• World Café similarities and differences task • Dolphin/shark activity • Challenges and solutions worksheet • School timetable activity
Week 3	Social support	• Co-pilot activities (self and others) • Parent/guardian/older relative puzzle • Accessing support from teacher's discussion
Week 4	CATZ consolidation of learning	• Sharing of homework puzzle activity • CATZ work
Week 5	CATZ presenting learning	• CATZ showcase of top tips • Worry box readdressed

The intervention foci and structure are in line with Resilience Theory, particularly Gilligan's (2000) five background concepts that underpin the concept: a) reducing stockpile of problems, b) pathways and turning points in development, c) having a sense of a secure base, d) self-esteem and e) self-efficacy, which draws on the protective internal and external factors discussed in *Chapter 1*. For example, in line with a) and b) the intervention includes a variety of activities for the children to recognise the different challenges they will face over the transition period and reposition the move as a linear progression, which is in line with findings from *Study 2* and aims to strengthen the children's coping efficacy. In line with c) of Gilligan's (2000) model, the children are also encouraged to draw on the support they receive from parents, teachers and classmates, who have been shown to provide the most salient sources of support over adolescence and primary-secondary school transition and can scaffold their coping efficacy and emotional well-being (see *Study 1*). There is also inclusion of activities that aim to improve the children's coping strategies in preparation for the transfer, by drawing on children's internal resources, incorporated in d) and e) of Gilligan's (2000) model. See Table 5.1 above for a summary.

5.2.1. Rationale

To examine the effectiveness of TaST, the present study used a longitudinal quasi-experimental follow-up design, where Year 6 children (aged 10-11 years) participating in TaST were compared to a control group. Specifically, the outcome variables used to assess the efficacy of TaST include *Emotional Symptoms* and *Peer Problems* (assessed using Goodman's (2001) *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)*), *Transition Worries* (assessed using Smith et al.'s (2006) *The Perceptions of Transition Survey* 'worried about' subscale) and *Coping Efficacy* (assessed using Sandler et al.'s (2000) the *Coping Efficacy Scale*), which were assessed across four time points: Time One (T1) (pre intervention), Time Two (T2) (post intervention), Time Three (T3) and Time Four (T4) (delayed follow up). The first three outcome variables: *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems* and *Transition Worries* are categorised as measures of children's adjustment. More specifically *Emotional Symptoms* and *Transition Worries* are measures of children's emotional adjustment and *Peer Problems* a measure of children's social adjustment. *Coping Efficacy* is an explanatory outcome variable, or change mechanism, which TaST aims to improve in order to support children's adjustment. If the sample size would have

been larger, *Coping Efficacy* would have thus been assessed as a mediator variable. Instead in the present study, regression analyses were conducted to measure pre-transition *Coping Efficacy* as a predictor of post-transition adjustment (see below).

The *SDQ* (Goodman, 2001) is a validated and widely used measure of children's well-being, and in the context of primary-secondary school transition, the *Emotional Symptoms* and *Peer Problems* subscales have been categorised as a broader measure of well-being (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012), psychological adjustment (Rice et al., 2011) and psychological functioning (Riglin et al., 2013).

Children's transition worries were measured using *The Perceptions of Transition Survey* 'worried about' subscale (Smith et al., 2006), which assesses children's worries towards the organisational, academic and social aspects of High school. This US scale was used in place of pre-existing scales used in the UK which have assessed 'transition concerns' or 'transition adjustment', as these scales have important limitations including: lack of sensitivity (e.g. asking children to numerically rate levels of concern, during an already worrying time, they may not have thought about), use open-ended items which impose high literacy demands, have items with face validity specific for a particular study but ungeneralizable beyond this, rely on retrospective reports, or do not account for the longitudinal nature of primary-secondary school transition (Rice et al., 2011).

Finally, as discussed in *Chapter 1*, coping is a regulatory process that serves to prevent, avoid, or control emotional distress. In line with Resilience Theory, also discussed in *Chapter 1*, children's feeling of efficacy in being able to cope, is an internal protective factor believed to predict better responses to stressors and subsequently adjustment, although to date, *Coping Efficacy* specifically has not been looked at within the context of primary-secondary school transition. *Coping Efficacy* is thus also believed to be a powerful intervention lever to target in emotional-centred support interventions, to improve children's emotional well-being during this time. The present TaST intervention aimed to do this and specifically focussed on improving children's perceptions of *Coping Efficacy.* Thus, drawing on the evidence discussed above, in addition to being informed by Resilience Theory, it was hypothesised that:

1. Year 6 children (aged 10-11 years) in the intervention condition, would show a significant reduction in *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems* and *Transition Worries*

scores, and an increase in *Coping Efficacy* scores, in comparison to the control condition, from Time One (T1) to Time Two (T2).

2. This significant difference would be maintained following a delay of up to five months, at Time Three (T3) and Time Four (T4).

Research has shown mixed findings regarding the role of children's gender and birth month in predicting adjustment (van Rens et al., 2018) and emotional well-being (White, 2020) over primary-secondary school transition. Although, as yet, the impact of gender and age on children's coping efficacy has not been examined over primary-secondary school transition. Thus, children's gender and age were also measured across the four time points to assess whether adjustment scores, assessed in terms of: *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems* and *Transition Worries,* and *Coping Efficacy* scores varied depending on these factors.

TaST aimed to improve children's adjustment over primary-secondary school transition, by encouraging children to draw on their coping skills, namely their *Coping Efficacy* and the support they can receive from parents, teachers and classmates to scaffold these skills. Thus, to assess the role of these protective factors in predicting adjustment over primary-secondary school transition, additional hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted, see *5.4.2.4. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis.*

The first hierarchical multiple regression examined *Coping Efficacy.* As discussed in *Chapter 1*, children's feeling of efficacy in being able to cope, which in the present study is assessed in terms of children's *Coping Efficacy* scores, is an internal protective factor believed to predict adjustment. Although to date, *Coping Efficacy* specifically has not been looked at within the context of primary-secondary school transition, other competence beliefs, such as self-esteem have been shown to predict adjustment over primary-secondary school transition (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). Moreover, children who have positive expectations prior to transition (Waters et al., 2014a) and exhibit greater emotional self-efficacy (Nowland & Qualter, 2020) also fare better over primary-secondary school transition. Thus, it is also likely that children with greater *Coping Efficacy* will be able to cope better with primary-secondary school transition, will be less vulnerable in response to transition challenges and as a result show greater adjustment post transition. Thus, it was hypothesised that:

3. Children with higher *Coping Efficacy* scores pre-transition will report fewer *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems,* and *Transition Worries* scores post-transition.

The TaST intervention has been developed to not just focus on supporting the development of a child's internal resources, namely their coping efficacy, but also how they can draw on the support of others to scaffold these skills. Social support, obtained from key stakeholders, specifically parents, teachers and classmates, is shown to be a protective external factor shaping children's emotional well-being and ability to cope over primary-secondary school transition (see *Chapter 1*). Thus, children's perceptions of social support obtained collaboratively and uniquely from parents, teachers and classmates were also measured across the four time points in the present study. These scores were included in the hierarchical multiple regression analyses below, to assess whether pre-transition perceptions of social support, could predict children's adjustment (in terms of fewer *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems* and *Transition Worries* scores) and *Coping Efficacy* scores. N.B., we did not expect TaST to specifically improve children's perceptions of social support, and instead if the sample size was larger, it would have been possible to assess collaborative and unique social support as a moderator of the intervention effects. For example, the intervention may be more beneficial for children with low levels of social support. Thus, it was hypothesised that:

4. Children with higher *Parent Support* (Hypothesis 4.1)*, Teacher Support* (Hypothesis 4.2) and *Classmate Support* (Hypothesis 4.3) will report fewer *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems,* and *Transition Worries* scores and greater *Coping Efficacy* scores post-transition.

5.3.   Method

5.3.1. Design

The longitudinal research project had a quasi-experimental, pre, post and delayed post (at two time points) follow up online survey design, investigating the efficacy of TaST in improving children's *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy* and *Transition Worries* scores. Children's perceptions of social support and the impact of birth month were also assessed. All variables were assessed at four time points: T1 May 2019

(pre intervention), T2 in July 2019 (post intervention), T3 in September 2019 and T4 in December 2019 (delayed follow up).

The same online survey (*Appendix 5.5*) was administered at each time point on Qualtrics, all items replicated. Although the demographic section changed slightly across time points, for example at T2 the questionnaire contained an item asking the children to specify which secondary school they will be attending. Children in the intervention condition at T2 were also asked to complete four process evaluation open questions (see *5.4.2. Process Evaluation*) to evaluate the efficacy of the intervention, and class teachers delivering TaST also completed a process evaluation feedback form. The outcome evaluation has a 'mixed' design with a related factor - Time (T1, T2, T3 and T4) and unrelated factor - Treatment (intervention vs. control group).

5.3.2. Participants

See Table 5.2 for a breakdown of participant numbers by gender and group (intervention vs. control) over time.

Table 5.2

Participant numbers by gender and group (intervention vs. control) over time

Time and Group	Female (N)	Male (N)	Prefer not to say (N)	Total (N)
Time One (T1, pre intervention)				
Intervention	76	63	4	143
Control	72	83	6	161
Total	148	146	10	304
Time Two (T2, post intervention)				
Intervention	66	61	0	127
Control	49	52	2	103
Total	115	113	2	230
Time Three (T3, immediate transition)				
Intervention	49	38	0	87
Control	274	241	19	534
Total	323	279	19	621
Time Four (T4, delayed transition)				
Intervention	47	39	0	86
Control	298	277	23	598
Total	345	316	23	684

At T1 and T2 Year 6 children, aged 10 and 11, from seven UK primary schools in the West Midlands participated in the research project (four schools participated in TaST and three were control schools). At T3 and T4, Year 7 children, aged 11 and 12, from five different UK secondary schools in the West Midlands participated in the research project. The seven primary schools were feeder schools to the five secondary schools, and, where possible, participants were followed as they transitioned to secondary school. However, we were only able to follow up on 15 children (eight males and seven females) who participated in the control group pre-transition from T1-T4 and 20 children (ten males and ten females) from T1-T3. The additional 519 children at T3 and 578 children at T4 represent children who took part at T3 and T4 only (as all Year 7 children from the five secondary school regardless if they took part in the study at T1 and T2 completed a survey at T3 and T4).

To recruit a representative sample, local primary and secondary schools' demographic and performance Ofsted Reports and NCOP (National Collaborative Outreach Programme) statistics were reviewed and from this top, medium and low scoring primary and secondary schools were selected which were situated in a range of areas across the West Midlands. Schools were assigned a condition based on these demographic factors, so that top, medium and low scoring primary and secondary schools were represented in both the control and intervention condition. Thus, the sample is representative of varying demographic characteristics and socio-economic status.

5.3.3. Materials

In the first section of the questionnaire (see *Appendix 5.5.*) demographic variables e.g. the child's: gender, birth month, primary school and chosen secondary school were obtained. Given the new requirements under GDPR concerning personally identifiable data, the children were not asked to put their names on the questionnaire to ensure that the data were anonymous. However, to allow participants' responses to be matched across time, children generated a secret and personal code, using Ripper et al.'s (2017) *Respondent Generated Personal Code* items, which have been shown to generate a percentage match of 99.7%. To do this, the participants responded to eight questions.

The main body of the questionnaire consisted of 59 multiple-choice items from five pre-existing scales (discussed below, also see *Appendix 5.6* for further description of

scale amendments), where internal reliability, construct, concurrent and face validity have already been established, which was replicated at all four time points.

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) **(Goodman, 2001)**

This *SDQ* is a widely used brief behavioural and emotional screening questionnaire. In the present study, the five item *Emotional Symptoms* and five item *Peer Problems* SDQ subscales were used, as was the three-point rating system (0: not true, 1: somewhat true, 2: certainly true) and mean scores were calculated (larger score equating to greater problems).

Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS) **(Malecki et al., 1999)**

The *CASSS* is a forty item self-report scale that assesses children's (Level 1 scale) and adolescents' (Level 2 scale) perceptions of social support obtained from parents, teachers, classmates and friends. In the present study, the Level 1 *CASSS* scale was used. Based on feedback received from teachers at the participating primary and secondary schools, the wording of some items was edited. The friendship sub-scale was omitted, subject to the aim of the present study being to assess the three most dominant and relevant support figures whom children have most access and exposure to over primary-secondary school transition. Moreover, an item from each remaining sub-scale was deleted, as these items were shown to overlap with other items on the scale; this also helped to minimise the number of questions in the survey. In total children answered 27 items (nine from each scale). The amended *CASSS* scale was scored using a three-point rating scale (2: yes, 1: sometimes, 0: not true) and mean scores were calculated (a high score indicating higher perceptions of social support) as, based on feedback from teachers, this scoring was perceived as less confusing, complicated and time-consuming for the children. See *Appendix 5.6* for further description of the amendments to this scale discussed above.

Coping Efficacy Scale (Sandler et al., 2000)

The *Coping Efficacy Scale* (2000) assesses children's satisfaction in their handling of problems over the last month and future problems. The scale contains seven items rated on a four-point Likert scale (1: Not at all satisfied, 2: A little satisfied, 3: Pretty well satisfied, 4: Very satisfied), which was utilised in the present study, and mean scores were calculated (a high score indicating a greater level of coping).

The Perceptions of Transition Survey (Smith et al., 2006)

The *Perceptions of Transition Survey (2006)* measures children's perceptions of the organisational, academic and social aspects of High school. The scale contains 15 items and is rated on a four-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: agree, 4: strongly agree). In the present study based on feedback received from teachers at the participating primary and secondary schools regarding the limited time available for the children to complete the survey, the 'worried about' sub-scale was used. The wording of some items were also edited so they were more open and represented general worries as opposed to specific ones, e.g. academic concerns. One item was also omitted, to avoid cross-over with other items, and mean scores were calculated (a high score indicating more transition worries). See *Appendix 5.6* for further description of the amendments to this scale discussed above.

Children were also asked to indicate their gender on a scale (Male/Female/Prefer not to say), birth month and year.

5.3.4. Procedure

Once ethical approval (*Appendix 5.7*) and Headteacher consent had been granted, a convenient time was arranged to meet with each participating primary school intervention teacher to share the finalised materials and answer any questions they may have. Following this, a week prior to data collection all Year 6 parents in participating control and experimental schools were sent a letter with an attached opt-out parental consent form for the data collection component of the research project *only* as *all* children in the intervention schools would participate in TaST, which had been approved by school gatekeepers. This decision was made as the hourly TaST lessons were incorporated into the intervention schools' PSHE curriculum, which parents are not normally given the choice to opt their child out. We did not wish the schools to take a different approach, as TaST aligns closely with inclusive education policies and it was deemed stigmatising and unethical to leave children out. Thus, parents concerned about their child participating in the intervention were directed to contact the school and all parents were given access to an Opt-in vs. Opt-out information sheet.

In all experimental and control schools, a convenient time was then arranged to administer the online questionnaires. Prior to data collection all children were read the same information sheet and gave assent. Children who did not wish to participate or their parents had not permitted participation in data collection were given an alternative activity.

To prevent demand characteristics or socially desirable answers, the questionnaire's title and sub-headings were deliberately vague and teachers were asked to not discuss the research aims with their class. Following data collection, the children were debriefed, offered the opportunity to ask questions and pointed to sources of support. The same procedure was replicated at T2, T3 and T4. Following data collection at T4 the research project aims were also explained.

5.4.   Results

5.4.1. Data preparation

Missing Data

Before commencing any analyses, the data file was screened for errors and missing data. There were 93 missing values (see *Appendix 5.8*), which were missing completely at random (MCAR) in line with Parent's (2013) assumption that data is treated as MCAR unless there is a clear bias in missingness, which was not the case within the present study. For missing data, participant-level mean substitution was used. Tolerance levels were determined based on author recommendations for the given scale, and when not available a tolerance level of 20% was set (Parent, 2013). If this was exceeded, the Exclude cases pairwise function was utilised. See further description in *Appendix 5.8.*

Reverse coding

In the present study, most questionnaire items were worded so high values of the specific constructs were reflected by high scores on the item. However, some items were coded so that high values of the same construct were reflected by low scores to encourage participants to pay attention to questions they were answering. Therefore, to determine overall scores for the scales some items needed transforming so that they all

oriented in the same direction. Thus, for the scale *Peer Problems*, items seven and eight, were recoded.

Statistical Power

All tests were adequately powered in terms of the total sample size using G*Power3.1 (see *Appendix 5.9)*. However as there was an unequal number of children within the intervention group and control group at T3 and T4, the *Post-transition change score* unrelated t-test analyses, whilst meeting the overall powered sample size of $N = 72$, did not meet the powered equal sized groups of $N = 36$ for the control group. For example, for this test the control group had $N = 27$ for *Transition Worries, N = 30* for *Coping Efficacy* and $N = 32$ for *Emotional Symptoms* and *Peer Problems.* Nonetheless, there was a significant difference in *Transition Worries* shown for this test, indicating that type two error was not violated; however, findings should nonetheless be interpreted with caution for this test.

Construct reliability

Using Cronbach's alpha, each scale's internal reliability at each time point was measured to check that all items within the scales measured the same latent variable. All items, apart from T1 *Emotional Symptoms* and T1, T2, T3 and T4 *Peer Problems*, reached, and were in fact highly above the desired Cronbach's alpha of .7, demonstrating high internal reliability. See Table 5.3 below for a breakdown of the Cronbach's alphas at each time point.

While a coefficient greater than .70 is usually recommended for a measure, most studies evaluating the *SDQ* have considered that coefficients of ≥. 60 are acceptable (D'Souza et al., 2017). Lower Cronbach's alpha coefficients are frequently reported for *Peer Problems SDQ* subscales (α range = 0.30–0.59) (D'Souza et al., 2017), and, as a result, coefficients of at least ≥ .50 are considered a moderate coefficient for this sub-scale (Maurice-Stam et al., 2018). However, Cronbach's alpha can also be affected by scale length, and subject to the *SDQ* subscales only consisting of five items, it is possible that low alpha values are due to the small number of items for each subscale. Nonetheless, when arriving at conclusions for these scales, caution is needed.

Table 5.3

Cronbach's alphas for each outcome variable at each time point

Research Phase	Scale	Initial Cronbach's
Time 1 (T1)	Emotional Symptoms	.65
	Peer Problems	.56
	Parent Support	.81
	Teacher Support	.84
	Classmate Support	.87
	Coping Efficacy	.82
	Transition Worries	.90
Time 2 (T2)	Emotional Symptoms	.73
	Peer Problems	.61
	Parent Support	.83
	Teacher Support	.96
	Classmate Support	.91
	Coping Efficacy	.90
	Transition Worries	.92
Time 3 (T3)	Emotional Symptoms	.71
	Peer Problems	.51
	Parent Support	.83
	Teacher Support	.85
	Classmate Support	.88
	Coping Efficacy	.88
	Transition Worries	.92
Time 4 (T4)	Emotional Symptoms	.71
	Peer Problems	.50
	Parent Support	.89
	Teacher Support	.90
	Classmate Support	.92
	Coping Efficacy	.90
	Transition Worries	.93

Assumptions

All correlation and hierarchical multiple regression test assumptions were met using both graphical and statistical tests. For parametric tests, a full outline of normality, homogeneity of variance and outlier assumption testing is presented in *Appendix 5.10.* However, to summarise, all variables (apart from *Peer Problems* scores) have between -2 and +2 kurtosis scores which is considered acceptable normal univariate distribution (George & Mallery, 2010). Mauchly's test of sphericity showed that the assumption of sphericity was not met for *Peer Problems* and *Coping Efficacy* and to reduce increase in Type 1 error, Greenhouse-Geisser corrections were applied to the degrees of freedom *(df)*, to calculate the valid critical *F*-values. The only significant outliers identified

on box plots were extreme low scores for *Coping Efficacy* and high scores for *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems* and *Transition Worries,* indicating poorer adjustment and greater vulnerability over the transition period. Subsequently, outliers were not removed as this has the unwanted effect in the present study of excluding children who are more vulnerable over primary-secondary school transition and find this period more difficult.

5.4.2. TaST outcome evaluation.

The TaST outcome evaluation analysis is presented below. Firstly, exploratory analyses were conducted (see *5.4.2.1*). This included: 1. assessing intercorrelations and cross-sectional correlations amongst the four outcome variables and three social support variables across time to assess the relationship between these variables and their stability, 2. assessing gender and age differences in the outcome variables, 3. preliminary t-test analyses to assess differences between the intervention and control conditions at baseline and 4. assessing longitudinal change from T1 to T4 amongst the whole sample (intervention and control schools) for the four outcome variables to see overarching patterns of change. Following this, immediate (see *5.4.2.2*) and post-transition (see *5.4.2.3*) change scores were calculated to assess the short- and long-term efficacy of TaST using a series of t-tests. Finally, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted (see *5.4.2.4*) to assess whether pre-transition *Coping Efficacy* and *Social Support* obtained from parents, teachers and classmates could predict post-transition adjustment (see section *5.2.1* for the rationale of these analyses).

5.4.2.1 Exploratory analysis

Correlations. Intercorrelations for the four outcome variables (*Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy* and *Transition Worries*) and three social support variables (*Parent, Teacher* and *Classmate Support*) for both intervention and control schools together at each of the four time points are shown below in Table 5.4 and 5.5. The three support variables are included in this preliminary analysis as these variables will be assessed as predictors in later regression analyses. T1 is shown below the diagonal and T2 above on Table 5.4, and T3 below the diagonal line and T4 above on Table 5.5.

Intercorrelations were investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. As shown above, preliminary tests were performed to ensure no violation of

the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. At each time point, all variables are shown to have a small to medium correlation in line with Cohen's (1988, p.79) guidelines, apart from T2 *Teacher Support* and *Parent Support* which had a strong positive correlation, *r* = .72, n =231, *p* < .001, and *Emotional Problems* and *Transition Worries* at all four time points which have a slightly stronger positive correlation, at T1: *r* = .57, n =309, *p* <.001, at T2: *r* = .66, n =230, *p* <.001, at T3: *r* = .56, n =583, *p* <.001 and at T4: *r* = .54, n =646, *p* <.001 . All variables, apart from *Teacher Support* with the two *SDQ* variables *Emotional Problems*: *r* = -.08, n = 309, *p* = .19 and *Peer Problems: r* = -.09, n = 309, *p* = .11 at T1 were statistically significant.

Table 5.4

Time 1 and Time 2 intercorrelations between: Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy, Transition Worries, Parent Support, Teacher Support and *Classmate Support*

	Emotional Symptoms	Peer Problems	Coping Efficacy	Transition Worries	Parental Support	Teacher Support	Classmate Support
Emotional Symptoms	--	.46**	-.47**	.66**	-.39**	-.27**	-.35**
Peer Problems	.40**	--	-.35**	.34**	-.28**	-.21**	-.38**
Coping Efficacy	-.48**	-.24**	--	-.48**	.42**	.23**	.42**
Transition Worries	.57**	.30**	-.49**	--	-.23**	-.15**	-.37**
Parent Support	-.18**	-.19**	.34**	-.19**	--	.72**	.36**
Teacher Support	-.08	-.09	.29**	-.13**	.39**	--	.31**
Classmate Support	-.33**	-.35**	.44**	-.29**	.34**	.28**	--

Note. T1 below the diagonal and T2 above. ** *p* < .05. * *p* < .01.

Table 5.5

Time 3 and Time 4 intercorrelations between: Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy, Transition Worries, Parent Support, Teacher Support and *Classmate Support*

	Emotional Symptoms	Peer Problems	Coping Efficacy	Transition Worries	Parent Support	Teacher Support	Classmate Support
Emotional Symptoms	--	.38**	-.45**	. 54**	-.12**	-.22**	-.28**
Peer Problems	.37**	--	-.33**	. 38**	-.22**	-.20**	-.46**
Coping Efficacy	-.35**	-.31**	--	-.41**	.35**	29**	.43**
Transition Worries	.56**	.34**	-.38**	--	-.17**	-.24**	-.39**
Parent Support	-.10*	-.21**	. 34**	-.16**	--	.40**	. 32**
Teacher Support	-.21**	-.19**	.40**	-.18**	.36**	--	. 31**
Classmate Support	-.29**	-.46**	. 40**	-.31**	.43**	.34**	--

Note. T3 below the diagonal and T4 above. $** p < .05$. $** p < .01$.

Cross-sectional Pearson correlations were also conducted for T1 and T2, T2 and T3, and T3 and T4, as shown in Table 5.6, 5.7 and 5.8. Cross-sectional correlations were investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. As shown above, preliminary tests were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. At each time point, all variables are shown to have a small to medium correlation in line with Cohen's (1988, p.79) guidelines. As anticipated, stronger and significant cross-sectional associations are generally found for the same variable across time, such as T2 and T3 *Classmate Support*: $r = .54$, n = 93, $p < .001$ and T1 and T2 *Emotional Symptoms*: $r = .65$, n =230, $p <.001$, demonstrating stability over time. When examining cross-sectional associations across time, greater stability across all variables are shown across T1 and T2, in comparison to T2 and T3, and T3 and T4. Greater and significant associations between variables are also shown at T1 and T2, such as T1 and T2 *Transition Worries* $r = .66$, n =231, $p < .001$. It is likely that more variables are shown to be significantly highly correlated at T1 and T2, in comparison to T2 and T3, and T3 and T4, as there is a smaller gap between these two earlier time points.

Table 5.6

Time 1 and Time 2 cross-sectional Pearson Correlations for: Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy, Transition Worries, Parent Support, Teacher Support and Classmate Support

	T2 Emotional Symptoms	T2 Peer Problems	T2 Coping Efficacy	T2 Transition Worries	T2 Parent Support	T2 Teacher Support	T2 Classmate Support
T1 Emotional Symptoms	.65**	.34**	-.43**	.51**	-.32**	-.16*	-.27**
T1 Peer Problems	.30**	.44**	-.17*	.24**	-.23**	-.21**	-.14*
T1 Coping Efficacy	-.43**	-.17*	.53**	-.36**	.32**	.17**	.31*
T1 Transition Worries	.51**	.24**	-.40**	.66**	-.28**	-.06	-.23**
T1 Parent Support	-.25**	-.32**	.32**	- .28**	.14*	.12	.27**
T1 Teacher Support	-.12	-.12	.17**	-.06	.48**	.35**	.29**
T1 Classmate Support	-.35**	-.38**	.31**	-.23*	.33*	.31**	.63**

* p < .05.   ** p < .01.

Table 5.7

Time 2 and Time 3 cross-sectional Pearson Correlations for: Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy, Transition Worries, Parent Support, Teacher Support and Classmate Support

	T3 Emotional Symptoms	T3 Peer Problems	T3 Coping Efficacy	T3 Transition Worries	T3 Parent Support	T3 Teacher Support	T3 Classmate Support
T2 Emotional Symptoms	.56**	.29**	-.40**	.49**	-.35**	-.20*	-.09
T2 Peer Problems	.20	.56**	-.17	.21*	-.23*	-.18	-.39**
T2 Coping Efficacy	-.20	-.21*	.52**	-.20	.13	.05	.34**
T2 Transition Worries	.46**	.24*	-.30**	.60**	-.14	-.12	-.11
T2 Parent Support	-.19	-.23*	.22*	- .11	.25*	.12	.29**
T2 Teacher Support	-.35**	-.18	.17	-.19	.36**	.23*	.32**
T2 Classmate Support	-.34**	-.44**	.20	-.25*	.21*	.21*	.54**

* p < .05.   ** p < .01.

Table 5.8

Time 3 and Time 4 cross-sectional Pearson Correlations for: Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy, Transition Worries, Parent Support, Teacher Support and *Classmate Support*

	T4 Emotional Symptoms	T4 Peer Problems	T4 Coping Efficacy	T4 Transition Worries	T4 Parent Support	T4 Teacher Support	T4 Classmate Support
T3 Emotional Symptoms	. 34*	. 10*	-.09	. 09*	-.05	-.04	-.08
T3 Peer Problems	.06	.08	-.03	.07	-.06	-.03	-.02
T3 Coping Efficacy	-.07	-.1*	.11*	-.07	.04	.06	.07
T3 Transition Worries	.15**	.08	-.09	.15 **	-.03	-.11*	-.05
T3 Parent Support	-.02	.01	.07	- .04	.23**	.14**	.07
T3 Teacher Support	-.09*	-.05	.10*	-.10*	.07	.16**	.10*
T3 Classmate Support	.05	-.02	.01	-.02	.02	.03	.03

* p < .05.   ** p < .01.

Gender differences. To assess whether there were significant gender differences in outcome variables *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy* and *Transition Worries* across the four time points, four independent samples t-tests were conducted. The three support variables are not included in these analyses as these variables are not treated as outcome variables. To do this gender differences were analysed separately at each time point for each outcome. To reduce type 1 error inflation indicative of conducting four separate t-tests, the Bonferroni correction was applied to the alpha level to set a more stringent level of statistical significance. To achieve this, the alpha level of .05 was divided by the number of comparisons conducted (in the present analyses this is 4 comparisons) and this new alpha level was used (in the present analyses .0125) and is reported in the findings below. Children in both the intervention and control group are included in the same test, as sample size drops when all time points are included in analyses as not all children participated across time. Descriptive and inferential statistics are presented in Table 5.9.

Table 5.9

Gender differences in outcome variable scores across T1, T2, T3 and T4

Outcome variable	*N*	Mean (SD)	*t* (df)
T1 Emotional Symptoms			2.16 (303)
Males	154	0.47 (0.40)	
Females	151	0.58(0.42)	
T1 Peer Problems			0.38 (303)
Males	154	0.44 (0.39)	
Females	151	0.45 (0.38)	
T1 Coping Efficacy			1.44 (302)
Males	154	3.04 (0.56)	
Females	150	2.94 (0.56)	
T1 Transition Worries			3.51 (303)**
Males	154	2.10 (0.63)	
Females	151	2.34 (0.58)	
T2 Emotional Symptoms			0.86 (226)
Males	113	0.45 (0.47)	
Females	115	0.50 (0.43)	
T2 Peer Problems			0.03 (226)
Males	113	0.39 (0.39)	
Females	115	0.39 (0.38)	
T2 Coping Efficacy			0.50 (226)
Males	114	3.03 (0.67)	
Females	114	2.98 (0.64)	
T2 Transition Worries			1.53 (227)
Males	114	1.96 (0.65)	
Females	115	2.10 (0.69)	
T3 Emotional Symptoms			1.47 (600)
Males	279	0.49 (0.44)	
Females	323	0.54 (0.44)	
T3 Peer Problems			0.24 (600)
Males	279	0.35 (0.31)	
Females	323	0.34 (0.33)	
T3 Coping Efficacy			0.29 (575)
Males	265	3.08 (0.60)	
Females	312	3.06 (0.60)	
T3 Transition Worries			0.67 (565)
Males	262	1.94 (0.64)	
Females	305	1.97 (0.65)	
T4 Emotional Symptoms			4.14 (659)**
Males	315	0.46 (0.43)	
Females	346	0.60 (0.47)	
T4 Peer Problems			1.91 (659)
Males	316	0.39 (0.35)	
Females	345	0.33 (0.34)	
T4 Coping Efficacy			1.44 (632)
Males	297	3.01 (0.65)	
Females	337	2.94 (0.64)	
T4 Transition Worries			3.51 (623)**
Males	291	1.73 (0.63)	
Females	334	1.91 (0.67)	

*$p \leq .05$.   **$p \leq .01$.

