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Primary-secondary school transition under Covid-19: Exploring the perceptions and experiences of children, parents/guardians, and teachers

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The transition from primary to secondary school is a major life event for eleven-year-old children in the United Kingdom, where they face simultaneous changes. Following the outbreak of Covid-19, transfer children face additional uncertainty on top of this. Negotiation of the multiple challenges, combined with the reduced support associated with Covid-19, could have a negative impact on children's school adjustment and mental health. Given the rapidity of changes associated with Covid-19, there are key empirical and practical gaps on how best to support children as they negotiate these two key events. To date, there is no published research which has explored the experiences of transfer children, and that of their parents and teachers during this time. The present research aimed to narrow this research gap by answering the research question: What are parents', children's, and teachers' experiences of primary-secondary school transition during Covid-19? This research used a series of UK wide surveys to gather data from 101 Year 7 children, 88 Year 7 parents, 26 primary school teachers, and 40 secondary school teachers using a mixture of open and closed questions. The data were analysed using Thematic Framework Analysis, taking an inductive-open coding approach. All three stakeholders reported negative impacts of Covid-19 on the transition, for example, in terms of missed opportunities. There were also many comments about the emotional impact of Covid-19 on children, parents, and teachers. Numerous strategies were reported that were used to meet children's needs pre and post-transition, highlighting areas of good practice, along with practical suggestions for how to approach transition in the future. The study has identified ways that transition can be managed more effectively, thus, having short term implications in providing an evidence base to support transfer children this year, and long-term implications for future transition years.

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School transition

Navigating multiple simultaneous changes can have deleterious effects on children's development (Evans, Li, & Whipple, 2013). Over school transition, children navigate simultaneous changes in contexts (e.g., home and school), domains (e.g., environmental, academic, and social), interpersonal relationships, and/or identity. This is in line with Jindal-Snape and Rienties (2016) *Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions* (MMT) theory. These changes can be exciting for children, providing 'windows of opportunity' for growth and learning (Rice et al., 2015, p.9) but can also have a significant negative impact on their ability to cope, especially if they do not have some consistency in their life such as social support from a stable support figure, and/or lack sufficient coping skills (Jindal-Snape, Cantali, MacGillivray, & Hannah, 2018). Baumeister's, Vohs, and Tice (2007) Depleted-Resource Hypothesis posits that an individual's ability to cope deteriorates as the number of stressors in their life accumulate, co-exist, and persist. This is because over time frequent concurrent stressors significantly draw on self-regulatory capacities and disrupt cognitive processing, impacting emotional well-being. This is shown over primary-secondary school transition, where emotional symptoms commonly increase (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012).

Covid-19 context

Following the international outbreak of Covid-19, which was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in March 2020, children transitioning schools faced additional uncertainty as they navigated one of the biggest disruptions to education in history. In an effort to curb the spread of Covid-19, face-to-face teaching in schools was temporarily suspended in 180 countries worldwide; at its peak in early April 2020, 1.6 billion children worldwide were out of school. In the United Kingdom, when schools reopened from September 2020 to December 2020, attendance in primary and secondary schools dropped to between 80 and 90% (DfE, 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic is transforming society in profound ways. This has included psychological costs. For example, the incidence of mental health problems has risen from 11% in 2017 to 16% in July 2020 during the pandemic for five- to 16-year-olds (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2021); more than a quarter of children report disrupted sleep, and one in 10 report often or always feeling lonely (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2021). Furthermore, the pandemic has also incurred economic uncertainty, and widened social, economic and educational inequalities (Engzell, Frey, & Verhagen, 2021). Children from more disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be exposed to stressful home environments due to financial issues caused by Covid-19, which may lead to an unequal distribution of behavioural and psychological problems following the pandemic (Fana, Pérez, & Fernández-Macías, 2020). The physical closure of schools and the adoption of distance learning are predicted to negatively impact learning and exacerbate existing educational inequalities (Di Pietro, Biagi, Costa, Karpiński, & Mazza, 2020). The social isolation caused by lockdown measures, in addition to stress and anxiety pertaining to the health and mortality risk of the pandemic, may negatively impact children's psychosocial development, academic attainment, and motivation.

Lockyer et al.'s (2020) unpublished interview study with 21 children aged between 10 and 13 and their parents, between August and September 2020 provides further support for the negative social impacts of the pandemic. It also provides preliminary insight into the destabilizing effect of the pandemic on school engagement for children transitioning to secondary school. For Year 7 children who were still getting used to a larger school and

who may have been experiencing issues adapting to the new secondary school environment, many reported feeling happy to not be attending school during the April 2020 lockdown and parents were worried that this would have a further destabilizing effect on their adjustment. For Year 6 children who were due to start secondary school in September, children felt sad that they did not get to experience the end of Year 6 or say goodbye properly to their teachers and friends going to other schools. They had also not been able to visit their new school and missed out on transition sessions, which caused anxiety for some children and their parents. However, given that the study was conducted in just one part of the United Kingdom (Bradford), drew on a relatively small sample and the focus of the study was not primary-secondary school transition, further research is needed to explicitly examine the impact of the pandemic on children's and parents' experiences of primary-secondary school transition.

Negotiating Covid-19 and school transition

Primary-secondary school transition is one of the most difficult transitions in children's education, which can have a significant negative impact on their short- and long-term psychosocial adjustment and mental health (Symonds, 2015). Previous research has shown that negative transitions are increasingly likely if children experience multiple simultaneous changes, are already vulnerable, or lack social support (Bagnall, Fox & Skipper, 2021c). Covid-19, an additional stressor, is likely to heighten the negative impact, with Year 6 pupils feeling anxious and apprehensive about Covid-19 and negotiating structural system changes associated with the pandemic, in addition to facing uncertainty associated with negotiating the simultaneous changes of school transition. In line with MMT (2016), this means that children may be negotiating multiple transitions in multiple contexts and domains.

