Manchester Metropolitan University

MCYS The Manchester Centre for Youth Studies

Young People's Experiences of Starting Secondary School

Transitional pressures, challenges, and support needs

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MANCHESTER CITY COUNCIL

Contents

Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

Young people consulted for this research study widely reported that the transition from primary to secondary school was fraught with pressures and challenges. Whilst each young person's educational journey was complex and highly personal, most young people reported struggling to adjust to the secondary school environment. A majority of young people felt that, overall, moving from Year 6 to Year 7 had resulted in a less enjoyable and less safe educational experience. Young people were highly aware of their support needs in the first two years of secondary school and were clear about their wish to actively participate in shaping future support interventions. It is the view of this report that meaningful and ongoing youth participation could be a key strength of the SAFE programme and associated interventions if facilitated consistently.

Transitional Pressures

- Young people identified a wide variety of transitional pressures associated with moving from a primary to a secondary educational setting.
- The most frequent pressures identified by young people were: disruption to peer relationships; peer conflict; school attitudes to behaviour; and academic performance.
- Most young people felt that starting secondary school had initially resulted in a less enjoyable and less safe educational experience.
- Most young people felt that they were treated very differently by school staff in Year 7 (when compared to Year 6), with many young people feeling that they had 'failed' to meet new expectations.

Ongoing Challenges

- Experiences of Year 8 continued to present challenges, with most young people suggesting they had a less enjoyable and less safe educational experience compared to the previous year, though a small number of young people reported the opposite.
- The most frequent ongoing challenges of secondary school identified by young people were: conflict over behaviour; relationships with teachers; academic performance; peer conflict; external safety concerns; and mental health and wellbeing.
- Of these, school attitudes to behaviour, relationships with teachers, peer conflict and difficulties with mental health were felt to have the biggest negative impact on school enjoyment and engagement.
- Many young people felt that they required the same, or a greater, level of support in Year 8 than they had received in Year 7.

Support Needs

- Young people identified a wide range of support needs in relation to both the initial phase of primary to secondary transition, and in their first two years of secondary school.
- The most frequent support needs identified were: strengths-based behavioural support; building support networks; support with peer conflict and bullying; support for mental health and emotional wellbeing; and upholding the right to participate.
- Young people widely felt that there was a need to frame support interventions more positively in the context of their school cultures.
- Most young people felt very strongly that more could be done to uphold their right to participate in the design of interventions aimed at supporting them. Young people wanted to participate in the design and delivery of all future SAFE interventions, and in the re-design of school behavioural systems.

Key Recommendations

Embedding the right to participate

- All SAFE taskforce interventions moving forward should be designed with the active participation of young people. Any existing interventions should integrate provision for ongoing youth participation to ensure responsiveness to feedback and youth input into decision-making regarding direction and delivery.

Encouraging strengths-based behavioural approaches

- The SAFE team should offer support for schools for redesigning current behavioural systems around evidence-based inclusive and strengths-based approaches as a matter of priority. Young people should be supported to participate in the re-design of school behavioural systems. The use of zero-tolerance, points-based or sanctions-focused behavioural systems should be actively discouraged at schools participating in the SAFE programme.

Linking with existing nurture provision

- Newly designed SAFE interventions should link in with existing nurture-style programmes in schools and enhance these programmes where possible. Young people participating in SAFE interventions should be considered as having met the threshold to access nurture and spaces to aid in emotional regulation. They should be supported to engage with these provisions more freely.

Counselling and mentoring

- Counselling and/or mentoring should be considered as a widely applied SAFE intervention, as this can provide crucial support for young people. It is vital, however, that young people's views on what they need and want from counselling or mentoring sessions are sought on a regular basis, and that young people are treated as partners within any such process.

Supporting young people with peer conflict

- Programmes for resolving and preventing peer conflict should be considered by the SAFE taskforce in consultation with young people and relevant professionals. It is important that support for young people to deal with conflict both within and outside a school setting is considered.

Supporting young leadership on mental health

- Support for youth-led mental health campaigns and awareness classes should be considered by the SAFE taskforce. The taskforce should consider offering young people the chance to work in collaboration with relevant professionals to explore how they can act as young ambassadors for mental health.