At T1, there were statistically significant gender differences in *Transition Worries* scores: t (303) = 3.51, $p < .001$, $d = 0.24$, 95% CI [-.38, -.11] girls reporting greater mean *Transition Worries* scores ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 0.63$) than boys ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 0.58$). At T1, *Emotional Symptoms* scores, were reaching statistical significance: t (303) = 2.16, $p = .03$, $d = 0.11$, 95% CI [-.20, -.01], although not significant in line with the Bonferroni adjustment.

At T4, statistically significant gender differences were found for *Emotional Symptoms* scores: t (659) = 4.14, $p < .001$, $d = 0.14$, 95% CI [-.21, -.08] and *Transition Worries* scores: t (623) = 3.51, $p < .001$, $d = 0.18$, 95% CI [-.29, -.08], girls again reporting greater mean *Emotional Symptoms* scores ($M = 0.60$, $SD = 0.47$) than boys ($M = 0.46$, $SD = 0.43$) and *Transition Worries* scores ($M = 1.91$, $SD = 0.67$) than boys ($M = 1.73$, $SD = 0.63$). This shows that prior to the transition to secondary school in May and once settled in secondary school in December, girls may be more vulnerable than boys in terms of their emotional adjustment.

There were no significant gender differences in *Emotional Symptoms* and *Transition Worries* at T2 and T3, which suggests that time is needed to obtain a full representation of changes in these outcome variables over the transition period. There were also no significant gender differences for *Peer Problems* and *Coping Efficacy* across all four time points.

Age differences. To assess whether there were significant age differences in outcome variables *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy* and *Transition Worries* across the four time points, four separate one-way between-groups Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were conducted. To do this age differences were analysed separately at each time point including children in both the intervention and control group.

Four separate ANOVAs were conducted in place of a MANOVA as the four outcome variables are not strongly related, see intercorrelations and cross-sectional correlations above which demonstrates mostly small intercorrelations <. 29 in line with Cohen's (1988, p.79) guidelines. Moreover, there is not sufficient justification to conduct a MANOVA as all variables assess different constructs, that are not closely related conceptually (Leech et al., 2011). Nonetheless, MANOVA adjusts for increased risk of a Type 1 error as only one test is conducted. Thus, to reduce type 1 error inflation indicative of conducting four separate ANOVA's for each outcome variable (*Emotional Symptoms,*

Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy and *Transition Worries)*, the Bonferroni correction was applied to the alpha level to set a more stringent level of statistical significance (in the present analysis 0.125).

To assess the impact of age, the sample was split into four categorical age groups dependent on the child's birth month, children born in the Autumn months: September, October and November were coded as '1', children born in the Winter months: December, January and February coded as '2', children born in the Spring months: March, April and May coded as '3' and children born in the Summer months: June, July and August coded as '4'. Descriptive and inferential statistics are presented in Table 5.10.

Table 5.10

Age differences in outcome variable scores across T1, T2, T3 and T4

Outcome variable	N	Mean (SD)	*F* (df)
T1 Emotional Symptoms			1.17 (305)
Autumn	66	0.54 (0.45)	
Winter	86	0.47 (0.36)	
Spring	77	0.59 (0.45)	
Summer	80	0.54 (0.43)	
T1 Peer Problems			0.53 (305)
Autumn	66	0.44 (0.38)	
Winter	86	0.41 (0.34)	
Spring	77	0.44 (0.37)	
Summer	80	0.49 (0.45)	
T1 Coping Efficacy			2.69 (304)
Autumn	66	3.07 (0.57)	
Winter	86	3.04 (0.55)	
Spring	77	2.83 (0.59)	
Summer	79	2.99 (0.52)	
T1 Transition Worries			0.20 (305)
Autumn	66	2.20 (0.62)	
Winter	86	2.19 (0.59)	
Spring	77	2.23 (0.56)	
Summer	80	2.26 (0.69)	
T2 Emotional Symptoms			0.11 (226)
Autumn	50	0.51 (0.49)	
Winter	67	0.47 (0.45)	
Spring	57	0.47 (0.35)	
Summer	56	0.47 (0.51)	
T2 Peer Problems			0.61 (226)
Autumn	50	0.44 (0.43)	
Winter	67	0.37 (0.34)	
Spring	57	0.41 (0.38)	
Summer	56	0.35 (0.41)	

Outcome variable	N	Mean (SD)	F(df)
T2 Coping Efficacy			0.76 (226)
Autumn	50	3.11 (0.62)	
Winter	67	3.02 (0.63)	
Spring	56	2.94 (0.69)	
Summer	57	2.95 (0.67)	
T2 Transition Worries			0.17 (227)
Autumn	50	2.05 (0.70)	
Winter	67	1.99 (0.62)	
Spring	57	2.07 (0.63)	
Summer	57	2.04 (0.76)	
T3 Emotional Symptoms			1.23 (617)
Autumn	174	0.55 (0.47)	
Winter	156	0.51 (0.43)	
Spring	154	0.51 (0.41)	
Summer	137	0.46 (0.43)	
T3 Peer Problems			1.52 (617)
Autumn	174	0.38 (0.32)	
Winter	156	0.36 (0.32)	
Spring	154	0.32 (0.33)	
Summer	137	0.32 (0.32)	
T3 Coping Efficacy			3.18 (592)
Autumn	166	2.98 (0.59)	
Winter	150	3.18 (0.58)	
Spring	149	3.03 (0.63)	
Summer	131	3.08 (0.56)	
T3 Transition Worries			0.68 (580)
Autumn	160	2.01 (0.63)	
Winter	147	1.98 (0.70)	
Spring	148	1.91 (0.61)	
Summer	129	1.93 (0.65)	
T4 Emotional Symptoms			0.78 (681)
Autumn	188	0.55 (0.47)	
Winter	165	0.51 (0.45)	
Spring	166	0.50 (0.43)	
Summer	166	0.56 (0.45)	
Peer Problems			1.13 (681)
Autumn	189	0.36 (0.34)	
Winter	165	0.34 (0.35)	
Spring	165	0.33 (0.31)	
Summer	166	0.39 (0.37)	
Coping Efficacy			0.29 (654)
Autumn	182	2.99 (0.64)	
Winter	158	2.94 (0.62)	
Spring	160	2.99 (0.67)	
Summer	158	2.93 (0.68)	
Transition Worries			0.11 (644)
Autumn	178	1.84 (0.66)	
Winter	156	1.83 (0.65)	
Spring	160	1.80 (0.62)	
Summer	154	1.82 (0.70)	

* $p \leq .05$.   ** $p \leq .01$.

There were no significant age differences at T1, T2, T3 and T4 for *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy* and *Transition Worries* based on the Bonferroni correction of $p > .013$. At T1 and T3 age differences for *Coping Efficacy* were approaching statistical significance in that they were less than .05 (at T1: $F(3, 304) = 2.69$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2p = .03$ and T3: $F(3, 592) = 3.18$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2p = .02$.

Baseline comparisons. To check differences between the intervention and control condition at baseline (T1), preliminary analyses were conducted using independent samples t-tests. As both intervention and control groups were matched in terms of the location of the schools, pupil demographics and socioeconomic status, we expected no significant difference between the intervention and control group in terms of all four outcome variables (*Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy* and *Transition Worries)* and the three social support variables (*Parent Support, Teacher Support* and *Classmate Support)*. The three support variables are included in this preliminary analysis as these variables will be assessed as predictors in later regression analyses. The means and standard deviations for each variable are presented in Table 5.11 below.

There were no significant differences in T1 means for self-report scores for *Emotional Symptoms*, *Peer Problems, Parental Support*, *Teacher Support* and *Classmate Support*.

There was a significant difference in *Coping Efficacy*: $t(306) = -2.14$, $p = .03$, $d = 0.14$, 95% CI [-.26, -.01] and *Transition Worries* scores, $t(307) = 2.80$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.19$, 95% CI [.06, .33] between the intervention and control conditions at baseline. Children in the intervention condition reported lower *Coping Efficacy* ($M = 2.91$, $SD = .61$) in comparison to children in the control condition ($M = 3.05$, $SD = .52$) and greater *Transition Worries* ($M = 2.32$, $SD = .66$) in comparison to children in the control condition ($M = 2.13$, $SD = .56$).

The differing starting points between the two conditions, shaped the approach taken for the *TaST Outcome Evaluation* analyses discussed below.

Table 5.11

Mean and Standard Deviation scores for T1 Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy, Transition Worries, Parent Support, Teacher Support and Classmate Support amongst control and intervention children

Outcome variable	*N*	Mean	*SD*
Emotional Symptoms			
Intervention	146	.57	.44
Control	163	.50	.41
Peer Problems			
Intervention	146	.46	.43
Control	163	.43	.34
Coping Efficacy			
Intervention	146	2.91	.61
Control	162	3.05	.52
Transition Worries			
Intervention	146	2.32	.66
Control	163	2.13	.56
Parent Support			
Intervention	144	1.57	.35
Control	161	1.63	.35
Teacher Support			
Intervention	146	1.71	.30
Control	163	1.70	.37
Classmate Support			
Intervention	146	1.47	.41
Control	163	1.44	.44

Longitudinal change. To investigate longitudinal change from T1 to T4 amongst the whole sample (intervention and control schools) for the four outcome variables: *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy* and *Transition Worries*, four separate repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted. Four separate ANOVAs were conducted in place of a MANOVA, in line with the justification discussed above in *Age differences.* To control for type 1 error inflation the Bonferroni correction was applied to the alpha level, to set a more stringent level of statistical significance (.0125) and is reported in the findings below. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 5.12. As shown below, the sample size is significantly lower when assessing longitudinal change, as only children who participated at all four data collection time points are included in the analysis.

Table 5.12

Mean and Standard Deviation scores for outcome variables: Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy and *Transition Worries at T1, T2, T3 and T4*

Outcome variable	*N*	Mean	*SD*
Emotional Symptoms			
T1	78	0.49	0.41
T2	78	0.45	0.42
T3	78	0.35	0.37
T4	78	0.35	0.37
Peer Problems			
T1	77	0.39	0.38
T2	77	0.34	0.36
T3	77	0.25	0.26
T4	77	0.27	0.29
Coping Efficacy			
T1	70	3.06	0.58
T2	70	3.16	0.57
T3	70	3.24	0.53
T4	70	3.08	0.68
Transition Worries			
T1	69	2.21	0.64
T2	69	1.95	0.73
T3	69	1.69	0.57
T4	69	1.61	0.6

There was a significant main effect of time on participants' scores for *Emotional Symptoms*: $F(3, 231) = 6.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 p = .08$, *Peer Problems*: $F(2.59, 196.75) = 5.5$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 p = .07$ and *Transition Worries*: $F(3, 204) = 28.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 p = .29$. See Figures 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3.

However, there was not a significant main effect of time for *Coping Efficacy:* $F(2.34, 161.48) = 2.19$, $p = .11$, $\eta^2 p = .03$.

Figure 5.1

Longitudinal change in Emotional Symptoms scores from T1 to T4 for intervention and control schools together

Longitudinal change in *Emotional Symptoms* scores from T1 to T4
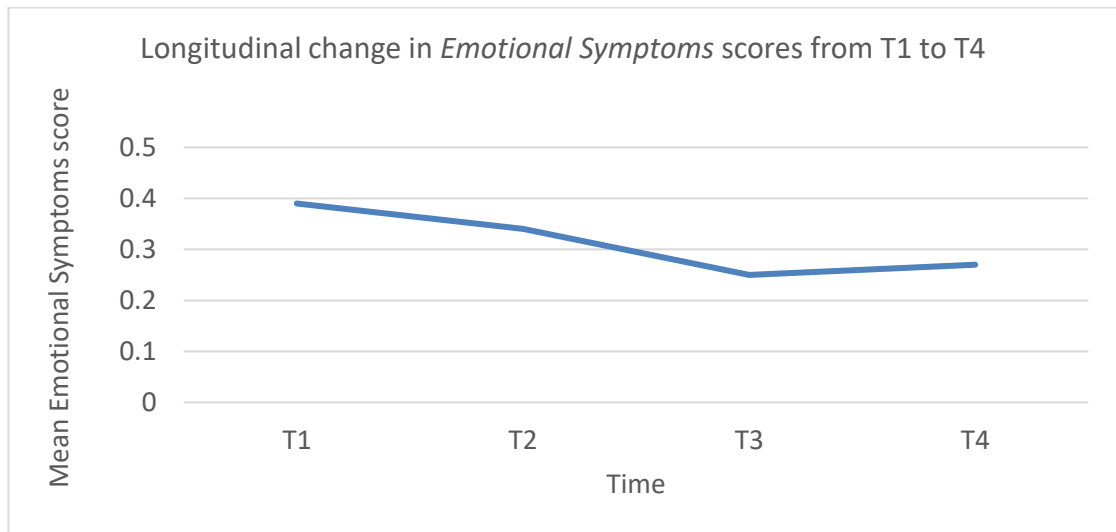
Figure 5.2

Longitudinal change in Peer Problems scores from T1 to T4 for intervention and control schools together

Longitudinal change in *Peer Problems* scores from T1 to T4
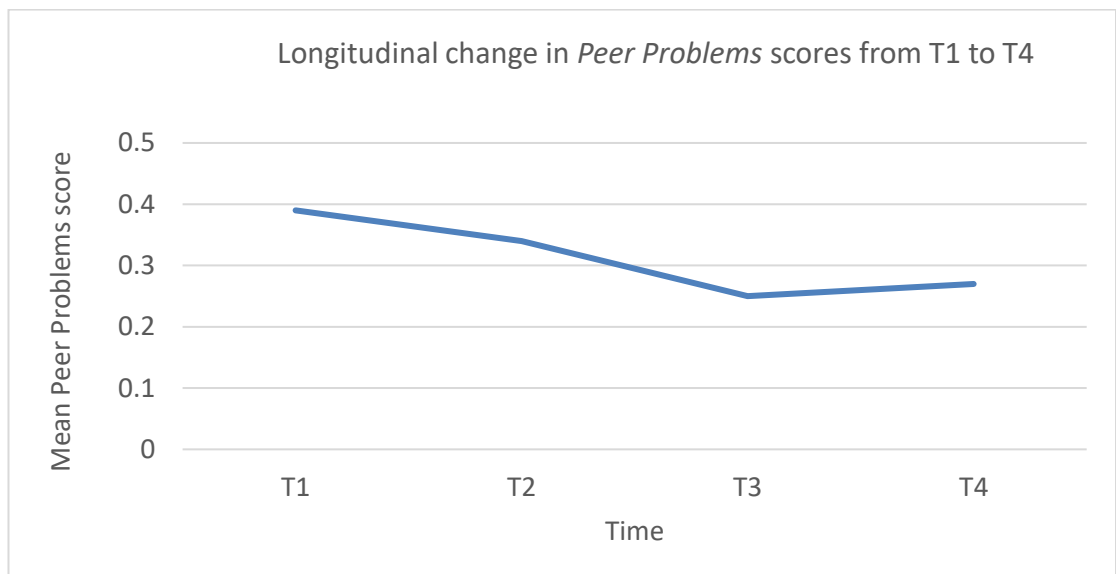
Figure 5.3

Longitudinal change in Transition Worries scores from T1 to T4 for intervention and control schools together
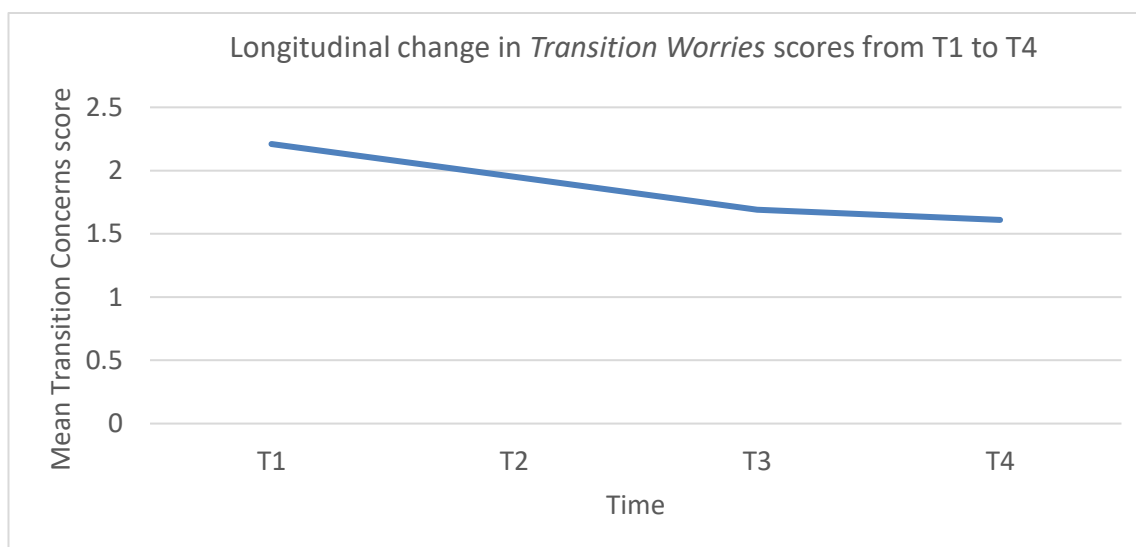
Three follow up post-hoc comparisons were conducted for each statistically significant main effect to assess which time points significantly differ from one another, specifically from T1 to T2, T2 to T3 and T3 to T4. To do this the Bonferroni post-hoc correction was applied to control for Type Two error.

Statistically significant decreases in *Transition Worries* scores from T1 to T2 ($p <$ .001), T2 to T3 ($p <$ .001) and T3 to T4 ($p <$ .001) were found. In line with the means presented on Table 5.11*,* this shows that children's concerns about school transition significantly decrease across each time point over the transition period.

The only statistically significant pairwise comparison for *Peer Problems* was from T2 to T3 ($p <$ .001). In other words, from leaving primary school in June to initial transition to secondary school in September, children report significant decreases in *Peer Problems;* perceptions of *Peer Problems* being significantly lower in September*.*

There were no statistically significant pairwise comparisons for *Emotional Symptoms.*

5.4.2.2. Immediate T1-T2 change scores

As there were baseline differences between the intervention and control group at T1 for most outcome variables (see *Baseline comparisons* above), change scores were calculated for each outcome variable: *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping*

Efficacy and *Transition Worries* scores*.* To do this for each outcome variable, the child's score at T2 was subtracted from their score at T1. This means that for outcome variables: *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems* and *Transition Worries*, a positive change score would show that the children's scores decrease meaning a positive outcome. In comparison, for *Coping Efficacy,* a negative change score would show that children's perceptions in their ability to cope increases meaning a positive outcome. It was hypothesised, see Hypothesis 1 in section *5.2.1. Rationale*, that there would be a significant difference in self-report scores of *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy* and *Transition Worries* from T1 to T2 and that the difference would be greater for children in the intervention condition who will report fewer *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems* and *Transition Worries* scores and higher *Coping Efficacy* scores*.*

Four independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy* and *Transition Worries* scores for children in the intervention and control conditions. To control for type 1 error inflation the Bonferroni correction was applied to the alpha level to set a more stringent level of statistical significance (.0125) and is reported in the findings below. Descriptive and inferential statistics are presented in Table 5.13 and discussed below.

Table 5.13

Immediate T1-T2 Mean, Standard Deviation and t-test scores for outcome variables: Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy and *Transition Worries*

Outcome variable	N	Change score means (*SD*)	T1 means (*SD*)	T2 means (*SD*)	*t* (df)	*p* value
Emotional Symptoms					-0.65 (228)	.52
Intervention	127	0.02 (0.37)	0.57 (0.43)	0.51 (0.45)		
Control	103	0.50 (0.36)	0.50 (0.41)	0.43 (0.44)		
Peer Problems					0.45 (228)	.45
Intervention	127	0.02 (0.42)	0.46 (0.43)	0.39 (0.40)		
Control	103	0.06 (0.38)	0.43 (0.34)	0.38 (0.37)		
Coping Efficacy					0.43 (227)	.43
Intervention	127	-.01 (0.58)	2.91 (0.61)	2.96 (0.67)		
Control	102	0.05 (0.61)	3.05 (0.52)	3.05 (0.63)		
Transition Worries					0.52 (229)	.52
Intervention	128	0.19 (0.50)	2.32 (0.66)	2.09 (0.70)		
Control	103	0.14 (0.57)	2.13 (0.56)	1.95 (0.62)		

* *p* ≤ .05.   ** *p* ≤ .01.

There were no significant differences in *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy* and *Transition Worries* scores for children in the intervention and control conditions. It was speculated that this was subject to the limited time period between T1 and T2. Thus, to examine longitudinal change in these outcomes, further tests were conducted as discussed below.

5.4.2.3. Post-transition change

To maximise sample size, mean scores for each outcome variable: *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy* and *Transition Worries* scores at T3 (immediate transition in September) and T4 (delayed transition in December) were combined. To do this, where possible a grand mean score for each outcome variable at both T3 and T4 combined was calculated (e.g. (T3 *Emotional Symptoms* score + T4 *Emotional Symptoms* score) / 2). Where this was not possible, the child's score for the given variable at either time point was used to maximise sample size. As a form of simplification, combined T3 and T4 scores will be referred to as 'Post Transition' scores.

Reflecting the differences between the intervention and control group at T1 (see *Baseline comparisons*), longitudinal, post-transition change scores were calculated. To do this for each outcome variable the child's Post Transition score was subtracted from their T1 score. As discussed above, for *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems* and *Transition Worries*, a positive change score indicates a decrease and a negative change score an increase. It was hypothesised, see Hypothesis 2 in section *5.2.1. Rationale*, that there would be a significant difference in self-report scores for *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy* and *Transition Worries* from T1 to Post Transition. It was further predicted that this difference would be significantly greater for children in the intervention condition who would report fewer *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems* and *Transition Worries* scores and higher *Coping Efficacy* scores.

Four independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy* and *Transition Worries* scores longitudinally, from T1 to Post Transition, between children in the intervention condition and children in the control condition. To control for type 1 error inflation the Bonferroni correction was applied to the alpha level to set a more stringent level of statistical significance (.0125) and is reported in the findings below. Descriptive and inferential statistics are presented in Table 5.14 and discussed below.

Table 5.14

Post-Transition Mean, Standard Deviation and t-test scores for outcome variables: Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy and *Transition Worries*

Outcome variable	N	Change score means (*SD*)	T1 means (*SD*)	Post Transition means (*SD*)	*t (df)*	*p* value
Emotional Symptoms					-0.56	.58
Intervention	101	0.03 (0.40)	0.57 (0.43)	0.43 (0.39)	(131)	
Control	32	0.08 (0.47)	0.50 (0.41)	0.54 (0.37)		
Peer Problems					-0.65	.52
Intervention	101	0.10 (0.33)	0.46 (0.43)	0.29 (0.31)	(131)	
Control	32	0.14 (0.33)	0.43 (0.34)	0.36 (0.27)		
Coping Efficacy					-0.92	.36
Intervention	100	-0.04 (0.60)	2.91 (0.61)	3.07 (0.59)	(128)	
Control	30	0.08 (0.58)	3.05 (0.52)	2.99 (0.54)		
Transition Worries					2.63	.01
Intervention	98	0.53 (0.55)	2.32 (0.66)	1.71 (0.59)	(123)**	
Control	27	0.21 (0.63)	2.13 (0.56)	1.71 (0.56)		

* p ≤ .05.   ** p ≤ .01.

As shown in Table 5.14 there were no significant differences in *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems* and *Coping Efficacy* change scores from T1 to Post Transition for children in both the intervention and control conditions.

However, there was a significant difference in *Transition Worries* change scores between the intervention and control conditions at the < .01 level, *t* (123) = 2.63, *p* = .010, *d* = 0.32, 95% CI [.08, .56], children in the intervention condition having greater mean change scores. For example, while mean *Transition Worries* scores decreased for both groups over the transition period, this decrease was significantly larger for children in the intervention condition, who had greater mean change scores (*M* = 0.53, *SD* = 0.55) than children in the control condition (*M* = 0.21, *SD* = 0.63). Furthermore, Post Transition mean *Transition Worries* scores are equal for both intervention and control conditions, despite children in the intervention condition having statistically significant greater *Transition Worries* scores at T1 (see *Baseline comparisons* above). This suggests that children participating in TaST, who were more vulnerable at primary school in terms of reporting greater *Transition Worries* scores caught up with control children once at secondary school and no longer showed the same vulnerability.

However, as shown in Table 5.14 above, across time there is also a smaller number of children in the control condition in comparison to the intervention condition. Thus, the representativeness of the findings presented below needs to be considered subject to the unbalanced numbers within the two conditions.

5.4.2.4. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis

As discussed above in section *5.2.1. Rationale*, if the sample size would have been larger, *Coping Efficacy* would have been assessed as a potential mediator variable and *Social Support* as a moderator variable, as these variables were targeted in TaST and it had been hoped to use them to explain the effectiveness of the intervention, in terms of improving children's adjustment, which was assessed in terms of their *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems* and *Transition Worries* scores. Instead in the present study, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to measure whether pre-transition *Coping Efficacy* scores could predict change in adjustment outcomes: *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems* and *Transition Worries* post-transition, and pre-transition *Social Support* obtained from parents, teachers and classmates could predict change in the four outcome variables: *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy* and *Transition Worries* post-transition.

It was hypothesised, see Hypothesis 3 and 4 in section *5.2.1. Rationale*, that children with higher *Coping Efficacy* and *Social Support* scores at baseline would have better adjustment scores over time. Hierarchical multiple regression was selected to test these hypotheses and conduct these analyses as variables can be entered in steps in a predetermined order, meaning that the analyses could control for age, gender and the corresponding pre-transition outcome variable.

Coping efficacy. As discussed in *Chapter 1* and in line with Resilience Theory, children's feeling of efficacy in being able to cope, which in the present study is assessed in terms of children's *Coping Efficacy* scores, is an internal protective factor believed to predict adjustment. Although to date, *Coping Efficacy* specifically has not been looked at within the context of primary-secondary school transition, as with other competence beliefs such as self-esteem which has been shown to predict adjustment over primary-secondary school transition (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020), it is hypothesised that children who exhibit greater *Coping Efficacy* also fare better over primary-secondary school transition and show greater adjustment, see Hypothesis 3 in section *5.2.1. Rationale.*

Coping Efficacy is also believed to be a powerful intervention lever to target in order to prevent maladjustment during this time. The present TaST intervention aimed to do this and specifically focussed on improving children's perceptions of *Coping Efficacy.*

As discussed above the sample size in the present study was not larger enough when partitioning children who participated in either the control or intervention condition to assess *Coping Efficacy* as a potential mediator variable to examine the effectiveness of TaST. Therefore, to shed light on this limited research area and add weight to theory discussed in *Chapter 1,* three hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to measure Hypothesis 3, discussed in section *5.2.1. Rationale*, and assess whether children with greater *Coping Efficacy* scores pre-transition, show greater adjustment post transition, assessed in the present study by fewer *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems,* and *Transition Worries* scores.

Within the analyses below, subject to the limited sample size, all children regardless of whether they participated in the control or intervention condition were included within the analyses. Furthermore, to maximise sample size further, in line with the method discussed above, grand mean scores for each outcome variable: *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy* and *Transition Worries* were calculated for T3 and T4 mean scores combined, and T1 and T2 mean scores combined. As a form of simplification, T1 and T2 combined mean scores will be referred to as 'Pre Transition scores' and T3 and T4 combined mean scores 'Post Transition scores'. Using Pre Transition *Coping Efficacy* scores as predictors, negative *betas* would illustrate a decrease in *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems* and *Transition Worries* over the transition period, which is expected in line with the *Longitudinal change* findings shown above. Within each hierarchical multiple regression analysis, the child's age and gender were controlled for, subject to the age and gender differences shown above.

For each outcome measure, separate regression analyses were conducted, as shown in Table 5.15. In each analysis the corresponding Pre Transition (Time One and Two combined) outcome variable (depending on the regression criterion) was entered on step one to control for previous scores. On step two, gender and age were entered, considering the gender differences and age differences discussed above. Finally, on step three Pre Transition *Coping Efficacy* was entered, which enabled investigation of whether Pre Transition *Coping Efficacy* could predict Post Transition *Emotional Symptoms, Peer*

Problems and *Transition Worries* scores. In support of Hypothesis 3, we are expecting to see on step 3 a significant change in R squared. It was hypothesised that higher Pre Transition *Coping Efficacy* scores would predict lower Post Transition *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems* and *Transition Worries* scores.

Table 5.15

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses for Pre Transition Coping Efficacy scores predicting Post Transition outcome variables: Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems and Transition Worries, controlling for age and gender

	R^2	ΔR^2	β
Criterion: Post Transition *Emotional Symptoms*			
Step 1: *Emotional Symptoms* (Pre Transition)	.29**	.29**	.54**
Step 2: Gender	.29**	.00	-.07
Age			.01
Step 3: *Coping Efficacy* (Pre Transition)	.33**	0.04**	-.24**
Criterion: Post Transition *Peer Problems*			
Step 1: *Peer Problems* (Pre Transition)	.37**	.37**	.61**
Step 2: Gender	.37**	.00	-.03
Age			-.01
Step 3: *Coping Efficacy* (Pre Transition)	.38**	.01	-.09
Criterion: Post Transition *Transition Worries*			
Step 1: *Transition Worries* (Pre Transition)	0.39**	0.39**	0.62**
Step 2: Gender	0.39**	0.00	0.02
Age			-0.01
Step 3: *Coping Efficacy* (Pre Transition)	0.39**	0.00	0.04

* $p \le .05$.　　** $p \le .01$.

As shown in Table 5.15, after controlling for the corresponding Pre Transition outcome variable, gender and age did not account for significant change across all three Post Transition outcome variables. For *Peer Problems* and *Transition Worries,* there was no significant change in Post Transition scores when Pre Transition *Coping Efficacy* scores were entered into the model at Step 3, after controlling for age, gender and the corresponding Pre Transition outcome variable score.

When Pre Transition *Coping Efficacy* was entered into the model at Step 3, after controlling for age, gender and the corresponding Pre Transition outcome variable, there was a statistically significant change in Post Transition *Emotional Symptoms* scores: *R* squared change = .04., *F* (1, 128) = 6.57, *p* = .01, 95% CI [-.32, -.04]. In other words, having controlled for Pre Transition *Emotional Symptoms* scores, which explained 28.8% of change in Post Transition *Coping Efficacy* scores and gender and age accounting for a further 0.4% of change, Pre Transition *Coping Efficacy* scores explained an additional 3.5%

of change in Post Transition *Emotional Symptoms* scores. In the final model, Pre Transition *Coping Efficacy* was statistically significant, shown to uniquely predict change in *Emotional Symptoms* scores (*beta* = -.24, *p* = .01, 95% CI [-.32, -.04]). This shows that children with higher perceptions of *Coping Efficacy* at primary school are more likely to report lower perceptions of *Emotional Symptoms* at secondary school. In other words, high self-reports of *Coping Efficacy* are protective in terms of predicting a decrease in *Emotional Symptoms* scores.