Moreover, children spend a substantial length of time each day within school settings, which are routinely identified as a key environment to support children's mental health through prevention and early identification of emotional well-being concerns (Department of Education, 2018), especially during turning points such as primary-secondary school transition. Covid-19 also poses a threat to the timely and sensitive emotional-centred transition provision and support that children need in the lead up to primary-secondary school transition, as shown in research (Bagnall et al., 2021a), and policy (DfHSC & DfE, 2018). Therefore, the multiple challenges along with reduced support associated with Covid-19 and primary-secondary school transition could lead to a negative transition experience for children, the effects of which may be long lasting (van Rens, Haelermans, Groot, & Maassen van den Brink, 2018).

Rationale

Given the rapidity of changes associated with Covid-19, there are key empirical and practical gaps in how to target children's specific needs as they negotiate primary-secondary school transition and Covid-19. To date, there is no published research, which has exclusively explored how Covid-19 has impacted children's experiences of primary-secondary school transition. This means that key stakeholders, who are fundamental in supporting children during this time, face continued uncertainty about how to implement clear and consistent provision to prepare Year 6 children for their transition to secondary school.

Therefore, there is need to develop evidence to allow schools and policymakers to make evidence-based decisions to support children, especially given stretched child mental health resources (DfHSC & DfE, 2018). To do this, it is vital that we learn more about the concerns of children and parents. 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 support systems are uncertain (Jindal-Snape et al., 2018). This can have significant consequences for children's academic, social, and emotional adjustment (White, 2020), and is of particular interest as school closures may make parents their children's main confidant. Yet there has been limited research exploring transfer children's and parents' experiences of primary-secondary school transition simultaneously, which is concerning given that previous research (Bagnall, Skipper & Fox, 2019) has shown both stakeholders to share similar concerns during transition, yet these are often hidden from the other, causing both stakeholders to feel unsupported and alone.

In addition, teachers are pivotal over the transfer period, not only educationally, but also in supporting children's emotional needs (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016). Teachers' voices are vital to our understanding of how to improve primary-secondary school transition experiences within the context of Covid-19, as this understanding will allow us to identify areas of challenge, but also examples of good practice, which can be shared more widely to enhance transition provision across the United Kingdom.

This study will draw on Bagnall, Skipper & Fox, (2019) approach by simultaneously comparing Year 6 and 7 children's, parents and teachers' experiences of primary-secondary school transition during Covid-19, using an online survey administered during 2020. By exploring experiences of a range of stakeholders simultaneously, this approach continues to build on research study limitations within the field of primary-secondary school transition, see Bagnall, Skipper & Fox, 2019 for a full outline. A further strength of the present research is that it uses Thematic Framework Analysis, an underused analytical framework within educational psychology.

A gap also exists in more theory-driven primary-secondary school transition literature, and the present research further extends the field by taking a firm theoretical approach to the study's design, methodology, and analysis, by drawing on Jindal-Snape and Rienties (2016) evidence-based MMT. This theory provides a balanced and holistic discourse of school transition, which is lacking to date (Jindal-Snape, Hannah, Cantali, Barlow, & MacGillivray, 2020). It accounts for the multiple changes children, but also significant others within a child's ecosystem, experience at the same time. Drawing on Jindal-Snape and Rienties (2016) MMT, the present research aims to answer the research question:

1. What are parents', children's, and teachers' experiences of primary-secondary school transition during Covid-19 lockdown?

Method

Participants

See Table 1 for breakdown of demographic characteristics. All the participants self-selected to participate in the UK wide research study. Most children (90%) had transitioned to secondary school when they completed the survey and spent most of Covid-19 lockdown at home (81%). Most parents were in full time (39%) or part-time (17%) work and shared the care of their child with a partner (64%). Most primary (85%)

Table 1. Participants' demographic characteristics

	Children N (%)	Parents N (%)	Primary school teachers N (%)	Secondary school teachers N (%)
Gender				
Male	54 (54%)	10 (13%)	7 (27%)	7 (18%)
Female	45 (45%)	67 (86%)	18 (69%)	33(83%)
Prefer to self-describe	2 (2%)	1 (1%)	1 (4%)	
Age (adults only)				
30 and under		4 (5%)	8 (31%)	12 (30%)
31–40		28 (36%)	10 (38%)	21 (53%)
41–50			4 (15%)	4 (10%)
51+		46 (59%)	3 (12%)	3 (8%)
Did not indicate			1 (4%)	
Ethnicity				
White/White British or Scottish	75 (75%)	62 (80%)		
Black/Black British	6 (6%)	6 (8%)		
Asian	13 (13%)	1 (1%)		
Chinese	1 (1%)			
Mixed		2 (3%)		
Other		1 (1%)		
Did not indicate	3 (3%)			

and secondary (66%) school teachers who completed the survey had been teaching for more than four years.

Materials

The participants completed an online child, parent, primary school teacher, or secondary school teacher survey, which consisted of open-ended and closed questions (multiple choice and Likert scales) focussed on stakeholders' experiences of transition and their recommendations for how transition could be best supported. All items were positively worded. See Appendix A for our main open-ended survey items and Tables 2 and 3 for a summary of our closed question survey items. The open-ended questions enabled us to take a more open and inductive approach, while the closed questions allowed us to ask more specific questions, for example, about the quality of the support received, and explore gender differences.

Procedure

Following ethical approval, Head Teachers from primary and secondary schools within our networks were sent an email providing a brief overview of the study, and a parent and teacher information sheet with the survey links to send to parents and teachers. In addition, Tweets were sent out on the researchers' social media accounts providing a brief outline of the research project and the survey links (parents were sent information pertaining to the child survey following completing their survey). It was stressed that parents should complete the survey first and afterwards they could choose to ask their

Table 2. Frequencies of child, parent, primary and secondary school teacher reports of support