Supplementary Recommendations

Current SAFE mentoring interventions

- Young people should be clearly informed about why they have been offered SAFE mentoring when selected for the programme. It should be explained that consent is optional, and that young people may withdraw from sessions for any reason. The goals of individual mentoring programmes should be designed in collaboration with each young person. Young people should have an ongoing role in the design and delivery of sessions, and should be treated as partners by their mentors. It is vital that mentoring is recognised as work, rather than reward, within school cultures.

Training on Participatory Youth Practice and Engagement for mentors, schools, and the SAFE team

- The SAFE taskforce should consider implementing training on Participatory Youth Practice and Engagement for all individuals engaged as professionals facilitating or delivering SAFE interventions. This will help to ensure sustainable practice in relation to youth participation and help to embed consistent youth partnership in interventions. This could be provided by any relevant professional body with experience of participatory youth engagement.

Training for schools on strengths-based behavioural approaches

- The SAFE team should consider implementing training for staff at participating schools on alternatives to sanctions-based behavioural management. This would support a general culture shift at schools in Greater Manchester towards evidence-based, strengths-focused behavioural models for increasing school engagement and providing sustainable opportunities for positive behaviour.

Training for young people participating in SAFE interventions on youth leadership

- The SAFE taskforce may benefit from offering young people the chance to participate in leadership training programmes, so they feel more confident acting as partners in the design and delivery of interventions they are involved in.

Pathways to further support

- The SAFE taskforce should consider embedding pathways to further support, such as NHS provision, within existing interventions.

Chapter 1:
Introduction

This research explores young people's experiences of primary to secondary school transition in Manchester. The study investigates the pressures and challenges faced by young people during the process of transition, along with the first two years of secondary school. The study aims to understand young people's support needs during the primary-to-secondary school transition. It offers a series of youth-informed recommendations for the types of support interventions young people feel would be most beneficial to them.

The research study was commissioned by Manchester City Council (MCC) as part of its SAFE taskforce initiative. The SAFE taskforce was launched by the Department of Education in December 2021 and aims to reduce the risk of young people becoming involved in peer conflict or Serious Youth Violence (SYV). Over a period of 3 years, the SAFE programme aims to deliver school-based interventions in areas of England with comparatively high rates of SYV, when viewed in a national context.[1] These interventions aim to reduce truancy, improve behaviours, and diminish the risk of children being permanently excluded from school, keeping them focused on their education.[2]

MCC was selected as one of ten councils across England to lead the delivery of a local SAFE programme. Due to a well-documented increase in the risk of disengagement with education during the transition from primary school to secondary school,[3] MCC chose to focus its interventions on children in their last year of primary school and in the first two years of secondary school. As part of developing the SAFE programme, MCC commissioned the Manchester Centre for Youth Studies (MCYS), based at Manchester Metropolitan University, to conduct the current research.

The research study focuses on eliciting the views of Year 8 school pupils (who have been identified as at-risk of becoming disengaged in their education) on the pressures, challenges and support needs they experienced as part of the process of primary-to-secondary school transition. MCC intends to reflect the views and experiences of young people in the design and delivery of all future SAFE taskforce interventions.

1 Department for Education (2021), Support for vulnerable young people in serious violence hotspots, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/support-for-vulnerable-young-people-in-serious-violence-hotspots DOA: 10/08/2022).

2 Ibid.

3 Sutherland, R.J., et al. (2010), Supporting learning in the transition from primary to secondary schools (Bristol: University of Bristol).

Research Objectives

- How do young people experience the transition from primary to secondary school?
- Do young people identify any key pressures or challenges involved in this transition?
- What types of interventions do young people feel would best support this transition?
- How do young people feel about their current educational experience?
- What types of interventions and/or support would young people like to see with regard to their continued engagement in education?

Chapter 2:
Methodology

This research was conducted over a five-month period between March and July 2023. The MCYS team adopted a creative, youth-friendly methodology to explore current Year 8 pupils' experiences of the transition from primary to secondary school and to elicit their views on what they felt could be done to better support them through this process.

Creative workshops with young people formed the basis of this research study. In total, five creative workshops were undertaken with Year 8 pupils across three different schools in Manchester.[4] All schools were participating in Manchester City Council's SAFE programme and associated support interventions.[5] Each workshop involved a small group of young people (n = <5) who were identified by school staff as likely to benefit from support staying engaged in education. In total, 13 young people participated in the study.