Social support. Social support, obtained from key stakeholders, specifically parents, teachers and classmates, is shown to be a protective external factor over primary-secondary school transition, as discussed in *Chapter 1* and *Chapter 2.* The present TaST intervention aimed to improve children's emotional well-being by encouraging children to draw on protective resources, such as social support, as previous research has shown that support figures can help model resilience and coping strategies. Therefore, to add weight to previous research discussed in *Chapter 1* which has shown social support to be a protective factor in shaping children's adjustment and emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transition, four hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to assess whether children with greater *Social Support* scores pre-transition, show greater adjustment post transition, assessed in the present study by fewer *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems,* and *Transition Worries* scores, and greater *Coping Efficacy* scores.

For each outcome measure, separate hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted. Thus, four hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted in total. In each analysis the child's Pre Transition score for the corresponding outcome variable (depending on the regression criterion) was entered on step one to control for previous scores. For example, if Post Transition *Emotional Symptoms* scores was the general criterion variable, Pre Transition *Emotional Symptoms* were entered on step one. On step two, gender and age were entered, in line with findings discussed above. Finally, on step three, Pre transition *Social Support* scores obtained from parents, teachers and classmates were entered, which enabled investigation of whether Pre transition *Social Support* could predict *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy* and *Transition Worries* Post transition. On step 3, and in support of Hypothesis 4, we are expecting a significant change in R squared and the *betas* to be significant for each unique support

figure: parent, teacher and classmate. It was hypothesised that children with higher *Parent Support* (Hypothesis 4.1)*, Teacher Support* (Hypothesis 4.2) and *Classmate Support* (Hypothesis 4.3) will report fewer *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems,* and *Transition Worries* scores and greater *Coping Efficacy* scores post-transition.

Table 5.16

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses for Pre Transition Social Support scores predicting Post Transition outcome variables: Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy and Transition Worries controlling for age and gender

	R^2	ΔR^2	β
Criterion: Post Transition *Emotional Symptoms*			
Step 1: *Emotional Symptoms* (Pre Transition)	.29**	.29**	.54**
Step 2: Gender	.29**	.001	-.07
Age			.01
Step 3: Support variables (Pre Transition)	.33**	.04 (p =.06)	
Parent			-.20*
Teacher			-.01
Classmate			.01
Criterion: Post Transition *Peer Problems*			
Step 1: *Peer Problems* (Pre Transition)	.37**	.37**	.61**
Step 2: Gender	.37**	.00	-.03
Age			-.01
Step 3: Support variables (Pre Transition)	.40**	.03	
Parent			-.10
Teacher			.09
Classmate			-.17*
Criterion: Post Transition *Coping Efficacy*			
Step 1: *Coping Efficacy* (Pre Transition)	.37**	.37**	.60**
Step 2: Gender	.38**	.01	.09
Age			-.06
Step 3: Support variables (Pre Transition)	.42**	.05*	
Parent			.13
Teacher			-.20*
Classmate			.19*
Criterion: Post Transition *Transition Worries*			
Step 1: *Transition Worries* (Pre Transition)	.39**	.39**	.62**
Step 2: Gender	.39**	.00	.02
Age			-.01
Step 3: Support variables (Pre Transition)	.41**	.03	
Parent			-.03
Teacher			-.08
Classmate			-.11

* p ≤ .05.   ** p ≤ .01.

As shown in Table 5.16, after controlling for the corresponding Pre Transition outcome variable, gender and age did not account for significant change across all four Post Transition outcome variables. For *Transition Worries* and *Peer Problems,* there was no significant change in Post Transition scores when all *Social Support* variables were entered into the model at Step 3, after controlling for age, gender and the corresponding Pre Transition outcome variable score. For *Peer Problems,* in the final model, and despite there being no significant change in R squared on step 3, *Classmate Support* was shown to be statistically significant in uniquely predicting a decrease in *Peer Problems* scores: *beta* = -.17 *p* = .03, 95% CI [-.26, -.01]. This shows that the higher children perceive support from their classmates pre transition, the fewer *Peer Problems* reported post transition.

For *Emotional Symptoms,* when Pre Transition *Social Support* variables were entered into the model at Step 3, the association between *Social Support* and *Emotional Symptoms* was approaching statistical significance: *R* squared change = .04., *F* (3, 126) = 2.52, *p* = .06, after controlling for age, gender and corresponding Pre Transition *Emotional Symptoms* scores. In other words, having controlled for Pre Transition *Emotional Symptoms* scores, which explained 36.9% of change in Post Transition *Emotional Symptoms* scores and gender and age accounting for a further 1% of change, Pre Transition *Social Support* variables explained an additional 3.1% of change in Post Transition *Emotional Symptoms* scores. In the final model, only *Parent Support* was shown to be statistically significant in uniquely predicting a decrease in *Emotional Symptoms* scores: *beta* = -.20, *p* = .04, 95% CI [-.54, -.02]. This shows that the higher children perceive support from their parents pre transition, the fewer *Emotional Symptoms* reported post transition.

For *Coping Efficacy,* when Pre Transition *Social Support* variables were entered into the model at Step 3, after controlling for age, gender and Pre Transition *Coping Efficacy* scores, there was a statistically significant change in Post Transition *Coping Efficacy* scores: *R* squared change = .05., *F* (3, 123) = 3.18, *p* = .03. In other words, having controlled for Pre Transition *Coping Efficacy* scores, which explained 36.5% of change in Post Transition *Coping Efficacy* scores and gender and age accounting for a further 1.1% of change, Pre Transition *Social Support* variables explained an additional 4.5% of change in Post Transition *Coping Efficacy* scores. In the final model, only *Teacher Support* and *Classmate Support* were statistically significant, shown to uniquely predict change in

Coping Efficacy scores; *Teacher Support* had a negative *beta* value (*beta* = -.20, *p* = .03., 95% CI [-.68, -.04]) and *Classmate Support* had a positive *beta* value (*beta* = -.19, *p* = .02., 95% CI [.06, .56]). This shows that too much *Teacher Support* at primary school, pre transition, can be negative in terms of children's *Coping Efficacy* scores. In comparison, greater perceptions of *Classmate Support* pre transition predicted greater perceptions of *Coping Efficacy.*

5.4.2.5. Summary of TaST outcome findings

1. At T1 there were significant gender differences for *Transition Worries,* in that girls reported significantly more *Transition Worries* than boys, and at T4 for *Emotional Symptoms* and *Transition Worries,* girls again reported significantly more *Emotional Symptoms* and *Transition Worries* than boys.

2. There was a significant main effect of time for adjustment outcomes: *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems* and *Transition Worries*, in that all reduced across the four time points for both intervention and control children. Post-hoc comparisons indicated that there were statistically significant decreases in *Transition Worries* scores from T1 to T2, T2 to T3 and T3 to T4. There were no statistically significant pairwise comparisons for *Emotional Symptoms* and the only statistically significant pairwise comparison for *Peer Problems* was from T2 to T3.

3. During immediate transition, from T1 to T2, there were no significant differences in *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy* and *Transition Worries* scores between children in the intervention and control conditions.

4. There was a significant difference in post-transition change scores (from T1 to Post Transition [T3 and T4 scores combined]) for *Transition Worries* between the intervention and control group*,* in that children in the intervention condition reported a greater reduction in *Transition Worries* from T1 to post-transition in comparison to the control group.

5. Pre Transition *Coping Efficacy* was shown to uniquely predict statistically significant change in post transition *Emotional Symptoms* scores, indicating that children with higher perceptions of *Coping Efficacy* at primary school are more likely to report lower perceptions of *Emotional Symptoms* at secondary school.

6. *Classmate Support* was shown to be statistically significant in uniquely predicting a decrease in post transition *Peer Problems* scores. *Parent Support* was shown to be statistically significant in uniquely predicting a decrease in post transition *Emotional Symptoms* scores. Both had negative beta values indicating that the higher children perceived support from their classmates and parents pre transition, the fewer *Peer Problems* and *Emotional Symptoms* reported post transition.

7. *Teacher Support* and *Classmate Support* were shown to uniquely predict statistically significant change in *Coping Efficacy* scores. *Teacher Support* had a negative *beta* value indicating that too much *Teacher Support* at primary school pre transition, can be negative in terms of children's *Coping Efficacy* scores. *Classmate Support* had a positive *beta* value indicating that greater perceptions of *Classmate Support* pre transition predicts greater perceptions of *Coping Efficacy.*

5.4.2. TaST process evaluation

Intervention fidelity pertains to 'the application of an intervention as it is designed' (Harn et al., 2013, p.181). Within research, fidelity assessments are used to evidence whether outcomes obtained in a study are related to the implementation of an intervention, as opposed to other extraneous variables (Carroll et al., 2007). Thus, fidelity assessments document the internal validity of a study, in addition to helping educational practitioners develop better practice, by assessing how well interventions can be implemented to standard within real-world settings. This is conducted through measurements of the programme's structural or surface fidelity, in other words levels of programme completion (e.g. material covered), dosage (e.g. time allocation) and adherence (e.g. session structure, number of lessons covered), in addition to process fidelity, to assess the quality of intervention implementation, including teacher responsiveness and child engagement.

Within the present study, Year 6 teachers delivering TaST were asked to complete a process evaluation feedback form, which contained five structural and process fidelity questions (see *Appendix 5.11*). To compliment these assessments, at T2 Year 6 children participating in TaST were also asked to complete four qualitative process evaluation questions to obtain detailed insight in identifying components of the intervention that were most critical in generating outcomes. Both of which are discussed below.

5.4.2.1. Feedback from teachers

Teachers from each intervention school were asked to complete a process evaluation feedback form, which contained five questions, which were answered using a three-point Likert scale: yes, partly and no (item one and two); yes, sometimes or no (item three); very confident, slightly confident or not confident (item four), or 'very engaged', 'partly engaged' or 'not engaged' (item five). Where 'yes', 'very confident' or 'very engaged' was not given, teachers were asked to expand on their answer in the space provided.

Out of the four intervention schools, three teachers completed these forms. Detailed description of findings is presented in *Appendix 5.11.* Overall, it was reported that all five TaST lessons were delivered and most were delivered as planned, although one teacher discussed tailoring the final two lessons to meet the class' firsthand experience. Time allocated to TaST was either as planned, or dependent on time available, some sessions sometimes split into two to aid discussion which children enjoyed and needed longer for. Most teachers felt confident delivering TaST, and felt that the planned, detailed lesson plans and complimentary PowerPoint slides helped this. External, personal factors, such as being new to teaching Year 6, was also shown to shape teachers' confidence, which they felt would develop with time. All teachers discussed their class being 'very engaged', key features shaping this being the parent activity, the discussion elements and practical tasks.

5.4.2.2. Feedback from children

Recognizing young people as 'reliable witnesses' when exploring aspects of their worlds (O'Kane, 2000, p.136), Year 6 children participating in TaST were asked to complete four qualitative process evaluation questions to provide further and deeper insight into how helpful they found TaST in preparing them for secondary school.

The first process evaluation question was a closed-choice question asking children to evaluate the usefulness of TaST on a three-point Likert scale, and simple frequency and percentage prevalence scores were calculated, see Table 5.17. The final three process evaluation questions were open-ended giving the children space to expand on their answer and outline what they liked and disliked about TaST and how it could be improved. Reflecting the descriptive nature of these answers and as the purpose of the

present analysis was to obtain a surface-level insight into children's perceptions pertaining to the efficacy of TaST and the spread of responses, inductive content analysis was used (Mayring, 2004). Inductive content analysis enables researchers to transform descriptive data into a highly organised and concise summary of key results. Code categories are also in the center of analysis, and this again suits the rationale for the approach taken in the present study which was to preserve and keep to the data as much as possible, taking a data-driven approach. This is especially reflected by the code category names, which are simple and meaningful to fit the model of communication shared with the participants.

The procedure for the present content analysis aligned with the following steps (Mayring, 2004), each research question analysed individually. 1) As a data-driven, inductive approach was taken, there was a process of data immersion. 2) The data were broken down into manageable code categories for analysis. 3) The data were then categorised in line with the coding system to create coded units. 4) Revision was implemented if, for instance, a category failed to adequately account for a significant proportion of the data. For example, for question two an initial category referring to reflection was omitted after it became clear that there was little individual description of this category beyond what was discussed in the code category *emotional-centred foci*. Furthermore, also for question two, the code category *discussion* was initially merged with the code category *support*, however, as it became clearer that coded units also reflected these categories distinctly, they were separated out. 5) Following revision, coded units were then recorded using a tally for each code category. 6) Scores for the final coding system are presented in Table 5.18, 5.19 and 5.20. Some responses, such as: 'that we learnt how to deal with being scared and how to think more positively' (Question two), included more than one coded unit, in this case *emotional-centred foci* and *coping skills* and thus a tally for both code categories was recorded.

1. <u>How useful did you find the 'Talking about School Transition' project in preparing you for secondary school?</u>

In total, across the four intervention schools, 125 children completed this question. Responses were summated and percentage prevalence scores calculated as shown in Table 5.17.

Table 5.17

Likert scale responses indicating how useful (in terms of response number and percentage) Year 6 children participating in TaST found the programme

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very useful	40	32%
Somewhat useful	75	60%
Not very useful	10	8%

As shown in Table 5.17, most Year 6 children reported TaST to be 'somewhat useful', just under a third of children reported TaST to be 'very useful' and very few reported the intervention as 'not very useful'. These findings provide support for TaST as a universal support intervention as majority of children participating in TaST reported it to be useful.

2. <u>Write down one thing that you liked about the 'Talking about School Transition' project</u>

Responses to question two aligned with eight main foci: *support, discussion, transfer exposure, emotional-centred foci, coping skills, specified activity, general appraisal* and *miscellaneous* as shown in Table 5.18*.*

As shown below, the most popular response to question two and subsequently what the Year 6 children participating in TaST liked most about TaST was the *emotional-centred foci* and this code category appeared in 21% of responses to this question. For example, children discussed how TaST helped them to understand: 'helped us understand the worries about high school' and manage: 'stopped me worrying' their feelings towards secondary school.

Children also discussed the usefulness of TaST in providing them with opportunity to engage in emotional-centred reflection and reported specifically enjoying the written emotional expression component: 'I liked writing down your feelings' and finding this useful: 'I wrote down and said things in a fun and understandable way', especially in helping to manage concerns: 'it helped me calm down about going to secondary school because I was nervous to start with so it was very useful'. The privacy associated with the written emotional expression activities was also discussed as important: 'none of your friends were able to see your answers and they were personal to just us'.

Table 5.18

Frequency and percentage of Year 6 intervention children's responses to each content analysis code category for question two

Code category	Code description	Example of coded units	*N*	%
Support	Not feeling alone, helping each other	'it helped me know that I was not alone'	14	12%
Discussion	Being able to talk about transition in class and at home	'I liked that you could share your feelings to the class'; 'talking about what we do'	14	12%
Transfer exposure	Managing expectations through transfer insight	'it helped me understand more about high school'	16	14%
Emotional-centred foci	Focus on feelings and emotional-centred reflection	'it helped us understand the worries about high school'; 'it stopped me worrying'	24	21%
Coping skills	TaST helping confidence, preparedness and coping	'it showed you how to cope in different situations'; 'it filled me with confidence'	19	17%
Specified activity	Naming of a favorite TaST activity	'I liked the timetable activity'; 'the colouring'	14	12%
General appraisal	Expression of liking, disliking or indifference	'it was okay'; 'unsure'; 'good'; 'nothing'	7	6%
Miscellaneous	Other response	'the helpful ideas'; 'I learnt a lot'; 'that it was exceptionally planned'	6	5%

Discussion of *coping skills*, which was the next most popular response to question two, was also something the Year 6 children liked alongside TaST's *emotional-centred foci.* An example is the response: 'we learnt how to deal with being scared and how to think more positively', which includes reference to the significance of TaST's *emotional-centred foci* in helping children to manage difficult feelings, 'being scared', but also how the programme did this by enhancing *coping skills*, 'think more positively'. Nonetheless, the code category *coping skills* also appeared in its own right, and children commonly discussed the significance of TaST in helping them prepare for secondary school: 'it helped me to be more prepared' by supporting development of skills, such as confidence: 'it filled me with confidence', resilience: 'how to deal with things' and coping efficacy: 'it showed you how to cope in different situations'.

TaST was also shown to be useful in encouraging *discussion* about the transition: 'talking about how I feel' in class: 'I liked how you could share your feelings to the class'

and at home: 'liked the fact that we had to talk to a parent or older sibling about the transition'. Some children expanded on their answers, outlining how the *discussion* element of TaST helped them to gain *support*: 'that they were there for us' by sharing feelings: 'that you didn't have to keep all your feelings to yourself' so they did not feel alone: 'it helped me know that I was not alone'. *Discussion* also provided *exposure* into what secondary school would be like: 'I liked how we got to hear what Year 7 have said it helped my nerves'.

Less common responses given by children were general one-worded *appraisals*, such as: 'good' (one response), 'unsure' (one response), 'nothing' (three responses) or 'everything' (two responses), without expansion as to why. Amongst the *specified activities,* colouring was the most popular activity (six children discussed liking this), followed by *top tips* (three children discussed enjoying this). *Miscellaneous* responses included feedback that did not fit into the other categories, such as the structure of the intervention: 'it was exceptionally planned', the content: 'the helpful ideas' and usefulness: 'I learnt a lot'.

3. <u>Write down one thing that you did not like about the 'Talking about School Transition' project</u>

Responses to question three aligned with nine main foci: *structure and content, repetition, rumination, sharing emotions, school-level factors, specified activity, nothing disliked, indifference and dislike* and *miscellaneous* as shown in Table 5.19*.*

As shown in Table 5.19, the most popular response to question three was *nothing disliked.* Only four children reported disliking TaST and two children expressed indifference, such as 'unsure' or 'I don't know. However, 8% of children reported TaST to encourage *rumination*, in other words, the intervention caused children to worry or over-mentalise about their impending transition to secondary school: 'sometimes talking about it made me more nervous'. For example, one child reported TaST to encourage feelings of loss about leaving primary school: 'the constant reminder of leaving primary school' and another expressed that it would have been better to suppress concerns about primary-secondary school transition: 'I did not like to be reminded about the change in my life'. Two children also felt that TaST planted worries that they had not considered: 'I'm not that worried and it gave me reasons to worry'; 'it made me find new things to worry about'.

Table 5.19

Frequency and percentage of Year 6 intervention children's responses to each content analysis code category for question three

Code category	Code description	Example of coded units	N	%
Structure and content	Structure and content too much (especially writing), or too little	'it was too long'; 'too much writing'; 'it didn't give advice about moving'	10	11%
Repetition	Material was not new	'getting told about things I already knew'	4	5%
Rumination	TaST encouraging worry and over-thinking/mentalizing	'it made me find new things to worry about'; 'it scared me a little'	7	8%
Sharing emotions	Did not like sharing emotions in written or spoken form	'we had to share a lot of our personal worries'	5	6%
School-level factors	Factor related to delivery in a specific primary school	'it was too early'; 'I didn't like how we had to put our names on the booklet'	7	8%
Specified activity	Naming of a disliked TaST activity	'homework'; 'emotions by colours'	13	15%
Nothing disliked	Expression of nothing disliked about TaST	'nothing I did not like'; 'what was there not to like'; 'I liked everything'	31	35%
Indifference and dislike	One-worded appraisal of general dislike or indifference	'everything'; 'I don't know'	6	7%
Miscellaneous	Other response	'people took high school way too serious'; 'childish'	6	7%

Extending on feelings of *rumination* discussed above the table, 6% of Year 6 children reported not liking *sharing emotions* whether through written: 'I didn't like that you had to write down things about what you had said because it felt like you were sharing your emotions' or spoken activities: 'we had to share our personal worries'. As discussed in the last quote, some of these concerns may pertain to *school-level factors,* in other words the way in which TaST was delivered and discussions were led, specifically relating to sensitivity, which was reported as not always present: 'how I would get told off if I said something wrong' and the extent in which the children's privacy was respected: 'I didn't like how we had to put our names on the booklet'. For example, when designing TaST it was acknowledged that the transition workbooks had the potential to contain

personal and sensitive information, thus teachers were asked to protect and maintain the children's privacy as best they could, e.g. asking children to put their forename or initials on the workbook as opposed to their full name and asking the children to keep their transition workbook in their tray between sessions. However, it is worth noting that some children felt that this was not enough: 'Writing feelings in those booklets wasn't private enough as it was open for anybody to see what you were writing'.

Furthermore, *rumination* and dislike for *sharing emotions* may have also been shaped by individual differences: 'one thing I disliked about this is maybe one of the questions involved sharing your feelings I think because I am not a feeling sharing person'. *Repetition:* 'getting told about things I already knew' was also something some children disliked about TaST, which again may have been subject to individual differences, specifically children with older siblings already at secondary school: 'that I already knew about everything they were telling us because I have older siblings'.

Children also discussed specific aspects of the *structure and content* of TaST that they would have liked to see covered more frequently, such as discussion: 'I didn't talk to the teachers as much as I would have liked' and specific content that should have been included, namely relating to the secondary school they would be going to: 'it didn't look further into our own high school'. Two children also felt that TaST was 'too long' and 'too much to take in on the same day' and four children disliked the writing components. Pertaining to *specific activities* that children disliked, homework, the life transition activity and emotions by colour were least popular activities, and within the code category *miscellaneous,* was feedback that didn't fit into the other categories, such as: 'it was childish' and 'people took high school way too serious'.

4. <u>Write down one suggestion to improve the 'Talking about School Transition' project</u>

Question four aligned with eight main foci: *active learning, transfer exposure, individualised support, more discussion, time, school-level factors, no improvement* and *miscellaneous* as shown in Table 5.20.

Table 5.20

Frequency and percentage of Year 6 intervention children's responses to each content analysis code category for question four

Code category	Code description	Example of coded units	N	%
Active learning	More kinesthetic and interactive activities	'make it more active'; 'make it more interactive'	7	8%
Transfer exposure	More or less insight into transfer challenges	'more advice about high school'; talk about the positives instead of the negatives'	25	27%
Individualised support	Personal, individual-level focus, specifically around emotions	'make it more private'; 'could have spoken to the pupil on a more personal level'	11	12%
More discussion	Greater opportunity to talk about transition	'more talking'; 'could make more activities about sharing things with the class'	11	12%
Time	Need for greater time to spend on TaST	'having more time'; 'longer to think about your answer'	6	7%
School-level factors	Factor related to delivery in a specific primary school	'got help on the things I struggle with'; 'make sure everyone is involved'	4	4%
No improvement	Expression of nothing to improve	'nothing it was great'; 'I can't think of anything to improve'	16	17%
Miscellaneous	Other response	'the helpful ideas'; 'I learnt a lot'; 'that it was exceptionally planned'	12	13%

As shown in Table 5.20*,* the most popular response to question four and what over one quarter of Year 6 children felt could be improved about TaST, was the level of *transfer exposure.* Within this code category, most children discussed the need for specific exposure into the secondary school they would be transitioning to: 'do one for all of the different schools that people are going to' and first-hand insight from past transfer children: 'get some Year 7's or above to come in and tell us about their experience and maybe have a workshop with them so we can understand the situation more than before'. Four children discussed wanting less exposure: 'don't give so many options for children to be worried about' and preferred suppressing concerns: 'be more understanding and try to help us to forget about the worries of leaving primary school'.

Just over 12% of children discussed how TaST could benefit from providing more *individualised support*: 'it could have spoken to the pupil on more of a personal level' and discussed ways in which this could be facilitated, whether that was through small group work: 'I think it might have been better in smaller groups with people going through the same things as you' or greater anonymity: 'make it more private by maybe doing the project on computers and having a secret coded name so nobody knows who's work it is'.

However, again, *school-level factors* may have also contributed to concerns regarding privacy, as children made reference to the way in which the intervention was delivered, whether pertaining to the timing of the TaST lessons in the school day: 'earlier lunch and break so the other classes don't push in', level of support: 'get help on the things I struggle with' or discussions: 'maybe help people feel like they shouldn't be embarrassed by what they put'. *More discussion* was raised by 12% of Year 6 children as something that they would have liked more of: 'you could make more activities about sharing things with the class', especially group discussion: 'work together more and talk about the situation' and children felt that this should be prioritised above the written components: 'to discuss it more than have to write lots'.

Children also discussed the need for *active learning*: 'make it more interactive' through kinesthetic activities, including drama: 'you could make the children act out what could or couldn't happen'. Other suggestions for further activities included 'a video' and 'less repetition' but suggestions had no clear pattern and did not fit into the other categories and thus were recorded within the code category *miscellaneous.*

Children also felt that TaST could have been improved if it was allocated more *time*: 'having more time'; 'longer to think about your answer'. However, this improvement also needs to be considered against the backdrop of competing pressures that are often faced within the Year 6 transfer year, and that a significant number of children (17%) felt TaST needed *no improvement.*

5.5. Discussion

In sum, although there is extensive global literature investigating primary-secondary school transition, few researchers have directed equal attention to the emotional well-being of children, as they have to their social and academic well-being (Gniewosz et al., 2012). The same can be said when considering emotional-centred

school-based intervention support provision during this time, which is sparse or subject to practical or empirical constraints (van Rens et al., 2018).

Nonetheless, primary-secondary school transition is well-documented as a 'critical period' (Neal & Yelland, 2014) and unsettling time for eleven-year-old children. This was supported within the present research, as children in both control and intervention conditions reported significantly higher *Transition Worries* scores prior to primary-secondary school transition and immediately following primary-secondary school transition, than in December in Year 7*.* This further demonstrates the short and long-term impact of primary-secondary school transition and the need for emotional-centred support.

Thus, more effort and action is needed to promote, maintain and support children's emotional well-being, especially in the lead up to and over periods of significant change, such as primary-secondary school transition, where implications can be significant. However, within society and school-based interventions the prioritisation of long-term well-being can detract from the importance of understanding and nurturing well-being in the here and now (Kesler et al., 2005). When considering primary-secondary school transition, this is concerning because children with good social and emotional development, especially in the here and now (Hanewald, 2013), are more likely to manage risk successfully and show superior long-term adjustment (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2010). Thus, emphasis on emotional-centred support in the lead up to the transition period is very much needed to nurture positive short and long-term emotional well-being. The present intervention aimed to do this and narrow this research gap by designing and implementing a five-week universal, emotional-centred intervention to support Year 6 children's emotional well-being, by encouraging children to draw on their coping skills, namely coping efficacy, and social support from parents, teachers and classmates, before they transition to secondary school.

TaST was shown to be effective in doing this as a significant reduction in *Transition Worries* was found from T1 to Post Transition (T3 and T4 combined) between the intervention and control group. As discussed in the analysis section, although data were collected at four time points over the transition period (May and July in Year 6 and September and December in Year 7), subject to the limited sample size when looking at change over time, T3 and T4 scores were combined. Thus, an implication for further

research within this area would be to repeat the present research with a larger sample of children followed over time. For example, despite best efforts to match secondary schools and their feeder primary schools, in the present study we were not able to follow up on a significant number of children post transition (especially children who participated in the control condition), which may have impacted our ability to identify additional intervention effects.

Nonetheless, despite the limited sample size, the longitudinal design, which collects data at several time points spread over the transition year, is a strength of the present research and extends our current understanding of children's adjustment during this time. To date, few school-based transition studies have adopted a longitudinal focus, and instead rely on snapshot designs which is problematic and limits conclusions that can be drawn by not reflecting the 'whole story' of intervention programmes. For example, in the present research no significant differences between the intervention and control condition were shown immediately following TaST between T1 and T2 when the children were still in Year 6. Taken alone, this suggests that TaST was not effective in causing change in children's immediate transitional adjustment.

However, taken with the longitudinal findings, it is argued that this lack of change was subject to the little time between May and July in Year 6, in that not much changed in children's lives pertaining to primary-secondary school transition between the two time points to account for significant change in adjustment and difference between the two groups. Furthermore, the Year 6 children had not made the transition to secondary school yet, and thus not been exposed to the stress associated with the discontinuity and challenge inherent with this period. Thus, children participating in TaST would not have had sufficient opportunity to 'test' their learnt coping skills. In other words, it is plausible that there is a germination period in the development and expression of these skills. This is in line with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Stress Model which outlines that while emotions, appraisals and self-efficacy pertaining to events facilitate coping, the catalyst for this process is the negative event, which in the present study is the transition from primary to secondary school. This has also been suggested empirically in the context of primary-secondary school transition (Vassilopoulos et al., 2018).

The process evaluation qualitative findings, which were collected while the children were still in Year 6, provide further support for this theory and shed greater light

on why change was not shown during this immediate time period. For example, children not only expressed how TaST focussed on variables associated with coping, such as their emotions, appraisals and coping-efficacy, but also discussed how these skills would likely help them when they transitioned to secondary school. Thus, the first-hand qualitative data collected from Year 6 children who participated in TaST can be argued as a further strength of the present research, as these findings extend the outcome evaluation findings in aiding our understanding of the process and trajectory of coping and adjustment over primary-secondary school transition. Moreover, this incorporation also contributes to increasing awareness of the significance of qualitative methodology in obtaining and valuing first-hand insight from underrepresented stakeholders (Jindal-Snape et al., 2011).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) also discussed the significance of social support as a moderator in coping processes, asserting that social support influences outcomes post-stressor by shaping an individual's appraisal of negative events. While we did not look at social support as a moderator of the intervention effects in the present study subject to our limited sample size, we did conduct hierarchical multiple regression analysis to assess whether social support obtained from parents, teachers and classmates at primary school could collaboratively and uniquely predict adjustment outcomes once at secondary school. The latter was shown in the regression findings, as social support obtained from classmates and parents in primary school was shown to uniquely predict greater *Coping Efficacy* and *Emotional Symptoms* scores at secondary school. The usefulness of inclusion of these stakeholders was also discussed in the process evaluation responses, children outlining how TaST helped them to talk to classmates and parents to gain support, so they felt less alone. This provides concurrent support for the significance of 'sharing concerns' which was discussed in *Study 2* as something that is incredibly important for transfer children, but also difficult. Thus, TaST not only extends our knowledge within this area, but also demonstrates the viability of translating this understanding into practice.

Nonetheless, high *Teacher Support* at primary school was also shown to predict lower *Coping Efficacy* at secondary school, demonstrating the dangers of too much *Teacher Support.* This is concerning and further supports previous research which has emphasised the caution and sensitivity needed when delivering programmes within this area (Bagnall et al., 2019). This was also raised in the present process evaluation findings,

where it is speculated that *how* TaST was implemented (especially in terms of sensitivity) by class teachers may have differed between schools. However, this is not aided by our current patchy understanding of *Teacher Support* during this time, which is often subject to researchers assessing the impact of *Teacher Support*, using various measures on very different outcomes. For example, teachers have been shown to aid adjustment processes, children who receive greater emotional support from teachers showing better adjustment (Symonds & Galton, 2014), but they can also impede adjustment, as teachers who are principally concerned with attainment as opposed to socio-emotional issues and peer acceptance can negatively shape children's anxiety (McGee et al., 2003). Thus, there is need across transition literature, for researchers to review study scales to more accurately conceptualise and measure social support over primary-secondary school transition.

Teacher-led primary-secondary school transition support programmes are shown to be more effective than programmes delivered by researchers and are favoured by key stakeholders, especially parents (McGee et al., 2003). Thus, understanding the trajectory of *Teacher Support* in shaping decreased *Coping Efficacy* is paramount. Considering past research which has looked at children's coping processes more generally (Vassilopoulos et al., 2018) it is plausible that *Teacher Support* follows a continuum in terms of children's coping efficacy, too much and too little being maladaptive. In other words, children either receive too much support and scaffolding with coping processes to the extent where they do not have opportunity to develop ownership over these skills, or children do not receive enough support. Thus, taken together, there is a need not only to include key stakeholders such as parents and classmates within support interventions to help model and scaffold coping skills, but to also include activities that help support children develop their own sense of coping efficacy. Further research is also needed to investigate whether there is indeed a curvilinear relationship pertaining to *Teacher Support*.