Child reports of support (N = 101)	Parent reports of support (N = 78)	Primary school teacher reports of support (N = 26)	Secondary school teacher reports of support (N = 40)
<p>Has your primary school done things to help you get ready for secondary school?</p> <p>Yes a lot: 26% Yes a little: 56% No: 17% Missing data: 1%</p>	<p>Did the primary school support your child?</p> <p>Yes a lot: 19% Yes a little: 30% No: 44% Missing data: 7%</p>	<p>Did you prepare children for the transition?</p> <p>Yes a lot: 23% Yes a little: 58% No: 19%</p>	<p>Did you prepare children for the transition?</p> <p>Yes a lot: 40% Yes a little: 35% No: 25%</p>
<p>Have parents supported with the transition?</p> <p>Yes a lot: 76% Yes a little: 17% No: 3% Missing data: 4%</p>	<p>Could the primary support more?</p> <p>Yes: 62% No: 29% Missing data: 9%</p>	<p>Did feeder secondary schools support with transition preparations?</p> <p>Yes a lot: 8% Yes a little: 65% No: 8% Missing data: 19%</p>	<p>Did feeder primary schools support with transition preparations?</p> <p>Yes a lot: 15% Yes a little: 20% No: 23% Missing data: 42%</p>
<p>Likely to talk to parents about the transition?</p> <p>Very likely: 48% Quite likely: 41% Not likely: 9% Not at all likely: 2%</p>	<p>Did the secondary school support you with your child?</p> <p>Yes a lot: 30% Yes a little: 39% No: 19% Missing data: 12%</p>	<p>Have parents supported their child?</p> <p>Yes a lot: 12% Yes a little: 50% No: 19% Missing data: 19%</p>	<p>Have parents supported their child?</p> <p>Yes a lot: 8% Yes a little: 28% No: 5% Missing data: 59%</p>
<p>How helpful is this/would this be?</p> <p>Very helpful: 30% Quite helpful: 55% Not helpful: 12% Not at all helpful: 3%</p>	<p>Could the secondary school support more?</p> <p>Yes: 46% No: 41% Missing data: 13%</p>		
<p>Have friends supported with the transition?</p> <p>Yes a lot: 44% Yes a little: 38% No: 16% Missing data: 2%</p>			
<p>Has the lockdown changed who you went to for support?</p> <p>Yes: 42% No: 56% Missing data: 2%</p>			

Table 3. Frequencies of child, parent, primary and secondary school teacher appraisals

Child appraisals (N = 101)	Parent appraisals (N = 78)	Primary school teacher appraisals (N = 26)	Secondary school teacher appraisals (N = 40)
<p>Would the transition have been easier without Covid-19 lockdown? Yes: 92% No: 8%</p> <p>Felt optimistic about the transition? A lot of the time: 24% Some of the time: 44% Rarely: 15% None of the time: 16% Missing data: 1%</p> <p>Thought about preparing over the summer? A lot of the time: 15% Some of the time: 40% Rarely: 26% None of the time: 18% Missing data: 1%</p>	<p>Would the transition have been easier without Covid-19 lockdown? Yes: 93% No: 7%</p> <p>Felt optimistic about my child's transition? A lot of the time: 24% Some of the time: 56% Rarely: 19% None of the time: 1%</p> <p>Discussed the transition with my child? Often: 62% Some of the time: 30% Rarely: 5% Never: 3%</p> <p>Was this discussion helpful? Very helpful: 55% A little helpful: 40% Not helpful: 1% Not helpful at all: 1% Missing data: 3%</p> <p>Dealt with own feelings well? Strongly Agree: 30% Agree: 61% Disagree: 6% Strongly disagree: 3%</p> <p>Dealt with child's feelings well? Strongly Agree: 30% Agree: 54% Disagree: 6% Strongly Disagree: 4% Missing data: 6%</p> <p>Could talk to other people about my feelings:</p>	<p>Would the transition have been easier without Covid-19 lockdown? Yes: 100%</p> <p>How prepared were children compared to previous years? Less prepared: 77% Equally prepared: 15% More prepared: 8%</p>	<p>Would the transition have been easier without Covid-19 lockdown? Yes: 100%</p> <p>How prepared were children compared to previous years? Less prepared: 70% Equally prepared: 20% More prepared: 10%</p>

Continued

Table 3. (Continued)

Child appraisals (N = 101)	Parent appraisals (N = 78)	Primary school teacher appraisals (N = 26)	Secondary school teacher appraisals (N = 40)
	Strongly agree: 30%		
	Agree: 53%		
	Disagree: 13%		
	Strongly disagree: 4%		
	Was this helpful?		
	Very helpful: 36%		
	A little helpful: 46%		
	Not helpful: 14%		
	Not at all helpful: 4%		

child if they wish to complete a child survey and both parties had to give consent. Following completion of the survey, the participants were signposted to support services, and families were encouraged to talk to each other, and to facilitate this, the puzzler activity used in our previous work (Bagnall, 2020b) was downloadable for parents and children.

Data analysis

Closed question responses

The closed question responses were analysed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies of stakeholders' reports of support over the transition are summarized in Table 2, and their appraisals in Table 3. We examined gender differences across all four stakeholder groups and none of them were statistically significant.

Although the descriptive statistics from our closed question responses did not inform the Thematic Framework Analysis or reported themes, some of the frequencies presented above, provide support for the patterns shown within the qualitative data, and are discussed below in line with this.

Open-ended survey responses

Open-ended data were analysed using Thematic Framework Analysis. Thematic Framework Analysis, sits within the broader family of Thematic Analysis (Gale et al., 2013), and is a flexible analytical approach, designed to support researchers to systematically reduce data while making comparisons across codes and participants, which was needed for this study. Thematic Framework Analysis also balances depth with breadth, and is appropriate when samples are not homogenous, as shown in this study.

A semantic and data-driven, inductive approach was taken and a contextualist framework was chosen. The following five stages outlined by Ritchie and Spencer (2002) were followed: familiarization (stage 1), identifying a framework (stage 2), indexing (stage 3), charting (stage 4), and mapping and interpretation (stage 5).

At stage 1, all data were read, and re-read in full by all authors, engaging in a process of familiarization. At this stage as an inductive approach was taken, rigorous line-by-line open coding was conducted independently by all three authors; each taking one group of data

(child, parent, or teacher). Following independent open-coding, all three authors met to discuss their codes. For confidence in the relevance and meaningfulness of codes, the first author checked coding to ensure that the codes were credible.

Similarities and differences were discussed and similar codes were then grouped into categories, which formed the analytical framework, indicative of stage 2, to organize data in a meaningful and manageable way. This analytical framework was informed by a priori questions (pre and post transition experiences, perceptions of support and recommendations), and emerging codes most pertinent to the participants.