Moreover, further research is needed in this area to examine *Coping Efficacy* in greater detail, especially over primary-secondary school transition, where our understanding is limited. One recommendation for this future research, would be for scholars to develop a more nuanced approach to measure *Coping Efficacy* specifically in the context of primary-secondary school transition. Considering the evidence presented above, assessments would need to account for the combinations of coping strategies

children use, which are reflected in greater detail in the process evaluation findings and resonate to findings discussed in *Chapter 2.* Moreover, social support needs to be assessed alongside coping, particularly how children draw on social support to aid these skills. Assessing these additional considerations would help us to further understand how children interact, perceive and interpret internal and external protective and risk factors.

Providing greater leverage for the latter point, the present research also sheds further light on our existing understanding of primary-secondary school transition in demonstrating how some children find this time more difficult than others (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012). Previous research suggests that this is often because of children's individual differences in their interpretations of risk and protective factors (Yeager & Dweck, 2012), which needs to be investigated in greater detail using more nuanced methods of measurement (see *Chapter 6*). For example, in the present study, while there were extreme scores identified in both directions (upper and lower), the only significant outliers identified on box plots were extreme low scores for *Coping Efficacy* and high scores for *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems* and *Transition Worries,* all of which indicating poorer adjustment and greater vulnerability over the transition period.

Furthermore, despite best efforts to match intervention and control schools in terms of the schools' geographical location, pupil demographics and socioeconomic status, at baseline, the intervention and control group were significantly different in terms of vulnerability, with children in the control condition reporting greater *Coping Efficacy* and fewer *Transition Worries* in comparison to children in the intervention condition. Thus, taken together, on one hand universal interventions are advantageous in supporting children on a whole-class, inclusive basis, as shown in the present study. For example, children participating in TaST (who had higher baseline *Transition Worries* scores) essentially caught up with children in the control condition (who had lower *Transition Worries* scores at baseline) following the transition period. However, some children may need further targeted support beyond this (see *Chapter 6).* Thus, as suggested by Waters et al. (2012), early detection of children who are vulnerable to poor transition and providing them with additional support tailored to their individual needs and personal experiences is likely to minimise maladjustment.

However, identifying 'at risk' children may be more difficult than initially anticipated. For example, as shown in *Chapter 2,* primary-secondary school transition has

a dual nature, combining both a sense of optimism and anticipation with anxiety and fear. Therefore, there is need to sensitively measure children's appraisals of optimism and anticipation, in addition to anxiety and fear, as while high scores on both would be expected during this time, solely high scores of anxiety and fear would indicate cause for concern. However, within transition literature, there are significantly more studies focussing on pre-transition experiences, in comparison to research which describes what the actual transition experience is like for children and the impact pre-transition expectations and appraisals have on transitional adjustment. Given that the present process evaluation findings indicate that some children appear at face-value to have fewer worries and are more optimistic about primary-secondary school transition, it would be interesting to shed light on this research gap and assess whether this translates to how prepared these children actually are for the impending move and adjust to secondary school, which is raised in the discussion in *Chapter 4*. Using diary-methods in the future could shed light on this understanding.

On one hand, optimistic thinking styles may act as a mechanism for coping (Longaretti, 2006). For example, Waters et al.'s (2014a) longitudinal research found Australian children who expected a positive transition from primary to secondary school to be more than three times more likely to report an actual positive transition experience. Providing greater support in the context of the UK with similar aged children, Rice et al. (2011) found both school-related and generalised anxiety symptoms pre-transition to highly correlate with school concerns following the transition to secondary school. However, on the other hand, and in line with optimism bias, it is also plausible that over primary-secondary school transition, more optimistic children may also be underestimating transition challenges and ill-prepared by not being worried. However, further research is needed in this area to investigate the trajectory of optimistic thinkers over primary-secondary school transition using both child self-report and teacher reports. A challenge for further intervention research would then be to determine how children's worries and apprehensions about transition can be reframed to reduce transition anxiety, which TaST has made steps in doing.

Extending on the above point, supporting 'at risk children' may also be more difficult than initially anticipated. As implied through the qualitative process evaluation findings a 'one size fits all' approach, especially when targeting children's emotional well-

being may not be effective for all children. For example, it was shown that for some children the emotional-centred foci of TaST encouraged rumination, in terms of over-mentalising and causing further concern around primary-secondary school transition. This was despite efforts that were made when designing TaST to ensure that emotional-centred content was delivered sensitively, e.g. activities that had the potential to be more sensitive were delivered on an individual basis as opposed to a group or class-basis. Nonetheless, these process evaluation findings are worrying and again raise questions regarding the usefulness of universal emotional-centred support interventions in helping all children in one setting. See further discussion in *Chapter 6.*

Nonetheless, the present study is not without limitations, one of which, as already discussed above, is relating to longitudinal attrition, especially children who participated in the control group at T3 and T4. Subject to the limited sample size when examining change over time, T3 (immediate transition in September) and T4 (delayed transition in December) scores were combined within post-transition change analyses to maximise sample size. Another limitation is that all outcome measures were assessed using self-report rating scales, albeit all were of established reliability and validity. This can be especially problematic if participants are aware of the research aims and can result in biased responses. However, in the present study efforts were made to avoid children becoming aware of the research aims, such as phrasing TaST sessions as PSHE lessons and negatively wording some items on the surveys to encourage children to attend to the question items they were answering. Furthermore, to prevent demand characteristics or socially desirable answers, the questionnaire's title and sub-headings were deliberately vague and teachers were asked to not discuss the research aims with their class.

Moreover, in light of previous research which has found teachers and children to perceive school contexts differently, and utilising multiple-informants to assess the same construct to often show little homogeneity (McGrath et al., 2020), in the present study, all outcomes were assessed using child self-report. This is recognised as a strength of the present research, given the differences that can be observed between teacher and child perceptions of school adjustment, especially when assessing internal constructs, such as resilience (Bailey & Baines, 2012), and the need to take the same approach in future research. This also has implications for education policy in supporting teachers to

consider child conceptualisations of school adjustment and appraisals of school adjustment success, which may be different to theirs.

Furthermore, the mixed methods design, which enabled participants to both rate and write-down their feelings, recognises the underrepresentation of children's voices within this field and the need to remediate this to improve this period (see *Chapter 6*). Considering Webster-Stratton et al.'s (2008) recommendation that fidelity measures should be collected at the teacher or school level and outcomes at the child level for appropriate data analysis, in the present study outcomes were measured at the child level and content and process fidelity assessments were obtained from class teachers delivering TaST, and complemented by further process evaluation feedback from children. Nonetheless, it is recognised that obtaining insight from additional informants such as parents and teachers could have also supplemented children's self-reports of their adjustment, but nonetheless was beyond the scope of the present study.

In conclusion, primary-secondary school transition is a major life event for eleven-year-old children that can have short- and long-term implications on their emotional well-being. Additional emotional-centred support during this time is undoubtedly important, although, as discussed above, is complex and sensitive. TaST, which aligns with an early-intervention, preventative approach, extends previous research in this area by illustrating the viability and efficacy of universal emotional-centred support intervention in Year 6 in significantly reducing transfer children's *Transition Worries* once at secondary school. Given the low priority and reduction of funding directed to children's mental health services (DfHSC & DfE, 2018), and the stretched time and financial resources schools face to address children's emotional well-being, the present research has immediate implications for our current climate. For example, TaST is cost and time effective, uses minimal resources, can be integrated into the PSHE curriculum and as shown in the qualitative process analysis findings, enjoyed and perceived useful by both children and teachers. However, further research is needed using larger sample sizes and contrast with targeted approaches.

Chapter 6: General Discussion

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The aim of this chapter is to draw together the main findings of the four studies on which this thesis is based. The first section provides a summary of the findings from the four studies and an evaluation of their unique and collaborative contributions to the field. The second section discusses the implications of these findings in the context of Resilience Theory and in terms of future directions for primary-secondary school transition research.

6.1. Summary and Evaluation of the Findings

Primary-secondary school transition is a major life event for eleven-year-old children in the UK, which provides greater opportunities but also challenges. In line with the latter, it is acknowledged that 'too many' children find primary-secondary school transition difficult (DfES et al., 2004, p. 61) and approximately 90,000 children each year are believed to never settle into secondary school (Evans et al., 2018). However, few researchers have specifically investigated children's emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transition (Bosacki, 2016) and emotional-centred support intervention provision is minimal, both in research and practice.

Thus, the present research aimed to narrow this research gap by firstly examining transfer children's, parents' and teachers' experiences of transition and the challenges they face during this time, using case study and focus group methodology, in the UK (see *Studies 1* and *3*) and in the US (see *Study 2*). This insight, along with an extensive literature review of pre-existing transition research, discussed in *Chapter 1*, then informed the design, delivery and implementation of Talking about School Transition (TaST), which is an emotional-centred support intervention, aimed to improve children's emotional well-being in preparation for the transition to secondary school.

While some interventions have been developed to counter the negative outcomes children commonly experience over primary-secondary school transition, as discussed above, they are limited in foci (minimal in addressing children's emotional well-being), number, and sustainability. Thus, TaST aimed to narrow this research by providing teacher-led emotional-centred support intervention over the duration of a school term as

part of Year 6 children's Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) curriculum, which builds on the short-comings of previous 'one-off' mental health workshops delivered by external facilitators. TaST is also a standalone legacy project and uses minimal resources, teachers given guided lesson plans, PowerPoint lesson slides and workbooks for their class, which also enhances the project's sustainability and scalability, see *5.1.3. Intervention design considerations.*

A common limitation across transition intervention research is that there is often little clarity of the theory underpinning interventions, which has resulted in uniformed and indiscriminate strategies to improve this period. TaST is theoretically informed and discussion of the theoretical underpinnings and evidence supporting TaST is clearly presented and in the public domain (Bagnall, 2020). The foci and structure of the programme is in line with Resilience Theory, particularly Gilligan's (2000) five background concepts (see *1.3. Resilience Theory*), and specifically supports the development of children's internal protective resources, namely their coping efficacy, but also encourages children to draw on the support they can receive from parents, teachers and classmates to scaffold these skills. To do this TaST consists of a variety of individual, group and class-based activities, which aim to improve children's spoken and written emotional expression in preparation for the move and was informed by original insights from the three preliminary research studies.

For example, the structure of TaST was informed by findings from *Study 1,* which raised the dangers of too much transition exposure, and the need for support provision to establish a balance between exposure and consistency. In other words, transfer children 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. This was modelled through the intervention structure, e.g. individual activities for more sensitive topics to give the children ownership over their exposure.

This same approach was taken to inform the content of TaST. For example, lesson 1, which focusses on helping children to position the transition from primary to secondary school as a progression as opposed to a loss, was informed by insight from the US case study research discussed in *Chapter 3*. *Study 2* raised the importance of presenting school transition as a step-up and continuation in children's education as opposed to a goodbye,

which directly contrasts with how the transition to secondary school is to date discussed and positioned in UK primary schools (as shown in *Study 1*)*.* Furthermore, the special school case study research, see *Study 3,* demonstrated the negative implications of children's reliance on too much hands-on child centred support at primary school in lulling children into a false sense of security that they will receive equivalent levels of support in their new secondary school. Drawing on this insight, lesson 2 focussed on helping children to develop their own coping skills and resilience in preparation for the transition. The aims, main findings and original contributions of each of the studies are summarised in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1

Aims, main findings and original contributions of the four research studies

Study and Aims	Main Findings	Original Contributions
Study 1: UK Focus Groups To explore children's, teachers', and parents' experiences of primary-secondary school transition and how they feel it can be improved. Bagnall, Skipper & Fox (2019). Published in *British Journal of Educational Psychology*	• Need for communication across schools and stakeholders. • Children's expectations and emotions need to be managed gradually and sensitively. • Peer support is crucial for children yet misunderstood by adults. • Seeking support from adults is harder at secondary school.	• Primary-secondary school transition provision needs to be gradual and sensitive, with a clear balance between exposure and consistency. • First study to my knowledge to simultaneously compare three unique stakeholders' first-hand experiences of primary-secondary school transition using focus groups.
Study 2: USA Schools Case Study To explore the 'optimal time' for school transition. Bagnall, Fox & Skipper (2021), *Pastoral Care in Education* Journal.	• School transition is easier when it matches children's disposition and needs, e.g. when children are older, been exposed to prior transition and well supported. • Between age 11 and 12 is a period of significant developmental growth and transition at age 11 is harder. • Adults have different attitudes than children regarding the value of previous school transition experience prior to High school transition.	• First study to my knowledge to explore the significance of transition timing by contrasting stakeholders' perspectives. • Need to present school transition as a progression and not a loss. • Earlier transition is more difficult for children where greater hands-on emotional support is needed. • Specialised transition support in school is the 'gold standard'.

Study and Aims	Main Findings	Original Contributions
Study 3: UK Special School Case Study To examine one special school's primary-secondary school transition provision Bagnall, Fox & Skipper (under review). *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs.*	• SEBD children negotiate more structural changes in support across primary-secondary school transition. • Need to balance children's short- and long-term emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transition so children feel *safe* and a sense of *belonging* at both schools.	• First study to my knowledge to investigate how SEBD children cope and are supported over primary-secondary school transition and mobilise this insight to inform wider emotional-centred transition provision. • Importance of investigating specific SEN difficulties
Study 4: Evaluation of TaST Intervention To examine the effectiveness of TaST, against pre-existing primary-secondary school transition support provision Bagnall (2020), published in the *Pastoral Care in Education* Journal.	• Year 6 children participating in TaST showed a significantly greater reduction in *Transition Worries*, to the control group, once at secondary school. • No significant findings were shown immediately following the intervention. • Indication that some transfer children are particularly vulnerable and may need targeted support.	• Raised awareness of the need for and viability of schools implementing emotional-centred support provision over primary-secondary school transition. • Longitudinal and control group comparison design extends our current understanding of children's adjustment.

As shown in Table 6.1, each of the four research studies presented in this thesis have unique main findings and have made distinct contributions to the field. For further discussion and a critical evaluation of the four studies, see the preceding chapters.

However, the findings, contributions, and implications drawn from the four studies presented in this thesis are also by no means mutually exclusive. For example, findings from *Studies 1, 2* and *3* informed the design, implementation and evaluation of TaST (see Bagnall, 2020). This practice-informed approach and collaborative insight is something which has received limited interest within this field empirically and in practice. For example, to date, studies have either focused on describing the experience of primary-secondary school transition or conducted investigations into assessing changes in outcomes (often theoretically uninformed) from pre to post transition (specifically academic attainment and social adjustment). However, efforts to link the experience of primary-secondary school transition, especially in terms of children's emotional well-

being, and intervention efforts to improve this, were up until now neglected. Thus, taken together, the four studies presented in this thesis have made a significant contribution to the field in informing our understanding of children's emotional experiences of primary-secondary school transition and how to improve them through an emotional-centred intervention that has been practically and theoretically informed.

Moreover, drawing together evidence from all four studies has additional contributions to the field in providing recommendations for future research and implications for policy and practice, which is discussed below.

6.2. Targeted vs. Universal support

The present thesis has shed further light on our existing understanding of how some children find primary-secondary school transition more difficult than others. Previous research has suggested that this is subject to the mismatch between children's concerns regarding secondary school and the repertoire of skills they can draw on to address them. In other words, and in line with Resilience Theory, this pertains to children's individual differences in their interpretation of risk and the availability of protective internal and external resources they can draw on for support (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). The present research has shown this to be the case as children who lack coping skills and social support find primary-secondary school transition especially difficult.

TaST discussed in *Chapter 5* aimed to narrow this gap by encouraging children to draw on their coping skills and the support they can receive from parents, teachers and classmates. For example, to improve the children's coping strategies in preparation for the transfer, in lesson 1, children participating in TaST were encouraged to reflect on potential challenges they may encounter at secondary school and draft solutions to overcome them. Children were given space to discuss these challenges and solutions with classmates, to encourage children to seek support, as children have been shown to perceive seeking support from classmates as one of the most helpful ways of coping with problems over primary-secondary school transition, as shown in *Study 1* and empirically (Coffey, 2013).

Drawing on previous research, which has shown the widespread usefulness of accessible and less stigmatising universal interventions in supporting all children within one educational setting, in addition to the evidence presented in *Chapters 2, 3* and *4,*

TaST adopted a whole-class, universal design. However, while the needs of the general population of children, in addition to children who face further difficulties, can be addressed side-by-side within universal transition programmes (Galton et al., 2003), as discussed in *Chapter 5,* some children may require additional support beyond this.

This concern intensifies when considering children with additional special educational needs (SEN), where universal programmes can increase disadvantages between children with and without SEN, especially in terms of transition anxiety (Neal et al., 2016), if programmes are not sensitive and receptive to children's special educational needs, as shown in *Study 3*. Thus, early detection of children who are additionally vulnerable over primary-secondary school transition and providing tailored targeted intervention support for these children could close the gap between vulnerable children and children who find this period less difficult. However, as discussed below, identifying children who may be vulnerable during this time is to date problematic, and subject to current measurement constraints in conceptualising and assessing vulnerability, as discussed later in *6.6 Measurement constraints.*

Similar findings have been shown when considering children without SEN. For example, the process evaluation findings discussed in *Chapter 5* indicate that for some children the emotional-centred focus of TaST led to over-mentalising. In other words, TaST may have caused some children to negatively question their coping skills and potentially planted anxieties pertaining to primary-secondary school transition that they may not have had. Similar findings have been shown empirically. For example, Qualter et al.'s (2007) universal intervention programme, which aimed to support the development of emotional intelligence (EI) competencies over primary-secondary school transition, found that while children with low baseline EI scores responded positively to the intervention programme, children with high baseline EI scores responded negatively to this support. Taken together, given that children's faith in their coping skills and self-identity is shown to decrease over primary-secondary school transition (Symonds, 2015), it is paramount that children do not become more vulnerable by participating in intervention research, even if they already show protective factors. Thus, primary-secondary school transition interventions need to be approached sensitively.

Thus, one recommendation for further research within this area would for be for researchers to take a targeted approach to emotional-centred support provision over

primary-secondary school transition, adopting the 'nurture group' approach that was taken by Boxall and Lucas (2010) in Scotland. Nurture groups typically support ten to twelve children who face additional emotional difficulties and provide further targeted support necessary for integration into the broader school environment. Nurture groups have been shown to be effective in the context of primary-secondary school transition. For example, Bloyce and Frederickson's (2012) targeted transfer support programme was shown to be effective in reducing vulnerable children's secondary school concerns, emotional symptoms and peer problems following the six-week intervention period in primary school and into the first term in secondary school, where anxieties reduced to match those of less vulnerable children who did not receive the intervention support. However, the small sample size, in addition to the limitations inherent in the unmatched control group restricts comparisons that can be drawn and highlights the need for further research in this area. Although, it is recognised that recruiting a control group would be difficult for this research, considering the ethics allocating children who are marked as vulnerable over primary-secondary school transition to a control condition.

In line with this, further emotional-centred primary-secondary school transition intervention research, taking a nurture group approach, would require early detection of children who are additionally vulnerable over primary-secondary school transition, and then providing tailored targeted intervention support for these children. However, as discussed in further detail below in *6.6. Measurement constraints,* to date we have an unclear and limited understanding of *who* the vulnerable children are over primary-secondary school transition, *how* to identify them and *what* additional emotional-centred support these children need. Thus, prior to designing and implementing targeted emotional-centred primary-secondary school transition support interventions, which is the ultimate goal, a more sensitive scale to measure children's emotional well-being during this time needs to be designed. This would enable not only more accurate and sensitive identification of 'at risk' children to participate in nurture groups but would also inform programme designers of the key ingredients that should be incorporated within emotional-centred support interventions and enable more robust evaluation of programme outcomes.

Finally, recognising that emotional-centred primary-secondary school transition support is minimal in both schools and research, yet as shown in this thesis, fundamental

to fully prepare children for transition challenges, this thesis is not advocating that only targeted children should receive emotional-centred provision. Instead, it is recommended that on a whole class-basis, all children should receive some emotional-centred support provision in preparation for primary-secondary school transition. Drawing on findings discussed in *Chapters 2*, *3, 4* and *5,* this support should be gradual and sensitive, establishing a balance between exposure and consistency (ensuring children feel safe), with focus on transition as a progression. However, in addition to this, there should be opportunity for children to access and receive additional targeted individual-centred support. As discussed in *6.6. Measurement constraints,* further work is needed within this area to accurately and sensitively identify 'at risk' children to participate in targeted support interventions. Therefore, in the meantime, it is recommended that following universal whole-class emotional-centred support intervention, there is further opportunity for *some* children to seek additional support.

6.3. Consideration of school-level factors

Since the publication of the DfHSC and DfE (2018), which raised the importance of supporting children's mental health within the school environment, there has been more attention placed on the need to do this over transition periods, such as primary-secondary school transition. Drawing on this, the present research has made preliminary progress in demonstrating the viability of carrying out this work in practice by designing an emotional-centred primary-secondary school transition intervention informed by preliminary research and theory, which is easily accessible and can be implemented by class teachers within the school setting.

However, there are of course challenges implementing school-based transition interventions. Some of which relate to school systems and cultures as it is important to recognise that the most effective school-based interventions not only require the involvement of external professionals, but also internal support within the school environment. For example, when pastoral policies and practices are supported by school managers and governors, in addition to being embraced by teaching staff and subsequently embedded into the school culture, interventions are shown to be more effective (Trotman et al., 2015). Thus, within all participating TaST schools, Headteachers

were initially met with to discuss the commitment, in terms of time and resources, that TaST would require.

This decision was made recognising that when schools are not ready to receive intervention and insufficient time and resources are invested to deliver the programme effectively, whether that is subject to 'initiative overload' (schools trying to implement many initiatives), or competing priorities, there are risks. This includes a waste of schools limited resources (both time and financial) if the programme is not sustained and fades away, which can add to further marginalisation of pastoral support programmes within schools (Trotman et al., 2015). In addition, incomplete implementation of programmes can also have a negative impact on children participating in projects, who will have also invested their time.

In the context of primary-secondary school transition, increased pressure to redirect both human and financial resources to the demands of meeting performance targets and competing curriculum pressures can result in reduced emphasis on children's emotional needs (Tucker, 2013). Thus, the TaST lessons were designed to be easily incorporated into the PSHE curriculum over the duration of a school term but is also a standalone legacy project. This design recognises that interventions that are linked to school curriculum improve not only uptake of interventions but are also more meaningful for children (Diedrichs et al., 2015).

However, there is more that needs to be done to embed TaST into the school culture. For example, while TaST is methodologically sound and theoretically supported, as with all school-based interventions, incorporating and sustaining programmes within the school environment can be more difficult. Thus, as acknowledged by Trotman et al. (2015), examples of emerging practice should be read as just that, work that can have short-term implications, but requires constant evaluation to bring about long-term change. In order to do this, TaST lesson plans provided teachers with a shared understanding of the theory and psychological research that informed TaST and key to intervention success, in addition to components open to modification. It was clear through the teacher process evaluation findings, which contributed to our understanding of how TaST was implemented across intervention schools, that teachers valued this insight into the key components of the programme. However, not all teachers completed these forms, which only provides a partial understanding.

6.4. Support for the whole child

TaST has also been developed to not just focus on supporting the development of a child's 'inner resources' but also how they can draw on the support of others, which aligns with Resilience Theory. However, taking a social-ecological approach, it must be recognised that any such intervention needs to be implemented alongside changes to other parts of the 'system', with the child at the centre. This includes the supportive role of parents, teachers, classmates, the wider school system and processes, and the community. For example, as discussed in *Chapter 2,* although parents, teachers and children can experience different concerns over primary-secondary school transition, positive relationships between stakeholders and collaborative support can help to improve perceptions of the challenges presented by the transition. Lesson 3 of the TaST intervention focussed on the importance of social support, helping children to recognise support they can obtain from parents, teachers and classmates over primary-secondary school transition, how this support may change at secondary school, and how to access it.

However, it is important to acknowledge that tensions do exist for parents, teachers, and children, in addressing school transition, as raised in *Chapters 2, 3* and *4,* that need to be carefully addressed. For example, for transfer children, establishing a balance between exposure to primary-secondary school transfer changes and consistency in support is paramount during this period, as is recognition of the importance of relationships with classmates. To encourage children to draw on classmates for social support over primary-secondary school transition, children participating in TaST completed a classmate co-pilot activity in lesson 3, where children wrote a support pledge to a classmate on how they can be there for them over the transition period. This activity drew on findings shown in *Studies 1, 2* and *3* regarding the significance of classmate support over school transition, in addition to research discussed in *Chapter 1* which has shown in the lead up to primary-secondary school transition, primary school classmate relationships to become strained (Weller, 2007).

For parents who are often negotiating similar social, emotional and procedural changes to their children, alongside feelings of loss inherent in saying goodbye to their child's primary school and in some ways their child's period of childhood, providing their child with this balance of emotional support can be difficult, as shown in *Study 1*. Thus, obtaining emotional support within the school setting can be incredibly useful, although

perceived as difficult due to lack of communication and informational exchange between stakeholders, in addition to competing pressures in the Year 6 transfer year, as shown also in *Study 1*. Reflecting on this insight in lesson 3 of the TaST intervention, children also created a puzzler activity, where the children wrote questions in class to ask their parents about the transition to secondary school and then played the game with their parents to answer these questions. This activity, which is guided by the child and thus in line with findings from *Study 1,* which raised the importance of sensitive, child-led transition provision, focussed on encouraging open communication and discussion channels between parents and children.

Schools also face many tensions when considering the implementation of school-based interventions and primary-secondary school transition is no exception. One such tension teachers face is negotiating relationships with transfer children which can be complex, too much and too little support being equally problematic for adjustment, as shown in *Study 3*. As found in *Study 1,* transfer children generally find seeking support from teachers easier at primary school than secondary school, where teachers are deemed more available. At the end of lesson 3, children participating in TaST engaged in a class-based activity to help them manage realistic expectations regarding changes in teacher relationships when they move to secondary school and strategies to access this support.

Negotiating relationships with transfer parents can also be complex over primary-secondary school transition which can be exacerbated by differences in parents' vs. educational practitioners' attitudes. For example, parents generally (although there are individual differences, as shown in *Studies 1* and *2*) hold more intrinsic–personal/social attitudes (considering children's individual sensitivities) towards their child's schooling, favouring pastoral and social support provision. In contrast, school managers often hold more of an instrumental–academic perspective, favouring results and standards (Runswick-Cole, 2011). For SEN children, factors at the school level, such as resource allocation, shaped by differences in these attitudes can have a greater impact on support provisions and continuity across schools, as shown empirically (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014) and in *Study 3*.

Thus, in summary, school transition needs to be approached carefully and sensitively, with all parties perhaps benefiting from an understanding of the tensions that

exist, and the need to involve all in the transition process through partnership, communication and informational exchange.

6.5. Valuing children's voice

The data emanating from the present research has been generated using various voice-focused methodologies inclusive of all key stakeholders, including children with and without special educational needs, whose voices to date have received minimal attention, both in schools and research, in the area of primary-secondary school transition. This is despite children having the right to participate in these discussions, and heavily valuing opportunities to be heard. Thus, the present work, challenges traditional evaluation approaches that study children and conduct research 'on children' as opposed to 'working with children' or 'for children' to bring about change. As shown in *Chapters 2*, *3* and *4*, children can provide context-specific insight into their first-hand experiences of school transition, including the support they receive and pressures faced, which can extend existing knowledge and improve educational policy and practice. In the context of the present thesis, this insight informed the design and implementation of TaST to enhance the programme's effectiveness. This further advocates the usefulness of voice-focused pedagogical practices and research methodologies.

Nonetheless, while incorporation of children's voice is a key strength of the thesis, it is also important to acknowledge the challenges inherent in this work, especially when working with more vulnerable populations, as shown in *Chapter 4*. For example, it is important to recognise the power imbalances inherent in adult-child interaction and how the authenticity of children's views can be shaped by this. Thus, as shown in the present study, voice-centred work needs to be approached sensitively with openness, assurance and respect. This can be successfully facilitated within collaborative and safe spaces led by external visitors as shown in *Chapters 2* and *3*, in addition to more participant-led approaches, such as photo-elicitation focus groups, as shown in *Chapter 4*. Children are shown to heavily value opportunities to have their voices heard, validated and actioned, which the present research strongly advocates.

6.6. Measurement constraints

To date, we have a limited understanding of how primary-secondary school transition impacts children's emotional well-being and which specific aspects of emotional well-being are most affected by the transfer. The present thesis has made preliminary steps in providing some insight into how primary-secondary school transition impacts children's *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy* and *Transition Worries*, and more importantly whether these outcomes can be improved through emotional-centred intervention. However, as raised in *Chapter 5,* further conceptual work is needed in order to refine this.

In *Study 4*, the scales used to assess children's adjustment were informed by Resilience Theory, previous research, in addition to practical insight into the challenges key stakeholders face during this time discussed in *Chapters 2*, *3* and *4*. However, drawing on the non-significant findings and implications discussed in *Chapter 5,* it is argued that these scales were too broad to fully account for the impact children's interactions, perceptions and interpretations of transition challenge may have had on their emotional adjustment. For example, while Sandler et al.'s (2000) *Coping Efficacy* scale assessed children's appraisals towards present and future problems*,* this scale did not account for the process of coping and the strategies children draw on to cope, specifically in the context of primary-secondary school transition. Moreover, Smith et al.'s (2006) *The Perceptions of Transition Survey,* which was used in *Study 4* to assess children's transition worries, was too broad, and did not account for the emotional challenges inherent in primary-secondary school transition.

However, Smith et al.'s (2006) *The Perceptions of Transition Survey*, which is a US scale, was selected based on the limitations, and especially the lack of sensitivity inherent in Thomasson et al.'s (2006) *School Concerns Questionnaire*, which is the most widely used scale to assess transition concerns in the UK, and asks children to rate on a Likert scale out of 10 how concerned they feel by 17 transition concerns. This is problematic, as by asking children to rate levels of concern, during an already worrying time, they may not have thought about has the potential to embed worries in children's heads. Besides this scale, a standardised quantitative measure to assess primary-secondary school transition concerns in the UK is lacking. For example, amongst the limited pre-existing scales which have assessed 'transition concerns' or 'transition adjustment', there are

important limitations, in that scales: lack sensitivity, focus on one aspect of transition, use open ended items which impose high literacy demands, design items with face validity specific for a particular study, rely on retrospective reports, or do not account for the longitudinal nature of primary-secondary school transition and instead rely on isolated, one-off measurements before or after the event (Rice et al., 2011). The latter two limitations are especially problematic as primary-secondary school transition is a process of assimilation which extends over a prolonged period, presenting the need to reliably and robustly track changes in children's emotional well-being longitudinally.

Taken together, there is need to design one robust and reliable quantitative scale to specifically and sensitively assess children's emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transition. Drawing on the work presented in this thesis, this scale will have two principle purposes.

1. Practical utility. The scale needs to enable educational professionals involved in supporting children over primary-secondary school transition, to administer the scale on a whole-class basis within primary and secondary school classrooms and score responses relatively quickly so this is not an additional pressure. This will provide educational practitioners with immediate insight into their class' emotional well-being, universal support their class may need and identification of specific children who may need additional support. Thus, to maximise the utility of the scale it needs to be simple and straightforward for children to complete, with little time demands, so the scale can be administered within the school environment and children can complete items independently. The scale also needs to be ethical and designed so items are positively phrased to not prime unanticipated worries.

2. The scale will also have empirical value. This will include more robust evaluation of pre-existing emotional-centred support intervention programme outcomes. In addition, for researchers designing intervention programmes, greater understanding of what aspects of children's emotional well-being are most affected by the transfer, identified through a reliable and valid primary-secondary school transition emotional adjustment scale, will inform refinement of the content (including key ingredients), delivery and subsequent effectiveness of both universal and targeted emotional-centred programmes.

Furthermore, a standardised valid and reliable scale would also enable sensitive and accurate identification of 'at risk' children to participate in targeted interventions and detect change in outcomes.

Thus, to ensure this scale is accurate and robust, there is need for further research. Drawing on the strengths of the present research with a 'bottom-up design' and preliminary qualitative work, in providing first-hand practical insight to holistically inform the design, delivery and implementation of TaST, it is recommended that the scale is designed using the Delphi method. This method is used commonly to design survey instruments (Hasson et al., 2000) and involves obtaining expert feedback from a multidisciplinary panel, such as bringing together the expertise of primary and secondary school teachers, educational psychologists and clinical psychologists, over a series of rounds, to reach consensus.

Moreover, the scale also needs to be receptive to children's pre-transition expectations, biases and anxieties, which may not always be linked to their post-transition adjustment. For example, as suggested in *Chapter 5*, some children may underestimate or overestimate transition challenges in primary school, which may make children more or less emotionally vulnerable to poor adjustment over the transition. Thus, it is important that when designing scale items, cross-informant reliability is considered, which could potentially be obtained using peer nomination methods (especially given findings discussed in *Chapters 2* and *3* pertaining to differences in adults' and children's appraisals of the school context over primary-secondary school transition). This would enable accurate identification of 'at risk' children both pre and post the transition period.

6.7. Implications

In sum, primary-secondary school transition is a critical period for eleven-year old children, that can have short-and long-term implications on their adjustment if they do not receive sufficient support (West et al., 2010) or if the move exceeds their coping capabilities (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016). While some interventions have been developed to improve children's academic and social functioning over primary-secondary school transition, emotional-centred support provisions are sparse, and face practical constraints at the school level and empirical limitations (van Rens et al., 2018). Therefore,

by designing a five-week emotional-centred intervention that builds on recommendations emphasising the importance of supporting children's emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transition (White, 2020), the present intervention has scope to bridge empirical gaps, as well as provide immediate support for professionals working in schools.

Empirically, the work presented in this thesis, provides further support for Resilience Theory, particularly Gilligan's (2000) five background concepts that underpin the concept which is firstly presented in *Chapter 1* and discussed in relation to the TaST intervention in *Chapter 5.* Resilience Theory recognises the role of both internal and external resources in shaping developmental outcomes, and thus provides a useful theoretical framework for primary-secondary school transition research, with children at the centre of this work. For example, the TaST intervention has been developed to not just focus on supporting the development of a child's internal resources, namely their coping efficacy, but also how they can draw on the support of others to scaffold these skills. Specialised and targeted support within the school setting, supplemented by support at home is deemed the gold standard for this.

The longitudinal design was shown to be a strength of the present research and extends our current understanding of children's adjustment during this time, as while there has been intervention research within this area, what has currently been lacking to date is a longitudinal focus (White, 2020). As discussed in *Chapter 5,* there are numerous problems with previous snapshot research in this area in not demonstrating the full picture of primary-secondary school transition, and the present research sheds further light on this using both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Extending on this, the mixed methods design was a further strength of the present research and provides insight into the process of primary-secondary school transition from the perspective of key stakeholders. The qualitative process evaluation findings discussed in *Chapter 5* also complement the outcome evaluation findings of TaST's efficacy, by providing insight into how these experiences were shaped by TaST. It is recommended that future transition research takes a similar approach.

One limitation of the present research was the lack of large-scale follow-up. As presented in *Chapter 5*, despite best efforts to match secondary schools and their feeder primary schools, it was not possible to follow up on a significant number of children post transition. Thus, further longitudinal intervention research is needed in this area using a

larger sample, ideally a randomised control trial, which is deemed the gold-standard, followed over time. Drawing on lessons learnt from the present research pertaining to challenges associated with follow-up when children transfer schools, one way in which this could be facilitated is through obtaining children's parents' email address in Year 6. The research team could then email children's parents at designated time points when their child is in Year 7 to ask their child to complete a follow-up survey electronically. However, there would need to be careful consideration of ethical issues, especially sensitivity, and GDRP, as in the present study, to maintain the children's anonymity and confidentiality, all participating children created an anonymous code and used this code when completing the survey at each time point in order for scores to be tracked over time.

Furthermore, there is need for further research to match control and intervention groups at baseline to shed further light on whether a targeted approach to emotional-centred support provision over primary-secondary school transition would be more appropriate. Again, drawing on and extending the findings presented in this thesis, this research would need to be approached sensitively recognising the unsettling, critical nature of primary-secondary school transition, in addition to considering involvement of already vulnerable children. In the context of discussion in *Chapters 4* and *5* pertaining to difficulties identifying 'at risk' children, and above in *6.6. Measurement constraints*, it is recommended that before approaching further work, thorough preliminary qualitative research is conducted with key stakeholders, adopting the approach taken in the present thesis. This practical insight will inform academics on how to best support more vulnerable children over primary-secondary school transition to avoid stigmatisation, overcome recruitment constraints and enable uptake and scalability of interventions within classroom settings.

In sum, the research findings presented in this thesis have important implications for the field and policy in elucidating the importance of supporting children's emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transition. While some interventions have been developed to improve children's academic and social functioning over primary-secondary school transition, emotional-centred support provisions are sparse, and face practical constraints at the school level, as well as empirical limitations (van Rens et al., 2018). Therefore, by designing a five-week emotional-centred intervention that builds on

recommendations emphasising the importance of supporting children's emotional well-being during this time, the present intervention has shown the viability of carrying out this work in practice, and has scope to bridge empirical gaps, and give rise to immediate practical implications for professionals working in schools.

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Appendices

Appendix 2.1: semi-structured focus group guides

<u>Child Focus Group Questions</u>

1. In general (and without mentioning particular people) how well do you feel year seven pupils have settled into secondary 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 do you think of this?

2. 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?

3. Before moving to secondary school what are pupils most looking forward to?

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

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 secondary school teachers than you had with your primary 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 (more independence)?
   - Can you talk to them more or less?
   - Is this different for boys/girls?

7. Did your primary schools prepare you for the move to secondary school?
   - What did they do?
   - Would you have liked more support? When?
   - What else could they have done to prepare you?

8. How do you feel we can better prepare pupils for the transition to secondary school? Is there anything you would have liked to have been done differently?

9. What advice would you give to parents to help them advise pupils about moving to secondary school?

10. What top tips would you give year six pupils about to experience the transfer?

Parent Focus Group Questions

1. How has the transition period been?
   - ➢ Have you or your child encountered any problems? If so how were they resolved?

2. How was the summer leading up to the transfer once your child had left year six?
   - ➢ Were you excited/nervous/sad to say goodbye?
   - ➢ Could you talk about your feelings with your child and vice versa?

3. In your opinion, does children's behaviour change as the transfer draws nearer?
   - ➢ When?
   - ➢ How did you deal with this?
   - ➢ What about communication, how was it?

4. How was the support from your child's primary school and secondary school?
   - ➢ What support did you receive?
   - ➢ Was this useful?
   - ➢ Could it have been better?
   - ➢ What type of support provisions would have been more helpful?

5. 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?

6. 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?

7. Now that you have navigated the process, is there anything you would do differently if you were to do it again?

8. What top tips would you give parents about to experience the transfer?

Teacher Focus Group Questions (Year 6)

1. On the whole how well were the children in your class ready for secondary school in the weeks leading up the transfer?
   - Were there any problems? How were they resolved?
   - How did last year compare to previous years?

2. Did you notice changes in your class' behaviours and dynamics as the transfer period drew nearer? What were they?
   - When did they manifest?
   - How did you adapt to this?

3. How would you describe the teacher-child relationship over the weeks leading up to the transfer period?
   - Does this change?
   - Is this different with boys/girls?

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 primary-secondary is a significant life event for parents in addition to their 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 are your thoughts concerning levels of pre-transfer support?
   - Should primary schools be placing more emphasis on the transfer?
   - Should provision be earlier/integrated into the year six school year-possibly alongside as opposed to post national assessment work?
   - What else could secondary schools do to support you?
   - Should school transition support work continue into the first few weeks of year seven?

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

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

9. What top tips would you give parents about to experience the transfer?

10. What top tips would you give children about to experience the transfer?

Teacher Focus Group Questions (Year 7)

1. On the whole how well have the children in your classes settled into secondary 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 they are a few months into 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?
   ➤ Is this different with boys/girls?

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 primary-secondary 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 are your thoughts concerning levels of pre-transfer support?
   ➤ Should primary schools be placing more emphasis on the transfer?
   ➤ Should provision be earlier/integrated into the year six school year-possibly alongside as opposed to post national assessment work?
   ➤ Should school transition support work continue into the first few weeks of year seven?

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

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

9. What top tips would you give parents about to experience the transfer?

10. What top tips would you give children about to experience the transfer?

Appendix 2.2: ethical approval letter

Keele
UNIVERSITY

11/12/2017

Dear Charlotte

PI: Charlotte Bagnall
Title: What are students', parents' and teachers' experiences of secondary school transition and how do they feel it could be improved?
Ref: ERP2363

Thank you for submitting your application for review. The proposal was reviewed by Ethical Review Panel. I am pleased to inform you that your application has been approved.

If the fieldwork goes beyond the date stated in your application, or there are any amendments to your study you must submit an 'application to amend study' form to the ERP administrator at research.governance@keele.ac.uk. This form is available via
http://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchethics/

If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me, in writing, via the ERP administrator, at research.governance@keele.ac.uk stating ERP2363 in the subject line of the e-mail.

Yours sincerely
PP.

Colin Rigby
Chair – Ethical Review Panel

Appendix 3.1: semi-structured interview and focus group guides

Parent Interview Questions

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?

Teacher 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?

Child Focus Group 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?

Appendix 3.2: ethical approval letter

Keele
U N I V E R S I T Y

19/03/2018

Dear Charlotte

PI: Charlotte Bagnall
Title: What are students', parents' and teachers' experiences of secondary school
transition and how do they feel it could be improved?
Ref: ERP2363

Thank you for your request to amend your study.

I am pleased to inform you that your request, of the 6th March 2018, has been approved by the Ethical Review Panel.

If the fieldwork goes beyond the date stated or there are any other amendments to your study you must submit an 'application to amend study' form to the ERP administrator at research.governance@keele.ac.uk stating **ERP2363** in the subject line of the e-mail. This form is available via http://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchethics/

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely
PP.

Dr Colin Rigby
Chair – Ethical Review Panel

Appendix 4.1: ethical approval letter

Keele
U N I V E R S I T Y

22/02/2018

Dear Charlotte

PI: Charlotte Bagnall
Title: How can we improve children's well-being over primary- secondary school transition in a special school?
Ref: ERP2368

Thank you for submitting your application for review. The proposal was reviewed by the Panel Chair. I am pleased to inform you that your application has been approved by the Ethics Review Panel.

If the fieldwork goes beyond the date stated in your application, or there are any amendments to your study you must submit an 'application to amend study' form to the ERP administrator at research.governance@keele.ac.uk. This form is available via http://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchethics/

If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me, in writing, via the ERP administrator, at research.governance@keele.ac.uk stating **ERP2368** in the subject line of the e-mail.

Yours sincerely
PP.

Dr Colin Rigby
Chair – Ethical Review Panel

Appendix 4.2: semi-structured interview guide

Year 6 Teacher Interview Questions

1. On the whole how well do you feel the children in your class are ready for secondary 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 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?
   - Is this different with boys/girls?

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 primary-secondary 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 are your thoughts concerning levels of pre-transfer support?
   - Should primary schools be placing more emphasis on the transfer?
   - Should provision be earlier/integrated into the year six school year-possibly alongside as opposed to post national assessment work?
   - What else could secondary schools do to support you?
   - Should school transition support work continue into the first few weeks of year seven?

7. I understand that [named school] is a special school and transition provisions can differ from mainstream schools. For example, most schools do not have transition support teams. Please can you explain your role working alongside this team.
   - When does support provision start?
   - Teacher input into placement decisions

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

10. What top tips would you give parents about to experience the transfer?

11. What top tips would you give children about to experience the transfer?

Primary school Transition Support Team Interview Questions

1. I understand that [named primary school] is a special school and transition provisions can differ from mainstream schools. For example, most schools do not have transition support teams. Please can you explain your role and the work you typically conduct at [named primary school] to support children over school transition.
   ➢ When does support provision start?
   ➢ Contact with parents/teachers/pupils

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

3. On the whole how well do you feel year six children in your school are ready for secondary school?
   ➢ How does this year compare to previous years?
   ➢ Have you encountered any problems? If so how were they resolved?

4. The transfer from primary-secondary 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?
   ➢ What top tips would you give parents about to experience the transfer?

5. What are your thoughts concerning levels of pre-transfer support?
   ➢ Do you think class teachers should be placing more emphasis on the transfer?
   ➢ Should provision be earlier/integrated into the year six school year?
   ➢ What else could secondary schools do to support you?
   ➢ Should school transition support work continue into the first few weeks of year seven?

6. 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
   ➢ Ideas on how to develop and support resilience

7. I have heard that in the past, year six children at [named school] have transitioned to Middle Schools, as opposed to secondary schools, to bridge this transfer and mitigate transition problems. Please could you elaborate on this?
   ➢ Do you think the age in which children transition to High school is important? (Why)

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

9. What top tips would you give children about to experience the transfer?

Secondary school Transition Support Team Interview Questions

1. I understand that [named primary school] is a special school and transition provisions can differ from mainstream schools. For example, most schools do not have transition support teams. Please can you explain your role and the work you typically conduct at [named primary school] to support children over school transition.
    ➢ When does support provision start?
    ➢ Contact with parents/teachers/pupils

2. With reference to past experience, how do you feel is best to address transfer problems?

3. The transfer from primary to secondary school 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?

4. What provisions do you carry out in your school to help year seven children settle into secondary school?

5. What are your thoughts concerning levels of pre-transfer support?
    ➢ Should primary schools be placing more emphasis on the transfer?
    ➢ Should provision be integrated into the year six school year?
    ➢ What else could primary schools do to support you?
    ➢ Should school transition support work continue into the first few weeks of year seven?

6. I understand that both [named primary school] and [named feeder secondary school] are special schools and transition provisions can differ from mainstream schools. For example, most schools do not have transition support teams. Please can you explain your role working alongside this team.
    ➢ When does support provision start?
    ➢ Pre-transfer contact with [named primary school]

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

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

9. What top tips would you give parents about to experience the transfer?

10. What top tips would you give children about to experience the transfer?

Appendix 5.1: *Pastoral Care in Education* **journal article discussing the design of Talking about School Transition**

Talking about School Transition (TaST): an emotional centred intervention to support children over primary-secondary school transition

Charlotte Louise Bagnall

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Talking about School Transition (TaST): an emotional centred intervention to support children over primary-secondary school transition

Charlotte Louise Bagnall

Faculty of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Transitions are an unavoidable part of life, often conceptualised as 'make it or break it periods'. They are important for personal growth and learning but can also be damaging in terms of our psychological wellbeing. Primary-secondary school transition is no exception and can heavily draw on children's ability to cope. However, support for children that pays attention to their feelings about the transfer is often lacking. Very few interventions focus on developing children's emotional resilience. There are also problems with the sustainability of such interventions. Thus, the present emotional-centred intervention, *Talking about School Transition (TaST)*, aims to narrow this gap. The evaluation of the intervention is ongoing and will be reported in a separate publication. Following an introduction of the limitations in supporting children's emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transition within schools, this paper provides details of the TaST intervention, including a brief description of the lessons' content. Attention is given to the design of the TaST intervention and how preliminary research, in combination with psychological theory and existing research, have informed the intervention content. The proposed research has short-term implications for present participating Year 6 children's adjustment and provides professionals working in schools with the knowledge and resources necessary to deliver TaST. In addition to this, the research has long-term implications for the field in highlighting the importance of supporting children's emotional well-being over this period.

Background

The number of children experiencing clinically significant mental health difficulties is increasing rapidly, especially long-term mental health conditions (Pitchforth et al., 2019), as are government initiatives emphasising the need for prevention and early intervention (Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Education [DfH & DfED], 2017). One in ten children and young

2 (-) C. L. BAGNALL

people, which equates to approximately three in every school classroom, have a diagnosed mental health disorder (Mental Health Foundation, 2016). Yet, access, support and treatment of mental health problems can vary considerably, resulting in 70% of children not receiving appropriate mental health support (Rees, Bradshaw, Goswami, & Keung, 2010). Children with mental health problems are more likely to experience problems in the short-term, such as increased educational disruption, which can account for up to 45% of dips in academic progression (Galton, Gray, & Ruddock, 1999).As they grow older, mental health problems developed in childhood can damage life changes and lead to further negative experiences, especially if symptoms are left undiagnosed and unmanaged (Murphey & Fonagy, 2012).

Transition, although an inevitable and unavoidable part of life, can be an opportunity for growth and learning, but also a period of heightened risk for the development of mental health complaints (Newman & Blackburn, 2002). Primary-secondary school transition, which is associated with simultaneous organisational, social, environmental and academic changes, is no exception and has long been recognised as a significant time for eleven-year-old children (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016) and the biggest discontinuity faced in formal education (Vaz, 2010). At this time, children need to adjust emotionally and socially, and become accustomed to new ways of learning as well as new environments (Rice et al., 2015). When navigated unsuccessfully, this can have ongoing short and long-term academic, emotional and social implications for children (West, Sweeting, & Young, 2010).

However, it was not until 2007 that primary-secondary school transition became a mandatory area examined in UK OFSTED inspections, where secondary schools were required to complete *The Self Evaluation Form* to specify their transition arrangements. This policy change not only reflected research at the time, which found the extent to which primary and secondary schools raised transition issues with their children to be variable across schools (Ofsted, 2007), but also reflects the growing attention this period has received in schools, research and policy. Nonetheless, since then, Government reports are still reporting primary-secondary transition as a period 'not handled well' (Ofsted, 2015, March, p. 65) where the quality of transition between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 is 'much too variable' (Ofsted, 2015, September, p. 21) and arrangements for transfer as a result 'weak in over a quarter of the schools visited' (Ofsted, 2014, p. 21). Evan's et al.'s (2010) review, which was conducted by the National Foundation for Education Research, found 21% of transfer children to report their primary school to not prepare them for secondary school. It is perhaps not surprising then that 15% of the sample reported not settling well into their new school.

While at face value there appears to be considerable school transition research, especially in the past ten years, as shown by Symonds' (2015) review, programmes to support children's emotions are minimal. Instead, most research

in this area tends to look at dips in educational attainment, with many intervention programmes focussing more on the practicalities of the transition and preparing children for the new ways of learning. What is often neglected is the fact that emotional well-being is directly linked with children's academic functioning (Vassilopoulos, Diakogiorgi, Brouzos, Moberly, & Chasioti, 2018).

Transition arrangements in many schools are often neglected or left until the summer term just before children make the transition. This is often because of more pressing academic and procedural demands such as national assessments, heavy staff workloads and difficulty finding space within the overcrowded curriculum (McGee, Ward, Gibbons, & Harlow, 2003). This reactive as opposed to preventative approach to emotional centred school transition support is largely inconsistent with Coleman's (1974)Focal Theory of Change, which emphasises the importance of gradual developmental change when negotiating multiple discontinuities. This approach can have both long- and short-term implications when considering primary-secondary school transition. In the short-term, leaving primary-secondary school transition provisions until the summer term can lead to a build-up of heightened anxiety and rush immediately prior to the transfer (Bagnall, Skipper, & Fox, 2019). In the long-term, poor primary-secondary school transition can heavily shape children's school attendance and engagement, psychosocial well-being and academic attainment (Riglin, Frederickson, Shelton, & Rice, 2013).

Furthermore, amongst the limited number of emotional-centred transition interventions administered within schools to support primary-secondary school, most are associated with challenges or methodological constraints. Significantly more school-based transition research is conducted in the United States (US) (van Rens, Haelermans, Groot, & van den Brink, 2018b). This has limited implications for provision in the United Kingdom (UK), especially given that children transition schools at a later age in America, and as a result of being older more likely to find school transition easier (Irvin & Richardson, 2002). Many evaluations of interventions are also small scale (Green, 1997), vague with regards to reporting participant numbers (Coffey, 2013), or employ biased participant selection (Evangelou et al., 2008) which limits conclusions that can be drawn. Longitudinal research is also limited (Riglin, Frederickson, Shelton & Rice, 2013), and instead researchers often employ single snap shot designs where data is collected before or immediately following the transition, which does not reflect the complexity of this period (Ashton, 2008). This limits the implications that can be drawn.

An additional challenge in this area is the approach taken. Interventions imposed on schools with little consultation, as opposed to those that adopt bottom-up or co-creation designs, can impede an intervention's sustainability (Stormshak et al., 2016), especially when considering schools' limited time and financial resources (Trotman, Tucker, & Martyn, 2015). Similarly, programmes that are targeted at particular children (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012) as opposed

to universal designs can be difficult for school buy-in, as educators must prioritize and effectively implement evidence-based approaches that produce multiple benefits for most, if not all children (Bennett, 2017). Moreover, over-reliance on external providers as opposed to teachers as implementers can be an additional barrier and impede progress (Diedrichs et al., 2015). This is not to mention that parents are reported to feel more comfortable when emotional centred interventions are delivered by teachers (99.2%), as opposed to outsiders (87.4%) (Barrett & Turner, 2001). As a result, developing emotional centred interventions that can be delivered by teachers is consistently highlighted as a priority in governmental reforms (DfH & DfED, 2017), in addition to academic research (Fairburn & Patel, 2014).

Despite consistent evidence of primary-secondary school transition being a period of vulnerability for eleven-year-old children, but also given that transition periods have been consistently highlighted as effective points to introduce and deliver intervention programmes (Newman & Blackburn, 2002), there is a lack of emotional centred interventions in this area (van Rens et al., 2018b). McGee, Ward, Gibbons & Harlow's (2003) survey study found 45% of parents to report their children needing help talking about their feelings in preparation for the transfer, 14% asserting that greater communication and explanations between teacher and child could help alleviate this anxiety. Therefore, as discussed below in the present TaST intervention, and supported empirically (Newman & Blackburn, 2002), the beneficial impact of insight but also support from families should not be neglected, and instead utilised in the transition process and support programmes. In sum, maintaining healthy and positive well-being pre, during and post navigation of key life changes, such as primary-secondary school transition, is paramount. This is not only for children's short-term adjustment (Symonds & Galton, 2014) but also long-term functioning, as successful navigation of transition establishes the foundations for future and lifelong well-being (Kessler, Berglund, Demler, Jin, & Walters, 2005). Thus, the above findings that many children are not receiving sufficient emotional centred support over primary-secondary school transition is concerning and highlights the need to support children's emotional well-being prior and during the transition period in order to nurture their long term well-being (Stratham & Chase, 2010).

Talking about School Transition (TaST) intervention

Negotiating multiple changes or 'stressors' within a relatively short period of time can have a negative impact on children's ability to cope, especially if concerns are not addressed at significant time points by well-equipped supportive figures (Eccles et al., 1993). While some interventions have been developed to counter the negative outcomes students commonly experience at secondary school transition, as discussed above, they are limited in foci

(minimal in addressing children's emotional well-being), number, and sustainability. Thus, the present emotional centred-intervention, which is called *Talking about School Transition (TaST)*, aims to provide teacher led emotional centred support over primary-secondary school transition within the school environment. The evaluation of the intervention is ongoing and will be reported in a separate publication. This paper aims to provide professionals working in schools with the knowledge and resources necessary to deliver TaST, as well as literature to demonstrate how the intervention is theoretically informed and evidence-based.

Key components

Universal-class based design

As outlined in the government's recent paper *The Green Paper: Transforming children and young people's mental health provision* (2018) the school has a 'frontline role' in supporting children's mental health and well-being (DfH & DfE, 2018, p. 9). This recognition is understandable, as children spend a substantial amount of their day at school, which is availability for educational practitioners to recognise and respond to children's emotional and social needs (Barrett & Turner, 2001). Moreover, the school environment can also be non-stigmatising by both parents and children, meaning that mental health support offered within the school is often portrayed as more acceptable, less threatening and stigmatising, than external services (Vaz, Parsons, Falkmer, Passmore, & Falkmer, 2014).

Evidence suggests that when well-designed and supported (Coffey, 2013), school-centred interventions can help children suffering from mental health problems (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017) and represent a promising approach in nurturing children's short-term adjustment and long-term resilience (Tanyu, 2007). Thus, in line with inclusive education policies (Booth & Ainscow, 2011), the TaST intervention has been developed to be delivered on a universal, whole-class basis, which avoids stigmatisation inherent in more targeted approaches. The uptake and scalability of interventions within classroom settings can be linked not only to the extent to which they are relevant and meaningful for students' real-life experiences, but also whether they can be easily incorporated into the already crowded school curriculum. Therefore, the five week TaST intervention is designed to be easily integrated into the Year 6 children's Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) curriculum.

Teacher-led

Teachers have: greater rapport and influence among students, more extensive expertise in behaviour management, are better equipped to meet the specific learning needs of their classes (Low, Van Ryzin, Brown, Smith, & Haggerty, 2014), and are also favoured by parents as deliverers (Barrett & Turner, 2001). Thus, it is

almost indisputable that teachers are natural deliverers of classroom-based research interventions. When teachers deliver small-scale or pilot interventions, they are also more ecologically valid and representative of long-term intervention success and scalability, as it will be teachers delivering these interventions in the long-term (Diedrichs et al., 2015). As a result, teacher-led school-based interventions are consistently highlighted as a priority for mental health reform (Fairburn & Patel, 2014).

Informed by the above literature, the TaST intervention has been designed to be delivered by Year 6 class teachers. Teachers are given guided lesson plans, Powerpoint lesson slides and workbooks for their class. For the schools that were delivering the intervention, I also met with each teacher to go through these materials as research has shown that teachers deliver intervention programmes with less adherence than researchers, potentially because teachers are uninformed of the theory behind programmes and reasons why certain elements need to be covered (Goncy, Sutherland, Farrell, Sullivan, & Doyle, 2015). Nonetheless, when interventions are delivered effectively by teachers, who feel confident delivering programmes, student responsiveness and programme effectiveness is greater than when programmes are delivered by researchers (Humphrey, Lendrum, & Wigelsworth, 2013).

Emotional-centred foci

Support interventions to improve children's emotional well-being prior to primary-secondary school transition are minimal both in schools (Hammond, 2016) and research (van Rens, Haelermans, Groot, & van den Brink, 2018a). Thus, the present five week-emotional centred school-centred support TaST intervention aims to narrow this research gap. The intervention foci and structure is in line with *Resilience Theory*, particularly Gilligan's (2000) five background concepts that underpin the concept: a) reducing stockpile of problems, b) pathways and turning points in development, c) having a sense of a secure base, d) self-esteem and e) self-efficacy, as resilience has been shown to be directly related to children's adjustment over primary-secondary school transition (Newman & Blackburn, 2002). For example, in line with a) and b) the intervention includes a variety of spoken and written individual, group, and class-based activities for the children to recognise the different challenges they will face over the transition period and reposition the move as a linear progression. For example, in *lesson 1* the children participate in a *progression activity* where they reflect on a transition they have experienced in the past (by writing down in their transition booklet what was easy and difficult during this time, how they felt, how they overcame obstacles and what they learnt) to prepare them for their future transition to secondary school. Activities such as this aim to improve the children's emotional resilience and coping strategies in preparation for the transfer, by drawing on children's internal resources, incorporated in d) and e) of Gilligan's (2000) model.

In line with c) of Gilligan's (2000) model, the children are also encouraged to draw on the support they receive from parents, peers and teachers, who have been shown to provide the most salient sources of support over adolescence and primary-secondary school transition (Coffey, 2013). In fact, as outlined in Jindal-Snape et al.'s (2018) review, factors external to the school, such as 'having a secure base' (outlined in item three of Gilligan's five resilience background concepts (Gilligan, 2000) at home through strong parent-child support relationships can be more predictive of adjustment outcomes than factors within the school and internal factors, such as self-esteem (West, Sweeting, & Young, 2010).

Preliminary research

The TaST intervention has been informed by a thorough literature review, in addition to three preliminary research studies. Findings from these studies and how they map onto the design of the TaST intervention are discussed below.

What are students', parents' and teachers' experiences of primary-secondary school transition and how do they feel it can be improved?

To explore transfer students', parents' and teachers' current experiences in the lead up to and over the transition period, and how they feel it could be improved, Year 7 students and parents, and Year 6 and 7 teachers participated in focus groups. See Bagnall et al. (2019) for further details. Key findings are outlined below.

(1) Parents, children and teachers together shape primary-secondary school transition experiences, and to improve this time for all, communication needs to improve across all these groups, so all are on the same page *(see homework activity, lesson 3)*.
(2) Making friends was a significant concern for students before, during, and after the transition period, but misunderstood by parents and teachers. Schools could assist in transition by focussing on supporting students to manage changes in their peer relationships *(see co-pilot (others) activity, lesson 3)*.
(3) Students generally found it easier to seek support from teachers at primary school. Helping Year 7 children to develop strategies to build supportive relationships with secondary school teachers is therefore important *(see teacher class-based activity, lesson 3)*.
(4) Concerns were expressed amongst transfer students about the dangers of too much transition exposure, and students expressed 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 *(modelled through the intervention structure, e.g. individual activities for more sensitive topics to give the children ownership over their exposure, such as the life transitions worksheet, lesson 1).*

What can we learn from cross-cultural insight into US transition provisions?

As previously discussed, much of the literature on transition has been conducted in the US and there is a wealth of transition support in American schools, which we may be able to draw on in the UK. To shed light on this gap, case study research was also conducted in California in the US, where some children can make a previous transition to Junior High school at age 12 or Middle school at age 11 (which is synonymous to the age in which children transition to secondary school in the UK). Therefore, using ethnographic classroom observations, student focus groups and staff and parent interviews, differences in transition preparations were examined. For more information, see Bagnall, Fox, and Skipper (in preparation).

(1) Schools in America 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 in line with recent UK school mental health reforms, regarding the need to support children's mental health within the school environment (DfEd & DfH, 2017). This support was also focussed on portraying school transition as an educational progression, as opposed to a loss, which directly contrasts with how secondary school transfer is discussed in the UK (Bagnall et al., 2019) *(see primary school progression activity, lesson 1).*
(2) Students favoured a school transition prior to High school transfer as they felt it provided them with transition exposure *(see challenges and solutions worksheet, lesson 2 and co-pilot (self) activity, lesson 3).*

What can we learn about transition from special schools?