Next, the framework was systematically applied to each group of data, through a process of indexing (stage 3) to code the data into the framework categories and then charting (stage 4) to summarize and organize the indexed data for each category in chart form. During the charting stage, it became clear that the categories were too broad, and thus the indexed data for each category was also organized by sub-category, to reflect the complexity of the data, see Table 4. Identified categories and sub-categories during this stage were also triangulated for congruence through discussion between the three authors, establishing confirmability.

Finally, the data set was examined as a whole during the final mapping and interpretation stage (stage 5), where connections were made across participants and categories in light of the research question. The thematic framework categories and sub-categories are presented in Table 4.

I. Impact on the transition

Over the transition period, children, parents, and Year 6 and 7 teachers discussed the negative impact of Covid-19 on their transition experiences. As shown in Table 3, all primary and secondary school teachers, 92% of children, and 93% of parents reported that transition would have been easier without Covid-19 lockdown, as the *1a. Environment was different*, due to social distancing measures; *1b. Absence (i.e., things did not happen)* leading up to and over the transition period, and teachers felt that *1c. Children were different* this year.

1a. Environment was different

All stakeholders discussed that the school environment was different when they returned following Covid-19 lockdown, due to social distancing measures, which made the transition much harder to manage. For teachers, this impacted their ability to support children in class: 'Being unable to wander around the classroom for 1–1 work closely with new students' (Secondary teacher 2).

While children did not comment on the environment being different, it was clear that their parents were concerned that children did not get the full experience of transitioning to secondary school: 'They are still not experiencing secondary school by being in the same room for lessons and not being able to visit the school canteen. They are not getting to know the school and surroundings yet but should be' (Parent 15). Instead, the secondary school environment was discussed as being very similar to primary school. Children were also limited in their ability to integrate with other children within the school as they remained within their class bubbles. Interaction opportunities for parents with the school were also limited.

Table 4. A table of the five Thematic Framework Analysis categories and corresponding sub-categories

I. Impact on the transition	2. Emotional impact	3. Meeting children's needs pre-transition	4. Meeting children's needs post-transition	5. Looking ahead/lessons learnt
Ia. Environment was different	2a. Feelings of loss/sadness	3a. Relational support	4a. Academic support	5a. Advice for children
Ib. Absence (i.e. things did not happen)	2b. Feelings of stress/anxiety	3b. Sharing information	4b. Relational support	5b. Advice for parents
Ic. Children were different	2c. Feelings of anger (Teachers only)	3c. Emotional Support	4c. Practical support	5c. Advice for teachers/schools
		3d) Practical support	4d. Emotional support	

A table of the five Thematic Framework Analysis categories and corresponding sub-categories.

Ib. Absence (i.e., things that did not happen)

All stakeholders discussed experiences of absence, or things not happening, leading up to and over the transition period in the context of Covid-19: 'He didn't really have a transition. He went from being half way through year 6 to being in high school. He didn't do his SATs or anything' (Parent 6). Missed opportunities pertained to learning opportunities (e.g., being unable to sit National Assessments), relational opportunities (e.g., saying goodbye to friends and teachers at secondary school), emotional/personal opportunities (e.g., celebrating the transition and milestone of leaving primary school: 'Would have had celebrations and closure from primary school' (Primary teacher 9), and practical opportunities (e.g., secondary school visits, reduced time for transition activities).

Missed opportunities negatively impacted transition preparations: 'Students unable to come into school to meet teachers/have tours - this has not helped the new cohort at all - no familiarity for when they arrived on the first day' (Secondary teacher 7) and children discussed feeling disadvantaged by missing out: 'Cause we would have more time to prepare for transitions' (Child 61). Parents also discussed these missed opportunities being an added pressure for them in supporting their child, as their child needed additional support and reassurance at home: 'It was just another problem for parents to deal with. Previously we were able to talk through concerns and expectations with the primary school. Plus my [older] son had weeks of visits to get used to the new building' (Parent 83).

Ic. Children were different

Children were discussed as being less ready for secondary school this year, whether that was because they lacked knowledge and understanding of the new environment: 'Other children were prepared and had an idea what to expect. This year it was frightening for them. They were not prepared at all' (Parent 15), or maturity to navigate the challenges posed: 'Children lost independence being at home' (Secondary teacher 10), which was discussed as being harder for schools to manage. This was further shown in the quantitative findings, as shown in Table 3, where 77% of primary school teachers and 70% of secondary school teachers reported transfer children being less prepared for transition than previous years.

Children were also reported as less confident: ‘as a teacher and year 7 tutor the year 7’s have been lacking in confidence and seem much younger than previous years’ (Secondary teacher 11). Parents discussed how their child was more worried and nervous for the transition this year, compared to their older siblings: ‘My other child had no fears, worries or concerns about starting secondary school compared to my child who started after lockdown’ (Parent 10).

Teachers also discussed that children’s motivation and engagement had slipped following Covid-19 lockdown: ‘Poor concentration levels, much poorer behaviour and work ethic. Clearly some of the kids have slipped in terms of effort/ ability’ (Primary teacher 6) and parents discussed the need for additional learning and academic support to help children catch up learning they may have lost.

2. Emotional impact

It was clear that Covid-19 had an emotional impact on all three stakeholders’ experiences of primary-secondary school transition; the transition discussed as a difficult, disruptive time, due to (2a) *Feelings of loss/sadness* and (2b) *Feelings of stress/anxiety*. Teachers also reported (2c) *Feelings of anger* due to how they were portrayed during the pandemic in the media.

2a. Feelings of loss/sadness

Children, parents, and teachers discussed feelings of sadness and loss: ‘Obviously it [transition] was more difficult for my child. There was much more anxiety and sadness that he missed the last few months of primary with his friends’ (Parent 75). For parents and children, feelings of loss pertained to the missed opportunities they experienced in primary school as a result of the Covid-19 restrictions, such as not being able to say goodbye to primary school friends and teachers, which made the transition harder: ‘Normally the transition would’ve been smoother’ (Parent 7). Unmarked milestones were also discussed to hinder positioning the transition as a progression and continuation: ‘Due to the fact that there were no “Rites of passage” at the end of yr6, it all felt a little anti-climactic’ (Parent 27). In particular, parents felt that this impacted children’s readiness for secondary school and their ability to cope.

Whereas feelings of loss and sadness discussed by parents and children focused more on missed opportunities, amongst teachers, there were numerous comments about the impact of Covid-19 on their mental health: ‘Mental health at lowest, constantly feeling sad and depressed whilst feeling overwhelmed by the littlest of things’ (Secondary teacher 14). These feelings were discussed in relation to additional demands teachers faced this year, one of which included the need to provide more emotional support for children to help them cope with the loss and sadness they were experiencing. For many teachers this led to mental exhaustion: ‘Mentally exhausted, having to find new ways to teach has drastically increased workload at home’ (Primary teacher 1).

2b. Feelings of stress/anxiety

Navigating primary-secondary school transition, acknowledged as an already stressful time, was discussed as even more stressful this year during Covid-19, due to feelings of uncertainty ‘The process was already stressful. This [Covid-19] was added stress’ (Parent

23). Feelings of uncertainty pertained to not knowing when children would be returning to school: 'Frequently changing guidance is sometimes difficult to keep up with and the uncertainty of the virus and what is going to happen next' (Primary teacher 10), which meant that preparations for secondary school could only be partly anticipated. Practical opportunities to prepare children for the transition to secondary school through visits were limited, or non-existent, which meant that parents and children's expectations were left unmanaged: 'Not being able to visit possible schools upset my child a great deal. Children imagine all sorts if unable to see things for themselves' (Parent 29).

Teachers also discussed how the additional uncertainty had increased the demands and nature of the job, remote working leading to increases in workload, reduced support from colleagues, and feelings of worry for their students' futures: 'Feel like I cannot properly teach my students, feel responsible for their exams and future' (Secondary teacher 15).

Parents and teachers discussed children's ability to cope with the emotional impact of navigating primary-secondary school transition and Covid-19 as being shaped by individual differences; for example, within the quantitative findings, it was clear that some children were more optimistic about the transition than others, as shown in Table 3, with 24% of children stating that they felt optimistic 'a lot of the time', 44% 'some of the time', and 21% of children stating that they felt optimistic 'rarely' or 'none of the time'. Furthermore, 44% of children reported thinking about preparing for the transition over summer 'none of the time' or 'rarely', whereas 55% reported 'a lot' or 'some of the time'. The qualitative findings shed further light on this, as children's resilience, mind-set, and confidence, was discussed as impacting their emotional adjustment: 'We have not had any issues with transition despite COVID. However our child is bright and fairly confident, I would think that may have made it easier than some children found it' (Parent 85).

2c. Feelings of anger (teachers only)

As discussed above, the emotional impact of helping to support children and parents over the transition against the backdrop of Covid-19 was prominent amongst teachers at both primary and secondary school. Both felt that the way they were portrayed during the pandemic in the media was additionally hard to cope with: 'Government and media have also had wildly different stances to and about education throughout the past year which have been difficult to keep up with as well as stomach. This is due to the fact that the people spouting these views are very unlikely to have actually stepped foot in a Covid-19 school scenario' (Secondary teacher 18). There was a profound sense of anger expressed in a few of the comments at the lack of support from government and the wider media reporting of teachers during the pandemic: 'The new rules and regs mean that school has become a bleak place. I can't wait to finish this year, hand in my notice and move back. I'm not even sure if I want to teach next year. This has been a f***** joke from start to finish' (Secondary teacher 20).

3. Meeting children's needs pre-transition

As shown in Table 2, many primary (19%) and secondary (25%) teachers acknowledged that they did not prepare children as well as they would have liked, and many parents reported that primary schools (29%) and secondary schools (41%) could have done more.

Support strategies used prior to the move to secondary school, to meet children's needs pre-transition consisted of: (3a) *Relational support*, (3b) *Sharing information*, (3c) *Emotional support*, and (3d) *Practical support*, discussed in turn below.

3a. Relational support

Relationship building was discussed as paramount for adjustment over the transition period. However, due to social distancing measures, and remote working, new strategies were needed this year for secondary schools to build relationships with transfer children and parents, which included welcome videos from secondary school teachers, 'Virtual summer school - students knew their teacher and classmates' (Secondary teacher 12), telephone calls to both parents and children, emails, information packs, and letters.

3b. Sharing information

It was clear that despite Covid-19 lockdown, information pertaining to the transition was still being shared across primary and secondary schools, although the extent of this was shown to differ within and between stakeholders. Some secondary school teachers discussed how they made 'Calls to primary schools regarding the students, their well-being, any updates that would be relevant to their start in September' (Secondary teacher 15), whereas others felt this was more minimal: 'Small amount of information sent about pupils' (Secondary teacher 19). Other teachers felt that the extent of information sharing was dependent on any additional support some children may need at secondary school.

Feelings were mixed amongst parents and children, pertaining to the extent of information shared with them, and the usefulness of this. Some parents felt very positively and felt they received a lot of shared information: 'Welcome to your new school letters and booklets. Really made my child feel part of a new educational family' (Parent 27), whereas others disagreed: 'We as parents didn't get updates, was lacking in communication' (Parent 76). Amongst these parents and children, they commented on the content of the shared information, either being too much and hard to follow 'Give us a pointless 55 page transition booklet and sent us loads of letters about what it would be like when we went there' (Child 13), or not updated to reflect the changes this year. However, this was not shared by all: '[the school] gave clear information about both who my child's form tutor would be and also how Covid safe measures would be put in place. They also created a "New to.....in 2020" drop down on the school website with updated information and welcoming messages' (Parent 62). These extra communication efforts were clearly valued by parents.

3c. Emotional support

Parents were discussed by children as useful sources of emotional support pre transition: 'Spoke me into how it will be fine and fun' (Child 72) and a source of comfort: 'Comfort me when I thought it was scary' (Child 79). Children also felt that their peers provided valuable emotional support prior to the transition: 'They played with me and checked everything is ok' (Child 98).