We have a limited understanding of children's emotional experiences in the lead up and over primary-secondary school transition, and how this part of their well-being is supported (Evans et al., 2010). Understanding how children with pre-existing emotional difficulties cope with the added apprehensions and anxieties that come with primary-secondary school transition and how they are supported, has useful implications for emotional-centred transition provisions that can be employed in mainstream schools to support children who face similar concerns, but often express them at a lesser degree (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012). To do this a longitudinal exploratory-explanatory case study (using ethnographic observations, student photo-elicitation focus groups, adult one-to-one interviews, document analysis and

survey data collection) was conducted within one special primary school (specialising in supporting children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties) to examine their transition provisions. For more information see Bagnall, Fox, and Skipper (in preparation). Overall it was found that:

(1) Subject to the children's special educational needs there was a clear sense of uncertainty regarding when to initiate transfer support, and at what level, in order to establish a balance between consistency and exposure but not at the expense of children's short or long term adjustment at either primary or secondary school *(modelled through the intervention structure)*.

(2) When children were not included in school transition decisions (often due to fears of upsetting or unsettling the child) or transition preparations were absent, children discussed feeling voiceless, uncertain and unprepared about their futures *(see co-pilot (self) activity, lesson 1 and CATS activities, lesson 4 and 5)*.

(3) Too much hands-on child centred support at primary school and children's reliance on this was shown to lull them into a false sense of security that they will receive equivalent levels of support in their new secondary school, which was not often the case *(see challenges and solutions worksheet and school timetable activity, lesson 2)*.

(4) In line with Study 2, within the special school, transition support team counsellors were employed to provide the children with specialised support, which considered the children's pre-existing transition experiences. This specialised support may have also contributed to the children's more open attitudes towards mental health *(see worry box activity, lesson 1 and 5)*.

(5) In comparison to the findings from the mainstream schools discussed in the two studies above, the children, in addition to their parents and teachers, at the present special school, placed greater emphasis on the importance of children feeling safe and a sense of belonging at secondary school which was shown to override all other concerns *(see challenges and solutions worksheet, lesson 2)*.

Overview of the Talking about School Transition (TaST) Intervention

A transition programme has been described empirically as a set of activities, strategies or resources to smooth the passage of students from primary to secondary school by a) reducing student trepidation, and b) expediting the feeling of belonging in the new environment (Ganeson, 2006). The TaST intervention incorporates both a) and b), as focus is placed on improving Year 6 children's appraisals, coping skills and emotional resilience towards the transition prior to the move, in addition to providing students

with strategies to build a sense of belonging and feel confident once at secondary school.

Intervention outline

Each of the five intervention lessons last approximately one hour, which is considered an optimal length for children of this developmental age (Merrell & Gimpel, 1998), and is delivered on a weekly basis. The lessons have three main foci:

(1) Helping children to position the transition as a progression as opposed to a loss
(2) Building children's coping skills and resilience
(3) Emphasising the importance of social support, how this may change at secondary school, and how to access it.
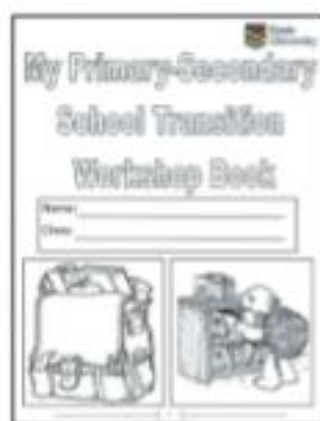
Transition workbook

Incorporated in each session are a variety of individual, group and class-based activities which aim to improve children's spoken and written emotional expression in preparation for the move. Each session has a lesson plan script, accompanying PowerPoint presentation slides and each child works from a transition workbook. Other components of the sessions, such as questioning and answering whole class activities can be tailored according to the needs and responses from the class. Furthermore, there is an element of flexibility in the final two weeks of the intervention, as in week four and five, Boulton's (2014) CATZ (cross-aged teaching) teaching techniques are used (see below). Table 1 shows a breakdown of the foci and activities in each intervention lesson.

Lesson one: progression vs. loss

Previous research has shown that within UK primary schools, primary-secondary school transition is often portrayed as a sad parting (Bagnall et al., 2019), as opposed to a progression, or step-up. Moreover, children who miss primary school report greater transition problems (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). In line with these findings, in addition to *Study 2*'s findings regarding the importance of presenting transition as an educational continuation, the focus of this lesson is

Table 1. Overview of Lesson Plans.

Lesson	Outline	Activities
Lesson One: Progression vs. Loss	Focus on positioning moving on to secondary school as a progression, or step-up, as opposed to a loss and sad parting.	• Transition introduction • Continuum activity • Primary-school progression activity • Life transitions worksheet • Worry Box and the colour of secondary school activity
Lesson Two: Coping strategies and resilience	Focus on the different changes transfer children will face on entry to secondary school and helps children to develop coping strategies to overcome difficulties that they may face.	• World café group activity • Dolphin/Shark group activity • Challenges and Solutions Worksheet • School Timetable Activity
Lesson Three: Social support	Children are encouraged to reflect and draw on peers, teachers and parents/guardians as supportive figures as they approach primary-secondary school transition	• Co-pilot activity-self • Co-pilot activity-others • Puzzle activity • Accessing support from teachers activity
Lesson Four: CATZ consolidation of learning	Learning consolidation of the past three lessons using cross-aged teaching as an alternative to teacher-led instruction	• Homework activity • CATZ Introduction and summation of individual five top tips • CATZ Finalise top tips • CATZ main activity
Lesson Five: CATZ presenting learning	Presenting learning and consolidation of learning acquired from the past four lessons	• Task re-introduction and presentation preparation time • Show and tell presentation session in a Year 5 classroom • Worry box address

positioning primary-secondary school transition as a progression, as opposed to a loss.

Children in this lesson are encouraged to position moving to secondary school as a new chapter by reflecting on their time at primary school. To do this on the *primary school progression worksheet* the children are asked to jot down their biggest achievement and fondest memory at primary school and how this will prepare them for secondary school, in addition to anything they will miss about primary school and what change they are most looking forward to. Research has shown that failure to talk or translate anxieties into language can inhibit coping strategies (Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990), thus these two questions were ordered this way purposefully, embedding principals of catharsis by providing an opportunity for children to acknowledge how they feel regarding leaving primary school but then immediately looking to the new opportunities they will gain at secondary school.

As shown in *Study 2* but also previous research (Irvin & Richardson, 2002), children who have been exposed to previous transition experiences find primary-secondary school transition easier, often as they have developed coping skills and resilience from these experiences to use as templates in the future (Adeyemo, 2005). Interventions that are linked to children's real-life lived experiences also help children to provide meaning to future events (Goncy et al., 2015) and this has been shown in the context of primary-secondary school transition (Hammond, 2016). In line with this, towards the end of the lesson, children complete the *life transitions worksheet* where they are encouraged to reflect on a previous transition that they have made and how the skills learnt from this life event can aid their transition to secondary school.

The two activities above are in line with Hallinan and Hallinan's (1992) 'transfer paradox', which presents the transition as both a step up and a step down (Hallinan & Hallinan, 1992). In other words, in order to gain a secondary student's level of autonomy and maturity, transfer children must be willing to give up the support, familiarity and protection of their primary school.

Lesson two: coping strategies and resilience

This lesson focuses on the academic, emotional, social and practical changes transfer children face on entry to secondary school and helps children to develop and draw on coping strategies and resilience to overcome these difficulties. To do this, a world café format is used, each group of children jotting down similarities and differences they expect to face across primary-secondary school transition, adding and building to each other's ideas, which aligns with a constructive phenomenological approach (Anderson, 2011). Children have been shown to perceive seeking support from peers as one of the most helpful ways of coping with problems (Coffey, 2013). Moreover, over primary-secondary school transition, parents and teachers are shown to hold differing attitudes and concerns than children (Evangelou et al., 2008). Thus, this activity provides space for Year 6 children to discuss primary-secondary school transition with likeminded peers.

Children's mental health and well-being is dependent on their feelings of control and this is no exception over primary-secondary school transition (Jordan, McRorie, & Ewing, 2010). In this lesson the children engage in the *dolphin/shark group activity* to develop awareness of their thoughts and how this affects their behaviour and feelings, which aligns with Fredrickson's (2001) *Broaden and Build Framework*. This theory outlines the significance of

positive thoughts in lessening the hold of negative emotions to promote positive behaviour.

In line with Newman and Blackburn's (2002) resilience strategy which outlines the importance of not eliminating risk, but instead providing children with the resources to build coping skills to effectively manage risk, the children then have time to practically address anxieties that they may have relating to primary-secondary school transition. They do this on the *challenges and solutions worksheet* by jotting down transition challenges they may face and then writing down a solution to each.

Lesson three: social support

Parents/guardians (Hanewald, 2013), peers (Waters, Cross, & Shaw, 2010) and teachers (Coffey, 2013) are significant support figures for children over primary-secondary school transition. However, school transition is also marked by peer and student-teacher relationship instability (Weller, 2007). To address this, in this lesson, the children are encouraged to reflect and draw on peers, teachers and parents/guardians as supportive figures as they approach primary-secondary school transition.

In the first part of the lesson the children complete the *co-pilot (self) activity* to write a personal pledge on how they can get themselves ready for secondary school, which models notions of mindfulness, especially written emotional expression (Brody & Park, 2004). Slater and McKeown's (2004) primary-secondary school transition peer counselling intervention found peer support learnt through the programme to be a source of containment and holding when difficulties were faced during the transition. In line with these findings, in the present intervention the children complete the *co-pilot (other) activity* to write a support pledge for their partner on how they can be there for them over the transition period. Children with good peer support over primary-secondary school transition period are shown to settle into secondary school better (Ashton, 2008). However, in the lead up to primary-secondary school transition, primary school friendships can become strained (Weller, 2007). Therefore this activity aims to minimise this.

Children who perceive parents to be available, open to communication and more importantly involved in their school life, show better adjustment over primary-secondary school transition (Pratt & George, 2005). However, although parents and students often share similar worries over the transition period

(Keay, Lang, & Frederickson, 2015), concerns are rarely shared which can cause both stakeholders to feel alone and unsupported (Bagnall, Skipper, & Fox, 2019). Therefore, encouraging open communication and discussion channels between parents and children can help both stakeholders (Keay et al., 2015). The *puzzle activity* is designed to do this, which is guided by the child, in line with findings from *Study One* regarding the need for sensitive transfer exposure.

In order to gain a level of autonomy and socially reflective maturity of being a secondary school student, transfer children must be willing to develop independence and organisational capabilities (Hallinan & Hallinan, 1992). The *homework puzzle activity* helps the children to develop these skills within a supportive and familiar primary school environment as the children will need to ask and write down in their transition book their parents/guardians answers to their puzzle questions and bring these answers to the next transition lesson.

While support from primary school teachers can help students prepare for primary-secondary school transition (Hopwood, Hay, & Dyment, 2016), support from secondary school teachers can help children settle into their new environment (Coffey, 2013). However, research has shown that children generally find seeking support from teachers easier at primary school which can impede the latter (Wit, Karioja, Rye, & Shain, 2011). Towards the end of the lesson the children then engage in a class-based activity to help them manage realistic expectations regarding changes in teacher relationships when they move to secondary school and strategies to access support.

Lesson four: CATZ consolidation of learning

In the final two weeks, to consolidate learning from the structured activities and discussion sessions incorporated in the last three sessions, and as an alternative to teacher-led instruction, the children will engage in Boulton's (2014) cross-aged teaching (CATZ) approach. Cross-aged teaching is a new technique where older students teach and pass on their knowledge to younger students. In order to teach younger children effectively, older children must firstly master their own learning, and then teaching reinforces this knowledge, as children are required to rework and make links with their existing understanding (Boulton, 2014).

CATZ has been shown to be effective in helping children to manage appraisals towards a range of social and emotional

factors (Boulton & Boulton, 2017). Aligning with the CATZ model in this lesson the children are asked to reflect on their learning from the past three weeks and think of five primary-secondary school top tips to prepare Year 5 children for the transfer next year. Creative approaches have been shown to enhance children and young people's emotional development and social skills (Galton, 2010b), and, aligning with this, the children are asked to illustrate their tips using a medium of their choice.

Lesson five: CATZ consolidation of learning

Building on Lesson Four the children continue engaging in activities guided by Boulton's (2014) cross-aged teaching (CATZ) approach. During this lesson the children finalise their top tips and then showcase them to a Year 5 class. This models Fredrickson's (2004) Broaden-and Build framework as the children will need to draw on their inner resources and use positive emotion and behaviour (in this case delivering their top tips) to discuss a sensitive topic (primary-school transition). As discussed above, by enabling Year 6 children do this within a safe, supportive primary school environment (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008), this provides assurance and the chance for the children to 'test out' their coping skills in preparation for the transfer.

Note: please contact the author if you would like access to the intervention resources.

Discussion

In sum, primary-secondary school transition is a critical period for eleven-year olds, that can have short-and long-term implications on their adjustment if children do not receive sufficient support (West et al., 2010) or if the move exceeds the child's coping capabilities (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016). While some interventions have been developed to improve students' academic and social functioning over primary-secondary school transition, emotional centred support provisions are sparse, and face practical constraints at the school level and empirical limitations (van Rens et al., 2018b). Therefore, by designing a five-week emotional resilience intervention that builds on recommendations emphasising the importance of supporting children's emotional wellbeing over primary-secondary school transition, the present intervention has scope to bridge empirical gaps, in addition to immediate practical implications for professionals working in schools.

In research, transition periods, such as primary-secondary school transition, have long been recognised as 'times of threat' (Newman & Blackburn, 2002, p. 17) but also 'windows of opportunity' (Rice et al., 2015, p. 9) for students to grow and learn. In order to support children during this time and develop best practice guidelines, it is paramount that evidence from previous research is

drawn on to refine the content and delivery of transition support interventions, as shown in the present TaST intervention (Cox, Bamford, & Lau, 2015). When incorporated through easy to follow intervention lesson plans, worksheets and Powerpoint slides, using a non-resource-intensive approach, as shown in the TaST intervention, these guidelines have immediate implications in providing professionals working within schools with the knowledge and resources to help children to cope with this transition (Waters et al., 2013).

Since the publication of the *Transforming children and young people's mental health provision: a green paper* (2018), which has 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 do this over transition periods, such as primary-secondary school transition (van Rens et al., 2018b). Drawing on this, the present intervention has made preliminary progress in demonstrating the viability of carrying out this work in practice as the emotional-centred transition lessons are designed to be easily incorporated into the PSHE curriculum. Interventions that are linked to school curricula improve not only uptake of interventions but are also more meaningful for students (Diedrichs et al., 2015).

However, there are of course challenges in implementing all of the proposals outlined in the Green Paper including any new interventions. Some of these relate to school systems and cultures as acknowledged by Trotman et al. (2015), who outline that the most effective school-based interventions not only require the involvement of external professionals, but also internal support within the school environment. For example, when pastoral policies and practices are supported by school managers and governors, in addition to being embraced by teaching staff and subsequently embedded into the school culture, interventions are shown to be more effective.

However, competing management priorities and increased pressure to redirect both human and financial resources, can often mean pastoral care support school interventions, such as the TaST intervention, are introduced when there is insufficient time put aside to deliver the intervention effectively. This is often subject to curriculum pressures and the demands of meeting performance targets (Jeffery & Troman, 2012) which can bring about reduced emphasis on children's emotional needs (Tucker, 2013). Lack of resources can also be a key constraint, which can add to the marginalisation of pastoral support within schools (Trotman et al., 2015).

The current TaST intervention is delivered by teachers over the duration of a school term, which builds on the short-comings of previous 'one-off' mental health workshops delivered by external facilitators and thus overcomes some of the shortcomings of previous intervention studies in terms of the project's sustainability, scalability (Diedrichs et al., 2015) and engagement (Goncy et al., 2014). The present TaST intervention also requires minimal resources, teachers in both intervention and control schools (and more widely) given the intervention materials

and guidance following the project to deliver the intervention in subsequent years.

However, there is more that needs to be done to embed the intervention into the school culture. For example, while the present TaST intervention is methodologically sound and theoretically supported, as with all school-based interventions, it is another matter trying to incorporate it within the school environment. Thus, as acknowledge by Trotman et al. (2015) examples of emerging practice should be read as just that, work that can have short term implications, but requires constant evaluation to bring about long-term change. Therefore, the present TaST intervention has immediate implications for year six children's adjustment who are participating in the intervention condition, but also preliminary long-term implications for the field and policy in elucidating the importance of supporting children's emotional wellbeing over this period.

The TaST intervention has also been developed to not just focus on supporting the development of a child's 'inner resources' but also how they can draw on the support of others. However, taking a social-ecological approach, it must be recognised that any such intervention needs to be implemented alongside changes to other parts of the 'system', with the child at the centre. This includes the role of peers, parents, teachers, the wider school system and processes, and the community. Thus, it should be recognised that the TaST intervention needs to be implemented as part of a whole school approach.

It is also important to acknowledge that tensions do exist for parents, teachers, and children, in addressing school transition. For transfer students, establishing a balance between exposure to primary-secondary school transfer changes and consistency in support is paramount during this period. For parents who are often negotiating similar social, emotional and procedural changes to their children, alongside feelings of loss inherent in saying goodbye to their child's primary school and in some ways their child's period of childhood (Zeedyk et al., 2003), providing this balance of emotional support can be difficult, and obtaining emotional support within the school setting can be incredibly useful.

As discussed above, schools face many tensions when considering the implementation of school-based interventions and primary-secondary school transition is no exception. One such tension teachers face is negotiating relationships with transfer students and parents, which can be complex, too much and too little support being equally problematic for adjustment. This means that school transition needs to be approached carefully and sensitively, with all parties perhaps benefiting from an understanding of the tensions that exist.

In sum, teacher-led school-based emotional centred interventions have been argued as a priority for mental health reform (Fairburn & Patel, 2014), yet efforts to do this over primary-secondary school transition are minimal. This absence is despite students' needs to access timely and sensitive emotional centred support in the lead up to this period (Rens et al., 2017). In part, this may be subject to a mismatch between children's concerns regarding secondary school and the

repertoire of skills they can draw on to address them (Rens et al., 2017); the greater this mismatch the more support children need (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Therefore, the TaST intervention recognises the importance of supporting children's emotional resilience and coping skills before critical events, such as primary-secondary school transition, to promote long-term adjustment.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID

Charlotte Louise Bagnall http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7213-2668

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Appendix 5.2: Talking about School Transition Intervention lesson plans

Intervention Brief

Schools are central to the lives of children and their families, especially in helping to promote, protect and maintain children's mental health and well-being. Over primary-secondary school transition particularly, support delivered within the school environment has been shown to have a stronger effect on adjustment than personal characteristics and parental reassurance.
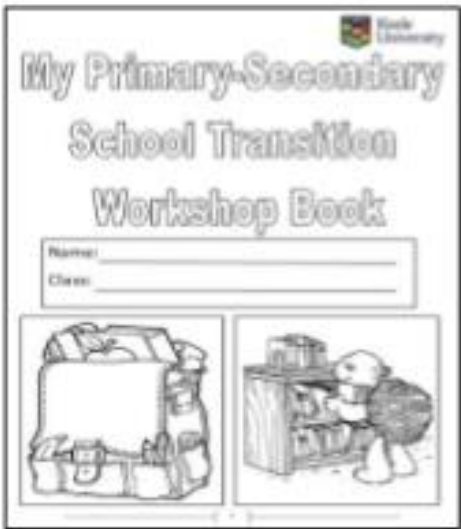
Informed by previous research conducted by other scholars, in addition to myself,the five lessons below aim to improve year six children's experiences over primary-secondary school transition, by providing information and strategies to help them develop independence, resilience, and coping strategies in preparation for the move. Aligning with inclusive education policies, the five-week classroom intervention will be delivered on a whole-class basis as part of the children's personal, social and health education (PSHE) curriculum in each intervention school.

Subject to prioritisation of National Assessment targets and behavioural concerns that may be implicated when primary-secondary school transition is addressed earlier in the year six-transition year, transition provision is often overlooked in schools and in research. Yet, this is at odds with year six children's need to access supportand can cause them to feel alone, unsupported and can encourage them to hide their concerns. For example, in previous research,45% of parents have expressed the need for more opportunities for their children to talk about their feelings prior to secondary school transfer, 14% asserting that greater communication and explanations between teacher and child could help alleviate feelings of anxiety during this time.

Emotional centred support provisionsover primary-secondary school transition also need to be sensitive to students' needs during this time. A balance between consistency and exposure is shown to be best, as children need a degree of insight into what secondary school will be like in order to establish and set realistic expectations, but this insight should be gradual and guided by the child to prevent them feeling overwhelmed. Research has also shown that adults need to be mindful to not be over-protective, anxious or cautious when discussing primary-secondary school transfer. Acknowledging this, these lessons are designed to facilitate emotional-centred primary-secondary school support provision within a safe, supportive environment.

Keele University

My Primary-Secondary School Transition Workshop Book

Name:
Class:

For further information, contact **Charlotte Bagnall** by email:
c.l.bagnall@keele.ac.uk

Session One Lesson Plan-Progression vs. Loss

In this lesson, as well as setting the scene for the lessons to follow, focus will be placed on positioning primary-secondary school transition as a progression, as opposed to a loss. Research has shown that students need regular and integrated emotional support in the lead up to secondary school transition. However, subject to prioritisation of National Assessment targets and concerns of behavioural issues that may be implicated when primary-secondary school transition is addressed earlier in the year six-transition year, primary-secondary school transition provision is often overlooked. This can cause a build up of emotions in the summer term prior to the transfer, when primary-secondary school transition is often finally addressed within year six classrooms. Feelings of loss can be especially apparent and accentuated the more the transition is portrayed as a sad parting, as opposed to a linear progression, or step-up, which can shape both appraisals and behaviours.

This notion of loss and delayed approach to school transition preparation is a sharp contrast to provisions carried out in other countries wheremore emphasis is placed on school transition as a linear continuation and progression. Children's time and achievements made at the school are celebrated and emphasis is placed on how these successes have put them in good stead and will prepare them for their next school passage.

This lesson aims to help children to start thinking about their transition to secondary school as a progression, by balancing the loss of leaving primary school with the anticipation of the new experiences and opportunities they will encounter at secondary school. To do this the children will firstly be encouraged to reflect on their experiences at primary school and then look to how these experiences can prepare them for secondary school. Towards the end of the lesson, the children will then engage in an activity to reflect on a previous transition that they have made and how the skills learnt from this life event can aid their transition to secondary school. This second session will also enable the children to realise that with transitions (even small ones) comes an element of change, which can cause feelings of discomfort. This will help the children to realise that feelings of apprehension towards school transition, like all new life passages, are normal, and something that will pass, but also that transition does not have to be a sudden end and abrupt beginning, and that there can be overlap between the old and the new.

1. General Introduction (5 minutes)

Establishing a set of rules that enables students and teachers to have a mutual understanding of what is expected in terms of their own behaviour and the behaviour of others, is particularly important when students are involved in activities that require the sharing of ideas, values, attitudes and especially emotions, as students need to feel safe and supported, not only by teachers but also by other students.

Explain to the class that over the next few weeks, they are going to spend one lesson per week taking a closer look at primary-secondary school transition. Explain that in these lessons, as a class, they will be looking at preparations for their move to secondary school and at times they will be encouraged to talk about how they feel, meaning children will potentially share personal feelings and experiences. Explain that before they can make a start on the workshops, three golden ground rules need to be put into place, as it is important that everyone in the class has a mutual understanding of what is expected in terms of their own behaviour and the behaviour of others in the workshops. Display **slide 2**, read the following rules and ask children what they think is meant by them.

1. We do not "put down" each other by laughing, talking over or interrupting someone when they are speaking. *Explain that everyone has the right to speak and everyone's opinion is valued.*

2. What other people say in class is confidential. *Explain that over the next few weeks sensitive topics will be discussed and everything discussed in this room needs to stay here. Remind the children that they can talk to their parents/guardians about what they are learning about and how they are feeling about the material covered.*

3. If you do not want to offer an opinion, you do not have to. *It is important to mention that every child has the right not to offer an opinion if they find issues or topics raised to be personally confronting.*

2. Transition Introduction (5 minutes)

It is important to remember that primary-secondary school transition is a significant life event for eleven-year-old children. Year six children will say goodbye to their smaller primary schools where they have attended most of their lives and have stable, personal and close relationships with peers and class teachers, to enter larger less familiar secondary schools where children are faced with new experiences and challenges. It is a developmental milestone for them and their first marked stage in growing up and their chance to become more independent and have greater responsibility. It is normal for children to feel conflicting emotions of apprehension and excitement when thinking about this next chapter, especially while at primary school and anticipating the move. However, children may not realise this, or struggle to put into words and voice how they feel, so it is important to remind them that they are not alone in feeling this way.

Move to **slide 3** and ask the class what they think the word transition means. Facilitate a classroom discussion and then show the answers presented on **slide 4**, fill in any gaps in understanding and wrap up by talking about the significance of primary-secondary school transition for eleven-year-old children.

Research has shown that children crave honest insight into how other year six children felt before making the transition to secondary school, especially as transfer children are often reluctant to share transition worries with peers and parents in order to

protect themselves and mask feelings of vulnerability, but also subject to fears of being misunderstood (by parents) or transferring worries. This can cause children to feel alone and unsupported in being apprehensive during this period of time.

Move to **slide 5** and explain that on the board are some quotes from year seven children who transitioned to secondary school last year. Read the quotes and reassure the children that it is common for children to feel a combination of conflicting emotions before moving to secondary school, such as excitement, apprehension and loss, until they settle into their new environment.

3. Continuum activity (10 minutes)

Research has shown that children's worries over primary-secondary school transition can be unstable, thus transition preparations needs to be sensitive to children's emotional well-being and preparations guided by children's needs. This activity will demonstrate this by illustrating how it is normal for children's appraisals to follow a continuum.

Thinking about the rules just discussed and quotes read, the children will engage in a continuum activity. Firstly, ask the class what is meant by the word continuum. Once answers have been taken, move to **slide 6**. Explain that this activity will be a fun chance for the children to start thinking about their feelings. Ask the children to start standing in the middle of the room. In this activity one end of the classroom will symbolise strongly agree, and the other strongly disagree. Several statements will be read out and the children in the class will be asked to stand in a position, which best represents, their feelings. For example, for the statement 'I like peas', children who love peas would stand close to the strongly agree side, and then move away the more they dislike this vegetable. After each statement, ask a student at random why they have positioned themselves at that place.

- 'I prefer Maths than English'
- 'I find change difficult'

- 'I am looking forward to secondary school'.
- 'The thought of meeting new people scares me'
- 'I want to leave primary school'

Can anyone suggest a statement that we can now do as a class?

4. Primary school progression activity (10 minutes)

Poor transition experiences are especially prominent amongst children who miss primary school, or struggle to adapt to informal psychosocial discontinuities embedded with being the youngest in a much older and mature secondary school body. Nonetheless, in order to gain a secondary students' level of autonomy and socially reflective maturity, transfer children must be willing to give up a layer of protection, which in this case is the support, familiarity and protection of the primary school. This activity encourages children to position moving to secondary school as a linear continuation and progression, as children will be encouraged to reflect on their achievements at primary school and look to how they will prepare them for secondary school. This activity is centred on positive psychology models, which outlines how recollection of positive experiences and emotions can promote positive behaviour, which is paramount for children to bounce back against stressful experience more quickly and effectively.

Encourage the class to go back to their seats and open their workbook to **page 1**. Explain to the children that their workbooks are theirs to write in and use as they please and will be stored in their tray while at school to maintain their privacy, but emphasise that these workbooks will not be completely secretive as in week three they will need to take these booklets home to work on a parent interview activity.

Move to **slide 7** and explain to the class that now that they have started to think about how they feel towards certain events relating to school transition, they are now going to look at the final continuum statement they have just discussed as a class relating to leaving primary school, more closely. Ask the class to complete the worksheet independently and remind them to raise their hand if they need additional assistance. Explain to the children that in ten minutes they will have the opportunity to share their answers with the group.

5. Life Transitions worksheet. (15 minutes)

Children who have been exposed to previous transition experiences find primary-secondary school transition easier, often as they have developed copingskills and resilience from these experiences to use as templates in the future.Interventions that are linked to children's real-life lived experiences help children to provide meaning to future events.This activity encourages children to reflect on how apast transition experience and the skills they used during this time, has put them in a good place to make a successful transition to secondary school. However, as children's readiness for transition exposure can vary, treat this activity sensitively and at the pace of each individual student. Avoid discussion time, as this activity has the potential to raise personal and sensitive topics.

Move to **slide 8**, explain that the children are now going to think about how previous experiences both inside and outside school, can help prepare them for their transition to secondary school.

For example, this section of the lesson could be introduced by saying: *many of the children in the class said that they find change difficult in the continuum activity. This is understandable as we are all familiar with the feelings experienced when we think about change. Anticipation, excitement and curiosity can be mixed with feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and fear, when thinking about unfamiliar experiences, places, people or events. However, you will have all experienced similar transitions and changes already in your life.*

Encourage the children to think about one of these transitions and fill out the next worksheet. For example, if the transition selected was moving house, in the first box things like carrying boxes, loading the moving van would be marked down as 'easy', and saying goodbye to old neighbours and packing written in the 'difficult' box. In the 'emotion'box, feelings such as excitement and apprehension could be jotted down.Ask the class to complete the worksheet independently and remind them to raise their hand if they need additional assistance or are struggling to select an event.

Examples of transitions children may have faced:
- *Starting nursery/ starting primary school*
- *Illness of a member of the family*
- *Changing school*
- *New siblings*
- *Moving house*
- *Moving through year groups*
- *New step-parents*
- *Change of class teacher, change of head teacher*
- *Supply teacher*

6. Worry Box and the colour of secondary school activity (5minutes)

It is important to help pupils to give words to the feelings and emotions they are experiencing at times of transition. Words can help children to understand their thoughts and feelings,the first stage in managing emotions on their own. Acknowledging concerns can also help children confide in others that can help them, as opposed to hiding how they feel.

Spend the last five minutes of the session introducing the worry box and emphasising its purpose. Remind the children of the importance of sharing as opposed to hiding worries, especially about moving to secondary school (use the quotes on **slide 9** to do this). Emphasise to the children that they can gain support from their parents, teachers, older siblings and friends who have already made the transition from primary to secondary school. Also explain that they are not alone if they feel worried about moving to secondary school, and how talking to other children who are also moving to secondary school this year, can be

helpful. Outline to the children that this is the purpose of the worry box, and that on the final week of the intervention lessons, ten minutes of the session will be spent selecting a worry at random out of the box and addressing this worry supportively as a class. Encourage the children to not put their name on the worry card, as we want the cards to be confidential.