Discussions relating to school transition as a class and 1:1 in primary school were discussed as helpful by both parents: secondary school 'Organised many Zoom meetings for whole class and one-one face meetings if pupils were feeling a little shaky. Also my child was able to email their teachers at any time-under parental supervision, which was

good for her' (Parent 27), and children: 'Gave us advice' (Child 6). Managing children's expectations was discussed as a critical component of this emotional support: 'They talked to the children about what to expect when they went to high school and ensured they answered any worries/questions the children had' (Parent 14).

3d. Practical support

For some children, tours of the new school did take place whether that was in person or virtually. One popular strategy was online, virtual tours: 'The secondary school organised a virtual tour of the school with lots of teachers and pupils talking us through the tour, this was online with easy access' (Parent 16), which both parents and children reported finding useful in helping them get to know their new secondary school environment. Both primary and secondary schools also made efforts to prepare children practically for the transition through dedicated transition work as part of the curriculum (in primary schools) and some secondary schools provided the children with transition booklets to complete ahead of the transition: 'Sent through transition packs that bridged the gap with the secondary school' (Parent 27).

Children discussed how primary schools helped to support them practically pre-transition by discussing standards of behaviour 'Teach me how to do subjects and how to listen, be responsible and respectful' (Child 62) and helping them with their academic work 'Got work and we were told it was similar to secondary work' (Child 65).

Parents were also seen as providing practical support, by helping children with their work during lockdown: 'They helped me with my work' (Child 77), helping them plan: 'They have helped me organise and plan' (Child 41) and buying them the things they needed for secondary school: 'Bought me new stuff for school' (Child 51) to help meet children's needs pre-transition.

4. Meeting children's needs post-transition

Underpinning efforts to meet children's needs post-transition included (4a) *Academic support*, (4b) *Relational support*, (4c) *Practical support*, and (4d) *Emotional support*, which are discussed in turn below.

4a. Academic support

Recognizing gaps in children's knowledge, secondary school teachers also discussed providing children with regular homework: 'Giving the children online homework' (Parent 52) and chunking material in lessons: 'Break down learning into manageable chunks, set regular homework which will bridge the gap in learning' (Secondary school teacher 18). There was also a greater focus on basic skills in numeracy and literacy: 'Continue to support their reading/literacy - we need to get the basics there before we can do anything else' (Secondary school teacher 20) and skills development: 'She is currently doing skills development in school' (Parent 65).

Children discussed how their peers also helped them with their academic work: 'Helped me a little bit with subjects I'm struggling with more' (Child 63), which helped them to adjust by boosting their confidence: 'She helped me with math sometimes because I would get mixed up at times and gave me confidence' (Child 25).

4b. Relational support

Secondary school teachers discussed there being more of an emphasis on helping to support children in developing relationships compared to previous years, both with peers: 'Support them in making friends' (Secondary teacher 24) and staff: 'They are spending more time with their form teacher and are spending longer developing relationships with friends and staff' (Secondary teacher 1). This was facilitated by secondary schools keeping transfer children together in small groups: 'Pupils are taught in bubbles more like primary school to make them feel more comfortable and adjust quicker' (Secondary teacher 19) and with more regular contact with one main tutor, to help with children's adjustment post-transition.

Post-transition, secondary schools also supported parents and children through enhanced communication: 'We are making regular contact with parents to ensure that we can sort any issues that arise' (Secondary teacher 1). This included additional phone calls: 'Call every two weeks' (Parent 72), in addition to letters and emails.

4c. Practical support

Enhanced practical support was provided through supporting children with getting used to the new building and organizing themselves: 'Support them with organising themselves. Ensure they know how to navigate the school site once we are out of bubbles' (Secondary teacher 24). Further practical support also included secondary schools being more patient and understanding: 'Being more understanding of situations' (Secondary teacher 1).

4d. Emotional support

There was a clear additional focus this year on supporting children emotionally following the transition to secondary school. This included a slightly adapted curriculum with more form time: 'Extended form times - 1hr30 for first 2 days then 45min each day following' (Secondary teacher 12) and additional support for children's personal, social, and emotional development, such as: 'Assigning one member of staff for their pastoral care' (Secondary teacher 15).

Secondary school teachers also discussed how a determined effort had been made by the school to identify children who found the transition particularly challenging and provide these children with additional support: 'School have been great so far with keeping me up to date and supporting my child with additional needs and helping me with getting support' (Parent 76). However, other parents felt that additional provision was needed to identify children who have struggled during Covid-19 lockdown: 'Identify the children that lockdown has been hard for and are finding it hard to adjust to new rules and a new school day' (Parent 3) or had more time off with Covid-19 and are finding it hard to adjust: 'More support. He is still having trouble settling in as he has again had to have more time off due to Covid' (Parent 5).

5. Looking ahead/lessons learnt**5a. Advice for children**

Children discussed the importance of talking to their friends about their feelings and keeping in contact with primary school friends for support: 'We shared information on

apps which made me more confident about going to secondary school.’ (Child 6), which was also shown in the quantitative findings where 82% of children discussed their friends supporting them ‘a lot’ or ‘a little’ (see Table 2). Talking to a trusted adult was also mentioned as useful for children: ‘They told me about high school which made me feel better’ (Child 9), and 89% of children discussed it being ‘very likely’ or ‘quite likely’ that they would talk to their parents about their feelings towards the transition (see Table 2). Adults also discussed the importance of children being confident and having a positive mindset.

5b. Advice for parents

Teachers felt that parents could help children to feel ready and excited for secondary school by preparing them practically, for example, ‘Help them to organise themselves, check their bag is packed correctly in the morning’ (Secondary teacher 24); and to talk to them about how they are feeling, which can help promote a positive mindset and confidence: ‘Keep a watch on their mental well-being - school is a strange place at the moment and they need to be supported both at home and at school’ (Secondary teacher 1). Children also discussed how it was helpful when their parents provided time and space to talk through their concerns, and shared their own experiences of school transition.

Parents can also help the process by engaging with the information provided by the schools, communicating with teachers, and getting used to the technology: ‘Utilise the information sent out. If you aren’t sure who to contact, get in touch with the new school and make sure you have that contact information. Never be scared to ask a question, it is one of the most anxious times (especially this year) and there is no such thing as a silly question’ (Secondary teacher 10). To help with information sharing, parents said it was also helpful to keep in contact with other parents.

5c. Advice for teachers/ schools

Many parents and children felt that schools had tried their best this year, despite difficult circumstances, and did not suggest any improvements. A lot of children discussed the importance of milestones typically associated with transition, for example, prom and signing shirts, and for schools to try to find ways to help children to experience these. They also felt like ‘Online homework and online learning’ (Child 81) could also help bridge the gap from primary to secondary school as could learning about secondary school standards, which many had found useful this year.

Teachers recommended better information sharing between primary and secondary schools, especially in the absence of data from SATs: ‘Send information sooner rather than after pupils have already transitioned so teachers can be prepared, rather than having to play catch up’ (Secondary teacher 19) and provide extra information for children with special educational needs.

There were also a few comments about the need for more virtual meetings to enable children to get to know the new building and people better, which was also shared by parents. Parents also discussed the need for information sharing, particularly following the transition, so they could have an insight into their child’s adjustment: ‘I would appreciate some feedback on how he is settling in from school perspective’ (Parent 8) and there was a suggestion from the children that phone calls could be a good way to keep in touch in case of technical difficulties ‘Normal phone calls to parents. Video links can be complicated for the older generation’ (Child 118).

A wider systemic and long-term change which parents suggested was to integrate transition throughout primary school to promote positive mindsets around school transition: 'I think this positive mindset was due to the fact that transition activities and visits take place all year and pupils are "well versed" and comfortable in their new academic home' (Parent 27) and 'Greater support of emotional and health wellbeing' (Parent 37).

Discussion

This study has shown the challenges experienced by all stakeholders in navigating primary-secondary school transition during the Covid-19 pandemic. Children, parents, and teachers reported negative impacts of Covid-19 on their experiences of the transition, practically, socially, and emotionally, and numerous strategies were reported that were used to meet children's needs pre and post-transition, highlighting areas of good practice, along with practical suggestions for future transition provision.

A strength of the present research was that it drew on Jindal-Snape and Rienties (2016) MMT, focussing on primary-secondary school transition as a group transition, and simultaneously comparing the first-hand experiences of transfer children, their parents, and Year 6 and 7 teachers, using the method outlined by Bagnall (2020b), to provide holistic, detailed, and in-depth exploration. This study makes further contributions to the field in mobilizing the underused, yet valuable Thematic Framework Analysis.

A set of recommendations have been developed from the findings of this study, supported by previous research evidence and underpinned by psychological theory. Considerations are also made to the generalizability and application of the present findings and recommendations, as we emerge from the pandemic. These recommendations should be viewed as *in addition* to high quality universal transition support.

Recommendation 1: Focus on children's resilience, emotional well-being, and coping skills throughout primary school to support children to view primary-secondary school transition more positively

Schools can build children's resilience by integrating transition support throughout primary school (Bagnall et al., 2021b). As discussed in the present research, this may include transition visits to prospective secondary schools and transition activities in class integrated within the final two years of primary school. This can help to position primary-secondary school transition as a gradual progression, and, as a result, avoid some of the heightened and built-up anxiety and rush that is commonly shown immediately prior to the transfer Bagnall, Skipper & Fox, 2019. It can also provide an opportunity to scaffold protective skills, such as feelings of control, safety, and emotional resilience (White, 2020). See Bagnall et al., (2021b) for some helpful suggestions of activities. This will not only help children cope with the uncertainty surrounding Covid-19 in the short term, but could also feed-forward to help them develop a positive view towards the transition.

Recommendation 2: shared communication between parents, primary and secondary schools is key to best support transfer children

A clear message from parents and primary and secondary school teachers was that communication is crucial over primary-secondary school transition, and especially during Covid-19 lockdown. Parents and children discussed helpful strategies primary and secondary

schools used during the pandemic, to build relationships and share information, despite social distancing. Leading up to the transition, primary schools facilitated online discussions with children and parents to provide additional emotional support, and secondary schools created welcome videos, transition information packs, and letters addressed to children. During the transition, telephone conversations between teachers and parents were discussed as particularly helpful to share information. These strategies have useful implications post Covid-19 to best support transfer children and manage expectations for all, especially given that previous research has shown the significance, but also difficulty facilitating collaborative support over the transition period between stakeholders (Bagnall, 2020a). Therefore, it is important that teachers are given time to do this.

Recommendation 3: support for children’s emotional well-being should be at the forefront of transition provision and not end as transfer children leave primary school

To date, efforts to improve children’s emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transition are limited in research (Bagnall et al., 2021a), practice (Bagnall et al., 2019), and policy (DfHSC & DfE, 2018), despite the fact that timely and sensitive emotional centred support in the lead up to and over this period is crucial in supporting children’s short- and long-term emotional adjustment (White, 2020).

In this research, parents and children reported significant anxiety leading up to and over the transition period and teachers reported children to be less ready, mature, and confident. However, it was clear that schools and parents were receptive to this and provided additional emotional support during the pandemic to support children. Prior to the transition, this included more discussions relating to school transition as a class and 1:1 in primary school. At home, parents discussed managing their child’s expectations through child-led discussions. Once children had transitioned to secondary school, there was a greater focus on supporting their socio-emotional well-being, through additional PSHE lessons, from time to help children build relationships with peers and teachers, and additional support for children who struggled during the pandemic.

While it is acknowledged that Covid-19 posed additional challenges to children’s emotional well-being this year, these examples of good practice demonstrate the viability of nurturing children’s emotional well-being during this time.

Recommendations 4: primary-secondary school transition is a significant milestone for children and parents, and needs to be recognized as such to promote educational progression

A unique finding from the present research was the significant sense of loss children and parents felt in being unable to mark the milestone of leaving primary school, due to the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. Parents felt that this impacted children’s readiness for secondary school and ability to cope, and lack of closure may have also impacted Year 7 children’s confidence, maturity, motivation, and engagement. These findings suggest the need to mark the milestone of leaving primary school.