Move to **slide 10**, in the middle of each table put out a pile of worry slips and ask the students to spend the next ten minutes either jotting down a worry that they would like to put into the box or filling in **page 4** of their workbook. Remind the children that they can do both and also that they can put a worry in the box in their own time as well if they think of one later, as a pile of worry cards will be kept by the worry box over the next five weeks of the intervention sessions. Emphasise to the children that hiding how we feel is never successful, whether this is to mask feelings of vulnerability or worrying others, and can cause children to feel alone and unsupported.
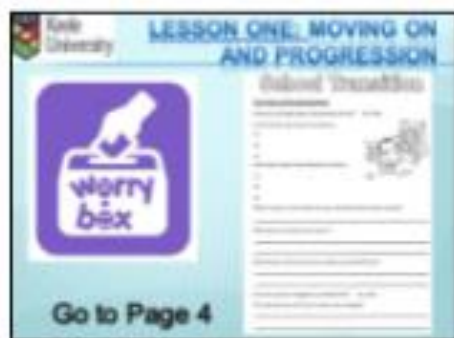
Lesson Plan Two: Coping strategies and resilience

Some children find it almost impossible to ask for help when faced with difficulties, others cope with underlying anxieties by acting out, but even children who appear to be coping well can be thrown off-course by transitions and changes. Increasing children's ability to cope with major life events, such as school transition, within classrooms and as whole schools, is a key component of education and health research, and imperative for children's long-term well-being. Supporting and helping children to develop emotional competence and psychological resilience is especially important over primary-secondary school transition, as children face simultaneous changes in their school environment, academic expectations and social interactions, which can heavily draw on their coping abilities.

This lesson consists of a variety of spoken and written individual, group and class based activities to encourage the children's spoken and written emotional expression and resilience by encouraging them to start thinking, talking and mentally preparing themselves for the transition, which has been shown to be neglected over transfer periods. This week predominantly focuses on the academic, emotional, social and practical changes transfer children will face on entry to secondary school and helps children to develop coping strategies to overcome difficulties that they may face.

1. Recap of session before (5 minutes)

Reminding and refreshing children with what was covered in the previous lesson, helps to set the tone for the lesson to come and establish a mutual understanding of what is expected in terms of lesson content, but also regarding their own behaviour and the behaviour of others.

As a class.spend five minutes recapping **Lesson One**. *E.g., Can anybody remind me what we did last week?* Use **slide 2**to ask the question and **slide 3** has potential answers. e.g.*Discussed what the word transitionmeans and started to look at how children's past experiences at primary school could help to prepare them for their transition to secondary school. Towards the end of the lesson, started to think about a similar transition the children had worked through in the past and how the skills learnt from this life eventcan help prepare them for their transition to secondary school.*

2. World Cafe (30 minutes)

Including pupil participation into school practice and valuing student voice is an educational standard, especially important over school transition where parents, teachers and children often show different attitudes and concerns. For example, children are primarily more concerned with social changes; parents'miscellaneous concerns arethat their child will be overlooked, and teachers generally more concerned with falls in academic attainment. Thus, acknowledging children's concerns and providing children with a safe place to voice themis important for their social and emotional development, especially in preparation for school transition where both are more heavily drawn on.

Move to **slide 4** and spend the next twenty minutes of the lesson looking at the academic, practical, emotional and

social similarities and differences between primary and secondary school. This activity should be conducted using a world cafe   format, with one piece of A2 or A3 flip chart paper with either the word 'social' 'academic' 'practical' or 'emotional' written in the centre of the paper and 3 green (to jot down similarities) and 3 red (to jot down differences) felt tip pens placed on four classroom tables. Divide the class into four groups and assign each group to one of the four tables at the start of the twenty-minute activity.Relating to the facet written on the centre of the paper, the children have five minutes to discuss the things that may change (differences) and stay the same (similarities)when they move to secondary school. During this time, the children should jot down these ideas on the flow chart paper, and make a note of two similarities and two differences in their transition booklet. After five minutes, the children will move to another table to do the same for another school transition facet, and expand and extend on their classmates ideas already written on the flowchart paper, as the same four sheets of flowchart paper will be used. As five minutes should be spent discussing and jotting down ideas on the flowchart paper for each facet, give the children two additional minutes at the end of eachto copy down two similarities and two differences from the flow chart paper into their transition workbook, as the children will need these for the next activity.

3. Challenges and Solutions Worksheet (20 minutes)

Children's mental health and well-being is dependent on their feelings of control. Primary-secondary school transition is no exception and children who report exerting little self-influence and control during this time show greater maladjustment, lack of school connection and low sense of self. Acknowledgement of one's own and other's emotions also plays a key role in adjustment processes, resilience research shown that failure to talk about concerns can inhibit coping strategies. This activity provides children with opportunity to practically address anxieties that they may have relating to primary-secondary school transition, within a safe and supportive environment.

Encourage the children to go back to their original seat. Explain to the children how the way we think can affect how we feel using **slide 5**. Explain to the children, that as we learn to think in more positive ways, this can make us feel better. Outline how psychologists use this idea to help people in therapy. Use the dolphin/shark activity as an example to put this learning into practice. This activity is presented on **slide 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10** and requires the teacher to read out a series of events, the class thenhave a minute to think about how positive thoughts (label as "dolphin thoughts") and negative thoughts ("shark thoughts") can change the way that person may feel. Spend ten minutes on this activity.

Example 1: picked to be in a school concert (slide 7)
-shark thought: I am going to be terrible; I cannot sing everyone will laugh at me. Feelings: scared, no confidence

-dolphin thought: I can do this; it will be fun meeting new people and spending time with friends after school. Feelings: excited

Example 2: having a friend visit unexpectedly (slide 8)
-shark thought: I have not had time to get ready, what will she think of me, what will she think of the house, what can we do. Feelings: worried, anxious

-dolphin thought: I have wanted to meet up with my friend for ages. We can have lots of fun. Feelings: excited, happy

Example 3: Having a new teacher (slide 9)

-dolphin thought: may teach a new, exciting learning style I find easier. Feelings: optimistic, excited

-shark thought: what if the teacher does not like me, the work is harder and I cannot do it. Feelings: worried, anxious, nervous

Moving to Secondary School (slide 10)

Can you think of any shark or dolphin thoughts and how they may make you feel?

Following the above discussion, move to **slide 11** and ask the children to individually select two of the differences that they have wrote down from the previous activity and copy these differences into the challenge boxes on **page 6** in their workbook. Ask the children to independently write a possible solution for each to adapt to that difference. Explain that we call such adaption in psychology resilience.

Give the children seven minutes to do this and three minutes should then be spent guiding a class discussion for the students to share their solutions. *Research has shown that children value and want greater teacher-child discussion over primary-secondary school transition to alleviate apprehension and anxiety, this activity enables you to do this.*

4. School Timetable Activity (5 minutes)

While some procedural concerns, particularly anxieties relating to new routines and the school size, are resolved within the first term of secondary school once children become more settled, other changes which require differentiation between previous codes of behaviour and new ones can be more long-standing. Research suggests that children want practical exposure to some of the challenges they may face over primary-secondary school transition and opportunity to 'test out' how to cope with these challenges, such as the above, in a safe place in preparation for the transfer. Becoming more organised and independent is something many transfer children struggle with over primary-secondary school transition, and are apprehensive about in preparation for the move. This activity provides children with opportunity to practice this.

Move to **slide 12** and ask the children to turn to **page 7** in their workbook and independently work on the timetable activity by copying down the items from the list below the timetable that they will need for Tuesday and Thursday.

Correct answers:

Tuesday: laboratory coat and goggles, english book, maths book, calculator, ruler, ingredients, pencil case, water bottle

Thursday: laboratory coat and goggles, english book, maths book, calculator, ruler, r.e. book, history book

Lesson Plan Three: Social Support

Supportive relationships are important for children's emotional wellbeing, and especially over primary-secondary school transition, where parents, peers and teachers are significant sources of support for children. However, school transition can also be marked by peer and student-teacher relationship instability. In this session, children will be encouraged to reflect and draw on peers, teachers and parents/guardians as supportive figures as they approach primary-secondary school transition.

1. Recap of session before (5 minutes)

Reminding and refreshing children of what was covered in the previous lesson, helps to set the tone for the lesson to come and establish a mutual understanding of what is expected in terms of lesson content, but also regarding their own behaviour and the behaviour of others.

As a class spend five minutes recapping **Lesson two**. *E.g. Can anybody remind me what we did last week?* Use **slide 2**, **slide 3** has potential answers, *e.g. participated in a World Cafe group activity and discussed academic, social, practical and emotional similarities and differences children face over primary-secondary school transition, learnt about how the way we think can affect how we feel and behave.*

Exeter University **Lesson Three: Social Support**
What did we do last session?
- World Café
- Learnt about the importance of thinking positively
- Packed secondary school bag following a timetable

2. Co-pilot activity-self (10 minutes)

It is important to help children to give words to the feelings they are experiencing at times of transition. Words can help children to understand their thoughts and feelings, the first stage in managing emotions on their own. Acknowledging concerns can also help children to confide in others that can help them as opposed to hiding how they feel.

School Transition

Move to **slide 4** and ask the children to use the techniques covered last session about coping strategies to make a personal pledge in the final box on **page 8** by jotting down a few ideas regarding what they could do to prepare themselves for secondary school. Explain that writing down worries and ways to overcome them is a mindfulness technique, called written emotional expression, and is believed to help people cope with challenging periods, and could be used to help prepare them for primary-secondary school transition. Spend ten minutes on this box.

Co-pilot activity-others (10 minutes)

Children with good peer support over primary-secondary school transition period are shown to settle into secondary school better. Thus, facilitating and promoting peer affiliation is especially important.

Explain to the children that support from parents, teachers, peers and siblings can really help children think more clearly and feel less worried, and school transition is no different. Emphasise that everyone in this class is in the same position and will share similar excitement but also worries about moving to

secondary school.

For this next activity encourage the children to pretend they are co-pilots about to voyage on a new journey to secondary school. Give the children two minutes to find a partner (ideally a child who is transitioning to the same secondary school as them) and give the children three minutes to talk to their partner about how they can support each other over the transition to secondary school. After this discussion time, display **slide 5** and ask the children to swap transition booklets. Give the children five minutes to write in their partner's co-pilot box on **page 9** what they have just discussed about how they are going to support them.

3. Puzzle activity (30 minutes)

Research has shown that children who perceive parents to be available, open to communication and more importantly involved in their school life, show better adjustment over primary-secondary school transition. However, although parents and students often share similar worries over the transition period (feelings of loss, anxieties regarding the unknown and changes in teaching being most common), these concerns are often not shared and hidden from each other, subject to fears of appearing vulnerable or worrying the other.

Nonetheless, when parents and students hide these anxieties from each other, this can cause them to feel alone and unsupported. Therefore, encouraging open communication and discussion channels between parents and children is believed to help both adults and children. This activity is designed to do this, and is guided by the child, as research has shown that students need a degree of insight into what secondary school will be like, but this insight should be sensitive to the child's specific needs.

Display **slide 6** and emphasise to the children that primary to secondary school transition is a period of change but also a normal event that lots of children experience and have experienced. Emphasise that talking to adults or older children who have already made the transition from primary to secondary school about their experiences can help prepare them for their move ahead. Ask the children to turn to **page 9**. Explain to the children that they are now going to create a puzzle to help them start talking to their parents/guardians or older members of their family about moving to secondary school. Give the children ten minutes to think of eight questions they would like answers to. If children are struggling display **Slide 7** and ask the children to use the questions that are on the slide to help them to think of their own.

Give the children seventeen minutes to: copy down their eight questions onto their puzzle, number the inner corners 1-8, colour the outer four corners in a different colours, cut out and make their puzzle. Use **slide 8** to help explain to the children of how to make their origami puzzle. Once the seventeen minutes have passed, ask the children to put the puzzle in their bag and turn to **page 11** in their workbook. Display **slide 9** and explain to the children that over the next week they need to interview a parent/guardian or older member of their family using their puzzle and fill in **page 11** in preparation and as homework for next week. Emphasise to the children that it is important that their parent reads the **parent leaflet** provided before working on this activity. Remind the children that they need to remember to take their workbook home today and then back to school next week for their next transition lesson, emphasise that this is good practice and will help to prepare them for secondary school.

Parent/Guardian Leaflet:
It is important to acknowledge that parents/guardians can also have worries over primary-secondary school transition, especially if this is their first time. When parents struggle to adapt to their changing

role in supporting a secondary school child, this can not only affect parent-child relationships, but their child's adjustment.

However, research has shown that for year six and seven children, the people who helped the most to prepare for secondary school transition were parents (41%) and when parents/guardians are involved during initial primary-secondary school transition, there is greater likelihood that this partnership will continue throughout secondary school. Therefore, establishing supportive parent/guardian-child relationships early on can be very important for children's long-term adjustment and development.

This parent/guardian leaflet is designed to empower parents/guardians and provide strategies to help them manage their own worries and support their child.

4. Accessing support from teachers activity (5 minutes)

Support from both primary and secondary school teachers cannot be underestimated over primary-secondary school transition. However, research has shown that children generally find seeking support from teachers easier at primary school, where teachers are perceived to be more open, approachable and available. This activity reminds children that they can and should still access support from teachers when they move to secondary school, although the way students do this may change, reflective of changes within the secondary school environment. For example, children are taught by many teachers at secondary school for short time periods, which can restrict opportunities for relationship formation and be at odds with what they have been used to at primary school. This can be more concerning when children miss primary school. It is important that children are aware of this and primary schools set realistic expectations for children over primary-secondary school transition so children do not feel falsely prepared.

Move to **slide 10** and ask children to put their hand up to suggest who is missing from the important supportive people mind-map. The aim is to discuss the importance of teacher support at both primary and secondary school and to encourage children to start thinking about how relationships with teachers and how they are taught may change when they move to secondary school and what they can do to feel supported by teachers. Use the quotes presented on **slide 11** to guide this discussion.

Important supportive people

Parents/ guardians

Peers

?

Lesson Plan Four: CATS consolidation of learning

In the final two weeks, to consolidate learning from the structured activities and discussion sessions incorporated in the last three sessions, and as an alternative to teacher-led instruction, the children will engage in Boulton and Boulton's (2017) cross-aged teaching (CATS). Cross-aged teaching is a new technique where older students teach and pass on their knowledge to younger students. In order to teach younger children effectively, older children must firstly master their own learning, and then teaching reinforces this knowledge, as children are required to rework and make links with their existing understanding. CATS has been shown to be effective in a range of domains, especially in teaching and modifying children's appraisals to a range of social and emotional factors.

Aligning to CATS, during this session the children will come up with five primary-secondary school top tips. The children will then translate these tips into practice using a medium of their choice, such as a poster, leaflet, story, poem, to prepare year five children for the transfer next year. The children will then showcase these top tips, using their chosen medium next week in their final workshop session.

1. Recap of session before (5 minutes)
Reminding and refreshing children with what was covered in the previous lesson, helps to set the tone for the lesson to come and establish a mutual understanding of what is expected in terms of lesson content, but also regarding their own behaviour and the behaviour of others.

As a class spend five minutes recapping **Lesson three**. *E.g. Can anybody remind me what we did last week?* Use **slide 2**, **slide 3** has potential answers, *e.g. wrote a personal pledge and pledge to a peer (who is going to the same secondary school) about preparing for primary-secondary school transition, created a origami puzzle to quiz parents/guardians about their experiences moving from primary-secondary school and gain answers to pressing questions and looked at how teacher support may change when moving to secondary school and how to adapt in order to obtain support.*

What did we do last session?

- Wrote a personal pledge and a pledge to a peer
- Created a origami puzzle to quiz parents/guardians
- Looked at how teacher support may change when children move to secondary school

School Transition

2. Homework activity (10 minutes)

*While some procedural concerns, particularly anxieties relating to new routines and the school size, tend to disappear within the first term of secondary school once children become more settled, other tensions, particularly aspects which require differentiations between previous codes of behaviour and new ones, tend to be more long-standing and can compromise children's ability to cope. Becoming more independent and organised are changes that children are apprehensive about prior to the move, and struggle to adjust too. This activity gives children the opportunity to develop organisation skills in preparation for the transition to secondary school, within a safe and supportive environment. Therefore, ensure that the children experience the consequences of not returning their transition booklet and completing the homework by not being able to participate in this question and answer discussion, but provide children with photocopies of **page 12** so they can continue participating in the lesson after this activity.*

Present **slide 4** and facilitate a class discussion, with the children sharing their questions and parents/guardians' answers.

3. CATS Introduction and summation of individual five top tips (10 minutes)

Explain to the children that they are going to put some of the solutions to the challenges they discussed in week 2 into practice using a new and exciting teaching technique called CATS. Display **slide 5** and explain that CATS stands for cross-aged teaching and involves children putting their learning into practice in the real world! Explain that they are going to do this using what they have learnt about secondary school transition over the last three weeks, and will use this learning to help prepare year five children for the transition. Firstly ask the children to come up with five top school transition tips they would give to a year five child when they move to year six next year. Give the children ten minutes to do this and display **slide 6**.

Examples of top tips (presented on **slide 7**):

- _Be prepared and organised by packing your bag the night before and completing your homework on the day you receive it._

- _Make friends and be sociable, your peers will help to support you during the initially settling in period and throughout secondary school._

- _Remember that you are not alone, everyone transitions schools and there are lots of people that you can go to obtain support._

- _First impressions matter. Be punctual, organised and polite._

3. CATS Finalise top tips (5 minutes)

Explain to the children that they are now going to put these tips into practice by creating a poster, leaflet, poem, role play (with script) or even a story to show their importance. Explain that they will use this work to present their five top tips to the year five children in their school next week to help prepare them for their transition to secondary school next year. Display examples from previous years on **slide 8, 9 and 10**. Explain to the children that they can do this in groups of no more than four children, then either put the children into groups or allow them two minutes to do this. Once the children are sat in their groups, give them an additional three minutes to discuss the top tips that they wrote independently and decide which five that they would like to present, encourage each group to select at least one tip from each member's list. Display **slide 11**.

3. CATS main activity (30 minutes)

Display **slide 12** and encourage the children to work on their leaflet, poster, storyboard, role-play etc. Explain that the children have the remaining thirty minutes of the lesson to do this and emphasise that they need to be finished by the end of the lesson so they can present to the year five children in the next transition lesson.

In order to gain a level of autonomy and socially reflective maturity of being a secondary school student, transfer children must be willing to develop independence and self-management capabilities. Giving the children opportunity to test these capabilities, by giving them ownership over work deadlines and time limits such as the above activity, within a supportive, familiar and protective primary school environment will help them to gain confidence to replicate this at secondary school.

Lesson Plan Five: CATS presenting learning

Building on last session the children will continue engaging in Boulton and Boulton's (2017) cross-aged teaching (CATS), a technique where older students teach and pass on their knowledge to younger students.

This week, to consolidate learning the children will have acquired from the structured activities and discussion sessions incorporated in the last three sessions, and as an alternative to teacher-led instruction, the children will finalise their top tips using their medium of choice and showcase these top tips to a class of year five children.

1. Recap of session before (5 minutes)
Reminding and refreshing children with what was covered in the previous lesson, helps to set the tone for the lesson to come and establish a mutual understanding of what is expected in terms of lesson content, but also regarding their own behaviour and the behaviour of others.

As a class spend five minutes recapping **Lesson four**. *E.g. Can anybody remind me what we did last week?* Use **slide 2**, **slide 3** has potential answers, e.g. *discussed the parent interview homework, learnt about what CATS is and used this technique to create five top tips to present to year five children to prepare them for primary-secondary school transition.*

2. Task re-introduction and presentation preparation time (10 minutes)
Facilitate a class discussion using **slide 4** about what makes a good presentation (**slide 5** has the answers). Then display **slide 6** and give the children 10 minutes to prepare for their year five presentations, emphasise that the children will be going to the year five classroom in ten minutes so they need to be ready.

3. Show and tell presentation session in year five classroom (30 minutes)
Modelling Fredrickson's (2004) Broaden-and-Build framework, positive emotions are believed to promote positive behaviour to 'bounce back' against stressful experiences more quickly and effectively. This presentation activity encourages children to do this as children will be discussing a sensitive topic (primary-school transition), which will draw on their inner resources to remain calm and to control the expression of their emotions.

Prior to the students showcasing their top tips, provide a brief introduction to the year five children and teacher explaining the importance of primary-secondary school transition, what the children have been doing over the last five weeks and briefly outline what CATS is (could ask the students to give answers). Then give the children the remaining time to share their work. Ensure a sensitive and supportive environment is maintained throughout with one child speaking to the group at one time.

4. Worry box address (15 minutes)
Display **slide 7** and ask a child at random to close their eyes and select a worry out of the box and read this worry to the class. Facilitate a class discussion about how this worry could be addressed, ensure that this is carried out sensitively and provide greater clarification where necessary. Children can also fill in **page 15** during this time.

For 68% of children primary-secondary school transition is hard to cope with and when worries are not addressed sensitively at appropriate times by supportive figures this can have long-term negative implications. This activity gives children the opportunity to voice their concerns, developing their spoken emotional expression skills and address these worries sensitively within a supportive environment.

Appendix 5.3: Talking about School Transition Intervention PowerPoint slides

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Slide 1:

Primary-Secondary School Transilon Workshops

LESSON TWO: Coping strategies and resilience

Slide 2:

Lesson Two: Coping strategies and resilience
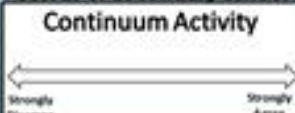
What did we do last session?

Slide 3:

Lesson Two: Coping strategies and resilience

What did we do last session?

- Continuum activity
- Primary school reflection
- Life transition worksheet
- Colour of secondary school

Continuum Activity

Strongly Disagree — Strongly Agree

Slide 4:

Lesson Two: Coping strategies and resilience

Mind Café

PRACTICAL   ACADEMIC

EMOTIONAL   SOCIAL

Slide 5:

Lesson Two: Coping strategies and resilience

- The way we think affects the way we feel and what we do

- By helping people to think in more optimistic and positive ways, we can change the way they feel and behave.

- We use these techniques in psychology: Cognitive Behavioural Theories and Rational Emotive Therapy

Slide 6:

Lesson Two: Coping strategies and resilience

We are now going to practice this...

positive thoughts (dolphin thoughts)   negative thoughts (shark thoughts)

Slide 7

Lesson Two: Coping strategies and resilience

You are picked to be in a school concert

What would be the shark thought and what would be the dolphin shark

1. I am going to be terrible, I can't sing everyone will laugh at me
2. I can do this, it will be fun meeting new people and spending time with friends after school

positive thoughts (dolphin thoughts)

negative thoughts (shark thoughts)

Slide 8

Lesson Two: Coping strategies and resilience

You have a friend visiting unexpectedly

What would be the shark thought and what would be the dolphin shark

1. I haven't had time to get ready, what will he/she think of me, what will he/she think of my bedroom, what can I do
2. I have wanted to meet up with my friend for ages. We can have so much fun

positive thoughts (dolphin thoughts)

negative thoughts (shark thoughts)

Slide 9

Lesson Two: Coping strategies and resilience

You have a new teacher

What would be the shark thought and what would be the dolphin shark

1. What if the teacher doesn't like me, the work is harder and I can't do it
2. May teach a new, exciting learning style I find easier.

positive thoughts (dolphin thoughts)

negative thoughts (shark thoughts)

Slide 10

Lesson Two: Coping strategies and resilience

Primary-secondary school transition

Can somebody think of a statement...

✦ What could be a dolphin thought

✦ What could be a shark thought

positive thoughts (dolphin thoughts)

negative thoughts (shark thoughts)

Slide 11

Lesson Two: Coping strategies and resilience

Go to Page 6

Select two or more challenges and find a solution or 'dolphin thought'

7 minutes independent working

School Transition

Slide 12

Lesson Two: Coping strategies and resilience

Go to Page 7 and pack your school bag for TUESDAY and THURSDAY

5 minutes independent working

School Transition

Slide 1

Primary-Secondary School Transition Workshops

LESSON THREE:
Social Support

Slide 2

Lesson Three: Social Support

What did we do last session?

Slide 3

Lesson Three: Social Support

What did we do last session?

- World Café
- Learnt about the importance of thinking positively
- Packed secondary school bag following a timetable

Slide 4

Lesson Three: Social Support

School Transition

Turn to Page 8

In the second box at the bottom of the page write a personal pledge to explain how you are going to get yourself ready for secondary school.

10 minutes independent working

Slide 5

Lesson Three: Social Support

School Transition

Now swap transition booklets with your partner and in their first box at the top of the page write a pledge to them to explain how you are going to support them over the transition to secondary school.

Slide 6

Lesson Three: Social Support

Turn to Page 9

Think of eight questions you would like answering about moving to secondary school and write them in the box.

10 minutes independent working

School Transition

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Slide 1: **Primary-Secondary School Transition Workshops** — LESSON FOUR CATS consolidation of learning

Slide 2: LESSON FOUR: CATS consolidation of learning — **What did we do last session?**

Slide 3: LESSON FOUR: CATS consolidation of learning — What did we do last session? • Wrote a personal pledge and a pledge to a peer • Created a origami puzzle to quiz parents/guardians • Looked at how teacher support may change when children move to secondary school

Slide 4: LESSON FOUR: CATS consolidation of learning — **Parent/guardian discussion homework** Turn to Page 12

Slide 5: LESSON FOUR: CATS consolidation of learning — CATS • Cross-aged teaching • Enables pupils to put their learning into practice • Older students teach and pass on their knowledge to younger students

Slide 6: LESSON FOUR: CATS consolidation of learning — Turn to Page 11 Independently think of five top tips 10 minutes quiet working

LESSON FOUR: CATS consolidation of learning

Examples of Top Tips

• Be prepared and organised by packing your bag the night before and complete your homework on the day you receive it.

• Make friends and be sociable, your peers will help to support you during this initially settling in period and throughout secondary school.

• Remember that you are not alone and there are lots of people to support you.

• First impressions matter. Be punctual, organised and polite

7

LESSON FOUR: CATS consolidation of learning

Leaflets

8

LESSON FOUR: CATS consolidation of learning

Posters

9

LESSON FOUR: CATS consolidation of learning

Story   Rhyme

10

LESSON FOUR: CATS consolidation of learning

Select Five Top Tips as a group
each group must select at least one tip from each group member's list

3 minutes of discussion

11

LESSON FOUR: CATS consolidation of learning

Work on you Five Top Tips Group Work

Use your planning space on **Page 11** and **12**

30 minutes group work

12

Slide 1:

Primary-Secondary School Transition Workshops

LESSON FIVE
CATS presenting learning

Slide 2:

LESSON FIVE: CATS presenting learning

What did we do last session?

Slide 3:

LESSON FIVE: CATS presenting learning

What did we do last session?
•Discussed parent interview homework

•Learnt about CATS and used this technique to create five top tips to prepare year five children for primary-secondary school transition

Slide 4:

LESSON FIVE: CATS presenting learning

What makes a good presentation?

Slide 5:

LESSON FIVE: CATS presenting learning

Good speech volume (not too quiet and not too loud)

Presenters speak clearly and concisely

Audience is engaged

What makes a good presentation?

Knowledgeable speakers

Speakers are enthusiastic

Presentation is carefully planned and rehearsed

Slide 6:

LESSON FIVE: CATS presenting learning

Prepare how you are going to present your Five Top Tips Group Work

Use Page 11 and 12

10 minutes group work

Appendix 5.4: Talking about School Transition Intervention Workbook

My Primary-Secondary School Transition Workshop Book
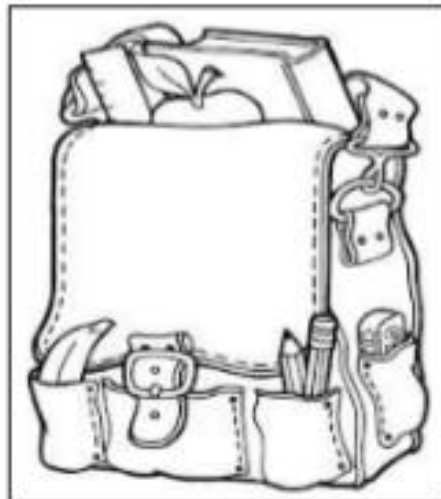
Name: _____

Class: _____

School Transition

Moving from primary to secondary school can be both an exciting and sad time, as children are not only looking forward to the new opportunities at secondary school, but also say goodbye to primary school. Reflect on your time at primary school by answering the following questions. Think about how your primary school experiences can help you prepare for your next progression to secondary school.

1) Jot down your biggest achievement at primary school

_____

_____

_____

2) Summarise your fondest memory at primary school

_____

_____

_____

3) Are you going to miss anything and if so what are you going to miss?

_____

_____

4) What change are you most looking forward to?

_____

_____

5) Reflecting on question 1 and 2, what have you learnt at primary school, which will help you with your transition to secondary school?

_____

_____

_____

School Transition

Transition is another word for change. In September lots of Year six children will experience a transition when they move up to Secondary school. However, similar transitions, such as moving house, changing jobs and even getting a pet happen throughout life, some of which you may have already experienced like moving through year groups at school, moving house or the birth of a new sibling.

Think about a particular transition in your life and brainstorm your ideas to the following questions:

Transition:	
What was easy and difficult? Easy: Difficult:	**How did you feel?**
How did you overcome obstacles?	**What did you learn?**

School Transition

The Colour of Secondary School

Have you thought about Secondary school?   Yes / No

List three of your favourite colours,

1)

2)

3)
and three of your least favourite colours.

1)

2)

3)

Which colour is most like how you feel about Secondary school?

_____

Why did you choose that colour?

_____

_____

Why do you think that colour makes you feel like that?

_____

_____

School Transition

Like the life transitions we have just worked on, when you transition from Primary school to Secondary school some things will stay the same such as having Maths, English and Science lessons, but some things will be different as you will also experience changes and face new challenges, such as moving between classrooms for different subjects, being taught by different teachers and using a timetable!

Take a minute to brainstorm ways your life might be similar but also different when you move to Secondary school practically (school environment), academically (school work, teachers), socially (friends, school clubs) and also emotionally (thoughts, feelings).

Practical Similarities:	Academic Similarities:	Social And Friendship Similarities:	Feelings/Emotional Similarities:
Have registration and assemblies in the morning.	Taught using interactive whiteboards.	Can continue playing football during break time.	Can talk to teachers about anything like primary school staff

Practical Differences:	Academic Differences:	Social Differences And Friendships:	Feelings/Emotional Differences:
Much larger than my Primary school. I may get lost.	Introduced to different learning styles.	More students to play and make friends with.	Become more grown up with greater responsibilities.

School Transition

However, although transitions can sometimes be worrying and a bit daunting, they can also be positive. Change and challenges are good and help us to become stronger, adaptable and more confident and it is important to learn ways to cope and find solutions to overcome our initial apprehensions.

Using the differences you have just brainstormed, take each in turn and write down some possible solutions to adapt to them. The first one has been completed for you as an example.

Challenges:	Solutions:
Secondary School will be much larger than my primary school. I may get lost	use a school map to help find classrooms, be organised and know where I need to be and when and don't be afraid to ask for help.

School Transition

Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
	Whole School Assembly	Form Time	House Assembly	Key Stage 3 Assembly	Whole School Assembly
Period 1	Maths	Chemistry	Biology	English	Biology
Period 2	Physics	English	Maths	Maths	R.E
Morning Break Time					
Period 3	Geography	Maths	English	Chemistry	Maths
Period 4	Geography	Physics	PSHE	R.E	English
Lunch Time					
Period 5	P.E	DT-Cooking	Art	History	ICT
Period 6	P.E	DT-Cooking	Art	History	ICT

Maths book, Laboratory Coat and googles, English book, ingredients, Geography book, Calculator, History book, P.E kit, R.E book, Atlas, Colouring pencils, Pencil case, Water bottle, Dictionary, Ruler

From the list above, jot down the things you need to pack in your school bag for that day:

Tuesday

Thursday

School Transition

Moving to Secondary school is a normal life event, that lots of eleven year olds in the UK will do this year and it is important to remember that you are not alone. For example, everyone in this class is in the same position and will share the same excitement but also worries and concerns as you. Think about yourselves as co-pilots about to voyage on a new life journey!