Thus, for the children that have transitioned schools during Covid-19 lockdown and now nearing the end of Year 7, supporting them to manage feelings of loss through the marking of milestones is important, given the sadness that will be associated with the missed opportunities these children experienced in Year 6. Thinking ahead to the future, there is need for primary schools to find ways to help children to experience these key milestones, for example, virtual ‘moving on’ events.

Recommendation 5: teachers need support too

The present findings have shed light on the additional pressures primary and secondary school teachers experienced during the pandemic, in managing children's emotional well-being, whilst also experiencing mental exhaustion and being overwhelmed themselves. It was clear that teachers were heavily stretched during the pandemic, as they navigated remote working, while also teaching some children face-to-face and having less support from colleagues, which increased the demands of their job. The way in which teachers were portrayed during the pandemic in the media was additionally hard for teachers to cope with, as was uncertainty associated with not knowing when children would be returning to school. Teacher retention is a long-standing problem (Foster, 2019), mainly due to the recognized demands and stresses of the job, which has an impact on teacher well-being and mental health (Perryman & Calvert, 2020). A recent study showed a significant increase in mental health problems among teachers over the last decade with the authors calling for the government to monitor teacher mental health to enable more targeting and tailoring of resources (Jerrim, Sims, Taylor, & Allen, 2021).

The Department for Education and the Education Support Partnership, aimed to do this by providing teachers' and leaders' online mental health support. In addition, to sustainably support teacher mental health there is a need for policymakers to provide extra support at an institutional level, for example, more teaching assistant support, and dedicated time and space in the curriculum for teachers to provide evidence-informed support for children during 'turning points' and uncertain times.

Limitations

All the participants retrospectively reflected on the transition provision they previously received, thus, forgetting and selective retrieval could have had an influence on our findings. However, given that the online surveys were live between September 2020 and November 2020, this is unlikely. Moreover, all the participants completed the survey online anonymously, which is shown to be non-confronting and leads to a greater likelihood of the participants sharing honest, sensitive experiences (Bagnall, 2020a) and is a strength of the present research.

All the participants self-selected to take part in the survey; however, the quantitative and qualitative findings show a range of positive and negative perspectives and experiences; this gives us some confidence in the generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, it is possible that the views and experiences of certain groups of children and parents (e.g., those with low socio-economic status) may not be represented within our findings, with certain minoritized groups often being less likely to take part in research studies. Future research should strive to be more inclusive, potentially using more participatory research methods. This is particularly important especially given that the physical closure of schools and the adoption of distance learning is predicted to exacerbate existing educational inequalities (Di Pietro et al., 2020), and given that there were concerns raised within the teacher data about how to best identify and support children most affected by the pandemic.

Furthermore, although caution was made to not over-represent their voices, it is worth noting that there were a greater proportion of children and parents to teachers participating in the research. Thus, there is an opportunity for further research with teachers to strengthen confidence in the credibility and robustness of the present findings. More innovative methods, that recognize the limited time that teachers have available to participate in research, must be explored. Recognizing the longitudinal nature

of primary-secondary school transition, an additional recommendation for further research would be to examine the long-term implications of the pandemic on children who transitioned to secondary school during this time, to build on the present findings.

Conclusions

In sum, this study has identified ways that transition can be managed more effectively. Standing out was the importance of maintaining healthy and positive well-being pre, during, and post navigation of key life changes, such as primary-secondary school transition. This study has short-term implications in providing an evidence base to support transfer children this year, and long-term implications to feed-forward to inform provision for future transition years.

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Conflicts of interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contribution

Bagnall Charlotte: Conceptualization (equal); Data curation (equal); Formal analysis (equal); Investigation (equal); Methodology (equal); Project administration (equal); Writing – original draft (equal); Writing – review & editing (equal). **Yvonne Skipper:** Formal analysis (equal); Methodology (equal); Project administration (equal); Writing – review & editing (equal). **Claire Fox:** Conceptualization (equal); Formal analysis (equal); Methodology (equal); Project administration (equal); Writing – review & editing (equal).

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Appendix A:

Child survey questions

Your recommendations

What lessons can we learn from what has happened this year to prepare pupils for the transition to secondary school for the future?

Do you think lockdown changed who you went to for support about transition? If yes how? If no, why not?

Parents/guardians

Is there anything that your parents/guardians could do/have done over the summer to make you feel confident about the transition to secondary school in September?

Teachers

What if anything could your primary school do/have done over the summer to make you feel confident about the transition to secondary school in September?

Is there anything that your secondary school could do/has done to make you feel confident about the transition to secondary school in September?

Classmates

Is there anything that your classmates could do/have done to make you feel confident about the transition to secondary school in September?

Parent survey questions

Recommendations

What could secondary schools do to help your child adjust?

What could secondary schools do to help you to help your child?

What could you do now to support them?

What (if anything) could the government do this year to help make the transition to secondary school easier for children?

If you have a child who has previously gone through this transition, how does this year compare to your previous experience?

Relationships

Is there anything that could improve your confidence talking to your child about primary-secondary school transition?

Is there anything that could improve your child's confidence about primary-secondary school transition?

Support

What if anything could your primary school do to support you to support your child?

What if anything could your primary school do now to support your child?

What if anything could your secondary school do now to support you?

Is there anything that your secondary school could do now to support your child?

Primary school teacher survey questions

Is there anything that your feeder secondary schools could do now and over the summer?

Is there anything that parents could do now?

What could secondary schools do now to help their new intake of Year 6 children adjust?

What do you feel would be/have been most helpful for children on entering secondary school?

What recommendations (if anything) for policy in this area of school transition do you have?

As a school teacher how has Covid-19 lockdown affected you personally?

Secondary school teacher survey questions

Is there anything that your feeder primary schools could do over the summer?

Is there anything that parents could do now?

What do you feel would be/have been most helpful for children on entering secondary school?

What are you planning on doing to help your new intake of primary children to adjust?

What recommendations (if anything) for policy in the area of school transition do you have?

As a school teacher how has Covid-19 lockdown affected you personally?