Share the work you completed in this lesson with one of your classmates! Whomever you choose will be your co-pilot for this activity. Talk about how you can support each other through the transition to Secondary school and create a pledge to be there for each other, by filling in your co-pilots box below:

My Co-pilot's Pledge:

Now jot down some things that you would like to do to help prepare yourself for secondary school:

My Pledge:

School Transition

Before moving to secondary school it is common to have many questions about what school life will be like as a Year seven student. Now is your chance to gain answers to these questions from experienced others who have successfully transitioned from primary to secondary school.

Jot down eight questions to ask your parents/guardians/older siblings/teachers

E.g. *What did you take to secondary school on your first day?*

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

_____

_____

8. _____

_____

_____

Now copy your questions onto your puzzler. Then, following the instructions on the right of this page start making it.

School Transition

Now that you have created your puzzler interview someone (this may be a parent/carer/older sibling/teacher) who has already made the transition from primary to secondary school and jot down their answers in the boxes below. *Remember to bring your transition booklet back to school ready for your next transition lesson.*

1. _____

_____

2. _____

_____

3. _____

_____

4. _____

_____

5. _____

_____

6. _____

_____

7. _____

_____

8. _____

_____

School Transition

Primary-Secondary School Transition Top Tips

Using CATS we are going to practice the things we have learnt over the past two weeks by helping prepare Year five children for their transition to Secondary school next year. We are going to do this by creating a poster, leaflet, poem or even a story to show the importance of our top tips.

Five top Tips:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Planning Space:

School Transition

Planning Space Continued:

School Transition

The Colour of Secondary School

Have you thought about Secondary school?   Yes / No

List three of your favourite colours,

1)

2)

3)
and three of your least favourite colours.

1)

2)

3)

Which colour is most like how you feel about Secondary school?

_____

Why did you choose that colour?

_____

_____

Why do you think that colour makes you feel like that?

_____

_____

Has this colour changed since Week One?   Yes / No

If so why do you think this colour has changed?

_____

_____

Appendix 5.5: Survey (Time 1)

Primary-Secondary School Transition Questionnaire T1

Consent

I have listened to and understand the instructions read to me about my participation in this research study	Yes/No
I give my consent to participate in this research study	Yes/No

Demographics

Gender	Male/Female/Prefer not to say
Primary school attending	....
What is your birth month and year? (write as mm, yyyy)	..../........ ....

Section 1: Secret about me code

1. Write the first letter of your mother's or female caregiver's first name ....
(Write "N/A" if this does not apply to you). Use the first letter of her full name and not a nickname (e.g. if first name is Elizabeth write "E" for Elizabeth and not "L" for Liz)

2. Write the first letter of your father's or male caregiver's first name ....
(Write "N/A" if this does not apply to you). Use the first letter of his full name and not a nickname (e.g. if first name is "Robert," please write "R" for Robert and not "B" for Bob).

3. Write the first letter of your middle name ....
(Write "N/A" if you do not have a middle name)

4. Write the name of your first pet ....
(if you have never had a pet leave this answer blank)

5. How many siblings (brothers and sisters) do you have? ....
(This is the number when you first completed the survey)

6. If yes, (when) were you born ....
(put the number e.g. 1 if first)

7. What is your birth month and year? (mmyy) ..../..............
(E.g. June 1995 would be 0695).

8. Write the first three letters of your primary school? ....
(the school you attended on when you first took this survey

Section 2: About me

For the questions below, please **CIRCLE**, Not true, Somewhat true OR Very True to best describe how you have felt since the Easter break

1) I get a lot of headaches, stomach-aches or sickness

Not true	Somewhat true	Very true

2) I worry a lot

                Not true   Somewhat true   Very true

3) I am often unhappy, down-hearted or tearful

                Not true   Somewhat true   Very true

4) I am nervous in new situations. I easily lose confidence

                Not true   Somewhat true   Very true

5) I have many fears, I am easily scared

                Not true   Somewhat true   Very true

6) I am usually on my own. I generally play alone or keep to myself

                Not true   Somewhat true   Very true

7) I have one good friend or more

                Not true   Somewhat true   Very true

8) Other people my age generally like me

                Not true   Somewhat true   Very true

9) Other children or young people pick on me or bully me

            Not true   Somewhat true   Very true

10) I get on better with adults than with people my own age

            Not true   Somewhat true   Very true

Section 3: My Parents

For the questions below please CIRCLE, Yes, Sometimes OR No for how often your parent(s) or guardian(s) do these things.

1) Express pride in me

                YES   SOMETIMES   NO

2) Help me practice things

    YES   SOMETIMES   NO

3) Help me make decisions

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

4) Give me good advice

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

5) Help me make up my mind

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

6) Help me find answers

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

7) Praise me when I do well

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

8) Politely point out my mistakes

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

9) Tell me how well I do on tasks

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

Section 4: My teachers

For the questions below please CIRCLE, Yes, Sometimes OR No for how often your teacher(s) do these things.

1) Listen if I'm upset

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

2) Care about me

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

3) Are fair to me

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

4) Understand me

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

5) Explain things

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

6) Show me how to do things

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

7) Give good advice

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

8) Help me solve problems

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

9) Praise me when I've tried my best

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

Section 5: My Classmates

For the questions below please CIRCLE, Yes, Sometimes OR No for how often your classmates(s) do these things.

1) Act nice to me

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

2) Ask me to join in activities

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

3) Do nice things for me

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

4) Spend time doing things with me

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

5) Help me with projects

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

6) Treat me with respect

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

7) Tell me how to do new things

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

8) Say nice things to me

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

9) Give me positive attention

     YES   SOMETIMES   NO

Section 6: Over the last month....

This next section of the questionnaire asks about dealing with problems. Answer each question by CIRCLING Not at all satisfied, A little satisfied, Pretty well satisfied OR Very satisfied to describe how you think you handle problems.

1) Overall, how satisfied are you with the way you handled your problems during the last month? Would you say...

    Not at all satisfied   A little satisfied   Pretty well satisfied   Very satisfied

2) Overall, compared to other kids, how good do you think that you have been in handling your problems during the past month?

    Not at all satisfied   A little satisfied   Pretty well satisfied   Very satisfied

3) Overall, how well do you think that the things you did during the last month worked to make the situation better?

    Not at all satisfied   A little satisfied   Pretty well satisfied   Very satisfied

4) Overall, how well do you think that the things you did during the last month worked to make you feel better?

    Not at all satisfied   A little satisfied   Pretty well satisfied   Very satisfied

5) In the future, how good do you think that you will usually be in handling your problems?

    Not at all satisfied   A little satisfied   Pretty well satisfied   Very satisfied

6) Overall, how good do you think you will be at making things better when problems come up in the future?

Not at all satisfied   A little satisfied   Pretty well satisfied   Very satisfied

7) Overall, how good do you think you will be at handling your feelings when problems come up in the future?

Not at all satisfied   A little satisfied   Pretty well satisfied   Very satisfied

Section 7: Secondary School

When you think about going to secondary school, rate how you feel about the following by CIRCLING Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree OR Strongly agree

1) I worry about finding my way around

Strongly disagreeDisagree   Agree   Strongly agree

2) I worry about getting along with other students

Strongly disagree Disagree   Agree   Strongly agree

3) I worry that my parents will put too much pressure on me

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly agree

4) I worry that my peers will put too much pressure on me

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly agree

5) I worry about being bullied

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly agree

6) I worry about fitting in

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly agree

7) I worry about having different teachers

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly agree

8) I worry about safety

Strongly disagree Disagree Agree   Strongly agree

9) I worry about new rules

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly agree

10) I worry about having too much homework

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly agree

11) I worry about feeling peer pressure to do things I don't want to do

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly agree

12) I worry about being accepted by other students

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly agree

13) I worry about getting lost

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly agree

14) I worry that my teachers will put too much pressure on me

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly agree

15) I worry about having difficult classes

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly agree

Thank you for filling in the questionnaire

If you are feeling worried or sad, then it is important that you talk to a friend, teacher or parent about how you are feeling.

Appendix 5.6: Scale amendments

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

This SDQ is a brief behavioural and emotional screening questionnaire which can be administered to parents or teachers of four to sixteen-year old's (informant-rated version), or as self-report for eleven to sixteen year olds. The scale consists of twenty-five psychological attribute items, five items in each of the five subscales: emotional and peer problems (internalising scales), conduct and hyperactivity (externalising scales) and prosocial.

In the present study, the five item Emotional Symptoms and Peer Problems subscales were replicated, as was the rating system: not true assigned a score of zero, somewhat true a score of one and certainly true a score of two, and mean scores were calculated (larger score equating to greater problems). Overall, the *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* is a widely used measure with good factorial validity, internal reliability (Goodman, Meltzer & Bailey, 1998), and test–retest is shown after four to six months (Goodman, 2001).

Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS) (Malecki et al., 1999)

The CASSS is a forty item (ten items on each subscale: Parent, Teacher, Classmate and Friend) self-report scale that assesses children's (Level 1 scale) and adolescence's (Level 2 scale) perceptions of social support. This scale draws on Harter's (1985a) *Social Support Scale for Children,* Nolten's (1994) *Student Social Support Scale* and is closely tied with Tardy's (1985) model of social support, in that the CASSS assess four types of social support: emotional, informational, appraisal and instrumental, across four sub-scales: parent, teacher, classmate and friend. To assess perceptions of social support, participants respond to the frequency of a statement on a six-point Likert scale from one (never) to six (always) and the importance of a statement on a three-point Likert scale from one (Not Important) to three (Very important). A total score is then calculated by summing all four sub-scale scores. The scale has strong internal reliability (Malecki & Demaray, 2002).

In the present study, the Level 1 scale is used at all four time points which is deemed appropriate for children between the ages of eight and twelve. The Friend sub-scale was omitted from the present study, subject to the aim being to assess the three

most dominant and relevant support figures whom children have most access and exposure to over primary-secondary school transition. Similarly, and based on feedback received from teachers at the primary and secondary schools, an item from each scale was deleted (item three from the parent sub-scale: 'make suggestions', item eighteen from the teacher sub-scale: 'helps me when I want to…' and item twenty-six from the classmate sub-scale: 'make suggestions when . . .') to minimise the number of questions in the survey, as these items were shown to overlap with other items on the scale.

Some of the remaining items were also edited, particularly items which were incomplete, such as item eight of the parent sub-scale: 'praise me when I do . . .' where the word 'well' was added to the end of the statement in the present study, and item fifteen of the teacher sub-scale: 'explains things when…' where the word 'when' was deleted in the present study. Also, based on feedback received from class teachers, children selected one of three choices 'yes' 'sometimes' or 'no' for each CASSS item which replicates the rating system of the SDQ, as this score allocation was perceived as less confusing, complicated and time-consuming for the children. Thus, the present CASSS scales consisted of nine items in each subscale and total scores were calculated (a high score indicating higher perceptions of social support), as 'yes' was allocated a score of two, sometimes a score of one and 'no' a score of zero.

Coping Efficacy Scale (Sandler et al., 2000)

Developed for children aged between nine and 12, the *Coping Efficacy Scale* developed by Sandler et al. (2000) assesses children's beliefs or appraisal in their ability to cope with challenging situations. The scale consists of four items which measures the child's level of satisfaction in their handling of problems over the last month, such as item two: 'Overall, compared to other kids, how good do you think that you have been in handling your problems during the past month?' and three items which measures their level of confidence in handling future problems, such as item six: 'Overall, how good do you think you will be at making things better when problems come up in the future?' Each item is rated on a four-point Likert scale (1: Not at all satisfied, 2: A little satisfied, 3: Pretty well satisfied, 4: Very satisfied) and total scores are calculated, a high score indicating a greater level of coping. The scale has strong test-retest reliability and internal reliability (Smith et al, 2006). This scale and rating system was replicated in the present study.

The Perceptions of Transition Survey (Smith et al., 2006)

The *Perceptions of Transition Survey (2006)* was developed from the research of Akos and Galassi (2004) and measures children's perceptions of the organisational, academic and social aspects of High school. Each item is rated on a four-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: agree and 4: strongly agree). The original survey consisted of thirty-five items: thirteen items pertaining to what children may look forward to, fifteen items pertaining to what children may be worried about and seven items for children to rate how helpful teachers, counsellors, parents and other children had been over the transition to High school. Across the sub-scales, there were eleven academic items, eleven social items and five organisational items with good internal reliability (Smith et al., 2005).

In the present study the 'worried about' sub-scale was solely used subject to advice from teachers regarding the length of time available for the children to complete the survey, and given that there were many parallels between items on the 'worried about scale' and 'looking forward to scale', such as items two: 'I worry about getting along with other students' and six 'I worry about fitting in' on the 'worried about' scale, and item three 'I look forward to being around more students' on the 'looking forward to' scale.

Also, item three: 'I worry that my parents will put pressure on me to do well in classes' was written differently so it was more open and generalisable as opposed to simply pertaining to academic concerns, as the purpose of the present study was not to assess academic difficulties but instead to assess general concerns, and instead this item read as follows in the present study: 'I worry that my parents will put pressure on me'. For this same reason, item four: 'I worry that my peers will put too much pressure on me to do well in classes' was omitted, as if this item was also re-written so that it was more open and generalisable it would be too similar to item twelve: 'I worry about feeling peer pressure to do thing I don't want to do'.

Appendix 5.7: Ethical approval

Keele University FNS Psychology Faculty Research Ethics Committee
psychology.ethics@keele.ac.uk

14.03.19

Dear Charlotte Bagnall,

Project Title:	Improving children's emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transition
REC Project Reference:	PS-190015
Type of Application	Main application

Keele University's Psychology Research Ethics Committee (PSY-FREC) reviewed the above application.

Favourable Ethical opinion
The members of the Committee gave a favourable ethical opinion of the above research on the basis described in the application form, protocol and supporting documentation, subject to the conditions specified below.

Conditions of the favourable opinion
The favourable opinion is subject to the following conditions being met prior to the start of the Study.

1.	• In Appendix Fi-Questionnaire (T1), section 1, question 6 may need some rewording, as it starts with "If yes", but the previous question does not require a yes/no response.
2.	• It may be appropriate to mention that the data will be stored for at least 10 years in the letter to parents, and not only in the consent forms for teachers.
3.	• It is possible that paper notifications sent home with students and opt out forms coming back via students could easily be lost/forgotten by the child. If possible, we would recommend that the school/teacher send out information via email in addition to the paper forms.

Reporting requirements
The University's standard operating procedures give detailed guidance on reporting requirements for studies with a favourable opinion including:
- Notifying substantial amendments
- Notifying issues which may have an impact upon ethical opinion of the study
- Progress reports
- Notifying the end of the study

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Yours sincerely,

p.p. R Cunningham.
OFFICE MANAGER

Joseph Brooks
Committee Chair

Manchester
Metropolitan
University

18/11/2019
Project Title: TaST Intervention follow up data collection (approved by Keele
University 03/19)

EthOS Reference Number: 15230

Ethical Opinion

Dear Charlotte Bagnall,

The above application was reviewed by the Education Research Ethics and Governance Committee and, on the
18/11/2019, was given a favourable ethical opinion. The approval is in place until .

Conditions of favourable ethical opinion

Application Documents

Document Type	File Name	Date	Version
Ethical Approval Application Form	Intervention Ethics Form (1)	14/03/2019	1
Ethical Approval Letter	2155_001	14/03/2019	1
Ethical Approval Supporting Information	Intervention ethics appendices (original application)	14/03/2019	1
Ethical Approval Supporting Information	Intervention ethics (T4 only)	14/07/2019	2

The Education Research Ethics and Governance Committee favourable ethical opinion is granted with the following conditions

Adherence to Manchester Metropolitan University's Policies and procedures

This ethical approval is conditional on adherence to Manchester Metropolitan University's Policies, Procedures, guidance and Standard Operating procedures. These
can be found on the Manchester Metropolitan University Research Ethics and Governance webpages.

Amendments

If you wish to make a change to this approved application, you will be required to submit an amendment. Please visit the Manchester Metropolitan University Research
Ethics and Governance webpages or contact your Faculty research officer for advice around how to do this.

We wish you every success with your project.

Education Research Ethics and Governance Committee

Appendix 5.8: Missing Data

Before commencing any analyses, the data file was screened for errors and missing data. Across all four time points, there were 93 missing values (14 at T1, 9 at T2, 7 at T3 and 63 at T4), which were missing completely at random (MCAR). This decision aligned with Parent's (2013) assumption that data is treated as MCAR unless there is a clear bias in missingness, for example, one item on a survey has many missing values. As shown below. this was not the case within the present study as missing values were scattered across items, scales and time points.

In handling missing data in the present study, participant-level mean substitution was used, as this method is considered robust and comparable to other data imputation methods when it is clear that: data is MCAR or missing at random (MAR), few scale items are missing, there is good interitem correlation and sample sizes are moderate (Parent, 2013). All these assumptions were met in the present study. For participant-level mean substitution in the present study, the participants' mean score for the scale where the item was missing was calculated (based on the participants' remaining data for that scale) and manually inserted. As all scales were extracted and replicated from pre-existing scales, tolerance levels were determined based on author recommendations for the given scale. For example, for the *SDQ* a tolerance level of 40% was set by Goodman (2007) wherein if at least three out of the five items in the sub- scale were completed, the remaining two scores were replaced by the mean. Where tolerance levels were not specified and efforts to contact authors unsuccessful, as recommended by Parent (2013) a tolerance level of 20% was set, which meant that for Smith et al.'s (2006) The *Perceptions of Transition Survey (2006)* which consists of fifteen items, twelve items must have been present for the participants' mean score to be calculated and inserted.

If missing data exceeded either the tolerance level set by the author or 20% when author recommendations were not available, the Exclude cases pairwise function was utilised, as this procedure omits that participant from any analyses which use that scale but includes data from that participant for all other analyses where there is full information. Where participant-level mean substitution was utilised, in line with recommendations by Schlomes et al. (2010), individual missingness rates by scale and data points are reported and presented below.

Time One Imputation Table

Participant Number	Time point	Scale	Number of items missed
108	Time 1	Peer Problems	2
42	Time 1	Peer Problems	1
191	Time 1	CASSS-Parents	1
74	Time 1	CASSS-Teachers	1
138	Time 1	Coping Efficacy	1
74	Time 1	Transition Worries	2
130	Time 1	Transition Worries	1
190	Time 1	Transition Worries	1
193	Time 1	Transition Worries	3
208	Time 1	Transition Worries	1

Time Two Imputation Table

Participant Number	Time point	Scale	Number of items missed
74	Time 2	Emotional Symptoms	2
134	Time 2	Emotional Symptoms	1
74	Time 2	Peer Problems	1
74	Time 2	CASSS-Teachers	2
88	Time 2	Coping Efficacy	1
145	Time 2	Transition Worries	1
208	Time 2	Transition Worries	1

Time Three Imputation Table

Participant Number	Time point	Scale	Number of items missed
205	Time 3	CASSS-Teachers	1
92	Time 3	CASSS-Classmates	1
439	Time 3	Coping Efficacy	1
667	Time 3	Coping Efficacy	1
813	Time 3	Transition Worries	1
646	Time 3	Transition Worries	1
379	Time 3	Transition Worries	1

Time Four Imputation Table

Participant Number	Time point	Scale	Number of items missed
820	Time 4	Emotional Symptoms	1
848	Time 4	Emotional Symptoms	1
853	Time 4	Emotional Symptoms	1
865	Time 4	Emotional Symptoms	1
876	Time 4	Emotional Symptoms	1
113	Time 4	Peer Problems	1
416	Time 4	Peer Problems	1
893	Time 4	Peer Problems	1
438	Time 4	Peer Problems	1
242	Time 4	Peer Problems	1
886	Time 4	CASSS-Parents	1
887	Time 4	CASSS-Parents	1
837	Time 4	CASSS-Parents	1

839	Time 4	CASSS-Parents	1
849	Time 4	CASSS-Parents	1
871	Time 4	CASSS-Parents	2
878	Time 4	CASSS-Parents	1
847	Time 4	CASSS-Teachers	1
339	Time 4	CASSS-Teachers	1
583	Time 4	CASSS-Teachers	1
195	Time 4	CASSS-Teachers	1
143	Time 4	CASSS-Teachers	1
438	Time 4	CASSS-Classmates	1
888	Time 4	CASSS-Classmates	1
28	Time 4	Coping Efficacy	1
645	Time 4	Coping Efficacy	1
832	Time 4	Coping Efficacy	1
834	Time 4	Coping Efficacy	1
839	Time 4	Coping Efficacy	1
841	Time 4	Coping Efficacy	1
844	Time 4	Coping Efficacy	1
851	Time 4	Coping Efficacy	1
852	Time 4	Coping Efficacy	1
853	Time 4	Coping Efficacy	1
857	Time 4	Coping Efficacy	1
848	Time 4	Coping Efficacy	1
865	Time 4	Coping Efficacy	1
870	Time 4	Coping Efficacy	1
879	Time 4	Coping Efficacy	2
880	Time 4	Coping Efficacy	2
125	Time 4	Coping Efficacy	1
884	Time 4	Coping Efficacy	1
832	Time 4	Transition Worries	1
889	Time 4	Transition Worries	1
890	Time 4	Transition Worries	1
833	Time 4	Transition Worries	1
834	Time 4	Transition Worries	1
836	Time 4	Transition Worries	1
837	Time 4	Transition Worries	1
838	Time 4	Transition Worries	2
840	Time 4	Transition Worries	1
841	Time 4	Transition Worries	1
842	Time 4	Transition Worries	1
843	Time 4	Transition Worries	1
845	Time 4	Transition Worries	1
853	Time 4	Transition Worries	1
870	Time 4	Transition Worries	1
871	Time 4	Transition Worries	1
884	Time 4	Transition Worries	1

Appendix 5.9: Power Analyses

For all tests, priori power analyses were conducted using G*Power3.1. It was predicted that all tests in the present study would have a medium effect size (partial η^2= .06). For the ANOVA tests, this was converted in G*Power3.1 to an effect size f = 0.25, for the t-tests calculated in line with conventional t-test effect sizes proposed by Cohen (1998) which was d= .50 and correlation d = .30, and for the hierarchical multiple regression in line with the conventional f^2 medium effect size, f^2 = 0.15. For all analysis α = .05 and power set at .80. The predicted sample size for each test is presented in the table below, and whether this was met in the present study:

Test	Overall sample size	Size of each group	Met in present study
Correlations	84	N/A	Yes
Baseline comparisons	102	51	Yes
Longitudinal change	180	N/A	Yes
Gender differences	102	51	Yes
Age differences	180	N/A	Yes
Immediate T1-T2 Change Scores	102	51	Yes
Post Transition change	102	51	Yes, for overall, not for each group (N control group > 32)
Regression	89	N/A	Yes

Appendix 5.10: Assumptions

Normality

The assumption of normality was measured using a combination of graphical (QQ-Plots and Histograms) and statistical methods (kolmogorov-smirnov test and kurtosis). The statistical test results are presented in the table below:

Test	Kolmogorov-smirnov test	Kurtosis
Time One		
Emotional Symptoms (C)	.00	.11
Emotional Symptoms (I)	.00	-.20
Peer Problems (C)	.00	.26
Peer Problems (I)	.00	2.86
Coping Efficacy (C)	.00	-.00
Coping Efficacy (I)	.00	.42
Transition Worries (C)	.20	-.74
Transition Worries (I)	.07	-.38
Time Two		
Emotional Symptoms (C)	.00	1.05
Emotional Symptoms (I)	.00	.73
Peer Problems (C)	.00	.58
Peer Problems (I)	.00	3.06
Coping Efficacy (C)	.00	.17
Coping Efficacy (I)	.00	1.13
Transition Worries (C)	.20	-.98
Transition Worries (I)	.00	-.39
Time Three		
Emotional Symptoms (C)	.00	.40
Emotional Symptoms (I)	.00	1.54
Peer Problems (C)	.00	2.69
Peer Problems (I)	.00	.91
Coping Efficacy (C)	.00	.51
Coping Efficacy (I)	.00	1.98
Transition Worries (C)	.00	-.59
Transition Worries (I)	.01	.29
Time Four		
Emotional Symptoms (C)	.00	.15
Emotional Symptoms (I)	.00	1.59
Peer Problems (C)	.00	1.36
Peer Problems (I)	.00	3.10
Coping Efficacy (C)	.00	-.12
Coping Efficacy (I)	.00	1.29
Transition Worries (C)	.00	-.03
Transition Worries (I)	.00	.82

As shown above on the kolmogorov-smirnov test all variables assessed within the t-tests and ANOVAs apart from *Transition Worries* at Time One (intervention and control groups) and Time Two (just intervention group) violated the assumption of normality. However, when looking at the kurtosis results all variables (apart from *Peer Problems* scores, which is not uncommon for this scale, as many scholars have also found scores to be non-normally distributed when using this scale) (Ortuno-Sierra et al., 2015) are between -2 and +2 which is considered acceptable in order to prove normal univariate distribution (George & Mallery, 2010). Thus, given that t-tests and ANOVA statistical tests are relatively robust with respect to the assumption of normality; the central limit theorem discusses means and sums as not always normally distributed for reasonable sample sizes (n > 30) (Pallant, 2013) and when data are naturally occurring (https://www.sdqinfo.org/a0.html), and Tabachnick and Fidell (2013, p.81) state that kurtosis is 'reduced when sample size is 200+', the present data was not transformed.

Outliers

While there were extreme scores identified in both directions (upper and lower), the only significant outliers identified on box plots were extreme low scores for *Coping Efficacy* and high scores for *Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems* and *Transition Worries,* indicating poorer adjustment and greater vulnerability over the transition period. Trimmed mean scores and significant outliers outlined on box plots for each outcome variable at each time point are presented in the table below. As you can see there are few differences between the means and trimmed means which further justifies why we did not remove outliers.

It was decided that while there were clear outliers for each variable across time (apart from *Emotional Symptoms* and *Coping Efficacy* in the control group at Time One, and *Transition Worries* for both the intervention and control group at Time One and Two), removing outliers has the unwanted effect of excluding participants who are most interesting. In the present study, this pertains to children who are more vulnerable over primary-secondary school transition and find this period more difficult. Thus, all outliers were included in the present analysis.

Variable	Mean	Trimmed Mean (5%)	Outliers (participant number) identified on box-plot
Time One			
Emotional Symptoms (I)	.57	.55	309
Emotional Symptoms (C)	.50	.46	N/A
Peer Problems (I)	.46	.42	101, 29, 80, 164, 202, 81
Peer Problems (C)	.43	.40	108, 134
Coping Efficacy (I)	2.91	2.94	101, 181, 91, 12
Coping Efficacy (C)	3.05	3.06	N/A
Transition Worries (I)	2.32	2.31	N/A
Transition Worries (C)	2.13	2.13	N/A
Time Two			
Emotional Symptoms (I)	.51	.47	306,
Emotional Symptoms (C)	.43	.39	30, 63
Peer Problems (I)	.39	.36	306, 86
Peer Problems (C)	.38	.34	305, 74, 308, 134, 114, 56, 126, 106
Coping Efficacy (I)	2.96	3.00	9, 170, 95, 12
Coping Efficacy (C)	3.05	3.09	109, 126, 308, 153, 106, 43, 123
Transition Worries (I)	2.09	2.06	N/A
Transition Worries (C)	1.95	1.93	N/A
Time Three			
Emotional Symptoms (I)	.41	.37	185
Emotional Symptoms (C)	.52	.49	343, 451, 806, 810, 834, 831
Peer Problems (I)	.30	.28	216, 719
Peer Problems (C)	.35	.32	685, 621, 672, 515, 677, 496, 651, 648, 802, 689,
Coping Efficacy (I)	3.13	3.17	794, 714, 647, 825, 815, 826
Coping Efficacy (C)	3.05	3.08	6, 181, 248
Transition Worries (I)	1.78	1.74	361, 353, 740, 646, 346, 406, 685, 513
Transition Worries (C)	1.99	1.97	396
Time Four			438
Emotional Symptoms (I)	.41	.37	179, 230
Emotional Symptoms (C)	.55	.52	633, 891, 905, 819, 634, 926, 730, 921
Peer Problems (I)	.27	.23	196, 80, 203, 245
Peer Problems (C)	.36	.33	341, 636, 885
Coping Efficacy (I)	3.02	3.05	241, 86, 196, 78, 230, 80
Coping Efficacy (C)	2.97	2.99	633, 385, 891
Transition Worries (I)	1.64	1.59	92
Transition Worries (C)	1.85	1.81	633, 910, 602

Homogeneity of variance and sphericity

For each t-test presented below, the Levene's test was larger than .05 demonstrating equality of variance. Mauchly's test of sphericity showed that the assumption of sphericity was met for *Transition Worries*: $\chi2$ (5) = 7.95, *p* = .16 and *Emotional Symptoms*: $\chi2$ (5) = 4.76, *p* = .45, but not for *Coping Efficacy*: $\chi2$ (5) = 27.01, *p* = .00 and *Peer Problems*: $\chi2$ (5) = 23.88, *p* = .00. Thus, to reduce increase in Type 1 error, Greenhouse-Geisser corrections are applied to the degrees of freedom *(df)*, to calculate the valid critical *F*-values.

Appendix 5.11: Feedback from teachers

Teachers from each intervention school were asked to complete a process evaluation form. This contained the five questions listed below, which teachers answered on a three-point Likert scale: 'yes', 'partly' and 'no' (item one and two); 'yes', 'sometimes' or 'no' (item three); 'very confident', 'slightly confident' or 'not confident' (item four), or 'very engaged', 'partly engaged' or 'not engaged' (item five). Where 'yes', 'very confident' or 'very engaged' was not given, teachers were asked to expand on their answer in the space provided.

1. All five intervention lessons were delivered
2. The content of all five lessons was delivered as planned in the teacher lesson plans
3. Between 50 minutes to one hour was allocated to each intervention lesson
4. Please rate your confidence in delivering the intervention lessons
5. Please rate your class' engagement during the intervention sessions

Out of the four intervention schools, three teachers completed these forms. Of the three teachers that completed the process evaluation forms, all teachers responded 'yes' to item one, reporting all five interventions to be delivered. 2/3 teachers reported 'yes' to item two, relating to whether the content of the programme was delivered as planned. The one teacher who reported 'partly' to this item discussed how they needed to tailor the final two lessons to meet the class' firsthand experience. 2/3 teachers reported 'partly' to item three, pertaining to whether the TaST lessons were allocated 50 minutes to one hour. The one teacher that responded 'sometimes' indicated how the time given to TaST depended on the time available, some sessions sometimes split into two as the children enjoyed discussion time and needed longer for this.

2/3 teachers reported 'slightly confident' to item four, which pertained to how they felt delivering the intervention sessions; the teacher who felt 'confident' expressed the cohesion between the lesson plans and PowerPoint slides, and the planned, detailed lesson plans enhancing confidence. The two teachers who reported 'slightly confident' discussed how this was shaped by external, personal factors such as being new to the Year 6 transition phase of education and that confidence would develop with time, particularly delivering the programme again next year. All three teachers discussed their classes being 'very engaged', key features shaping this being the parents' activity, the discussion elements and practical tasks.