The first set of workshops focused on an in-depth exploration of young people's lived experiences of primary-to-secondary school transition, whilst the second set focused on eliciting young people's recommendations for the design and delivery of future supportive interventions. Youth participants each received a £10.00 voucher per workshop they attended in recognition of their time and contribution to the research.

Workshop Activities

MCC requested that the MCYS team approach the research study as an open-ended 'curiosity exercise'. In view of this, the MCYS team used a creative methodology to explore young people's experiences in a flexible and participatory way, investigating their own concerns and priorities. In designing workshop activities, the MCYS team drew on a number of well-established child-friendly toolkits suitable for capturing youth voices on key research themes and objectives using participatory methods. These included MCYS's Participatory Youth Practice Framework (2023); Derby City Council's Voice of the Child Toolkit (2016) and Manchester City Council's Anxiety-Based School Avoidance Guidance (2021).[6] All workshops encompassed a broad range of creative activities. Activities were completable in multiple formats (art-based, written, and verbal) to ensure a good level of inclusivity and accessibility.

4 To aid in in their identification of young people at risk of disengagement in education, schools were given a selection tool by MCC based on their Risk of NEET Indicator (RONI) tool with the addition of mitigating factors.

5 In one school, a single, combined workshop was conducted due to difficulties with end-of-term timetabling.

6 See Manchester Centre for Youth Studies (2023), Participatory Youth Practice Engagement Framework, 2nd edition (Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University); Derby City Council (2023), Voice of the child toolkit, online resource; and Manchester City Council (2021), Anxiety-based school avoidance guidance, online resource.

Group Discussions

Creative workshops were audio recorded and functioned as open-ended interviews. Key talking points were initially introduced by the researcher focusing on the central research questions, but as rapport was strengthened, discussion was shaped by young participants.

Themes of discussion addressed in each workshop included:

- Primary and secondary school environments;
- Classroom pressures;
- Staff/student relationships;
- Peer relationships;
- Emotional wellbeing and learning needs; and,
- Home and community life.

Icebreaker Prompts

Icebreaker prompts were used to introduce and stimulate initial discussion of the research questions and to support young people's reflections about their school transition experiences. The first set of icebreakers asked young people to give quick, intuitive 'enjoyment' ratings for Years 6, 7, and 8, whilst the second asked them to consider 'how safe they felt' in each of these years. The third icebreaker asked young people to reflect on their feelings about a 'typical school day' (see figures 1, 2 and 3). These activities were not intended to generate quantitative data, but rather to provide a basis for individual reflection.

Figure 1:
Icebreaker exercise on school enjoyment

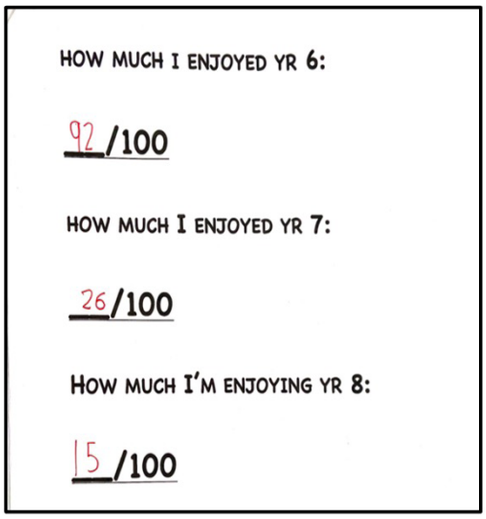


Figure 2:
Icebreaker exercise on feeling safe

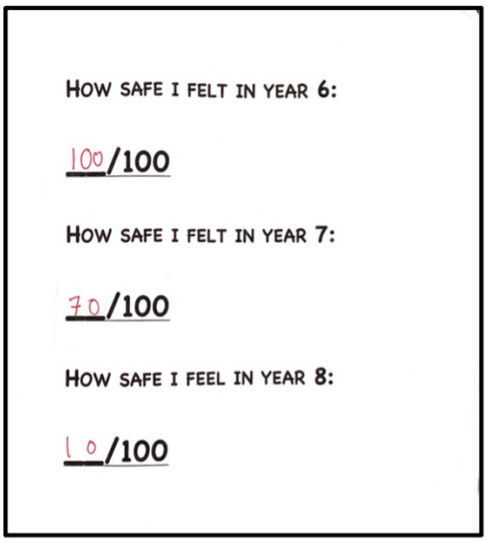
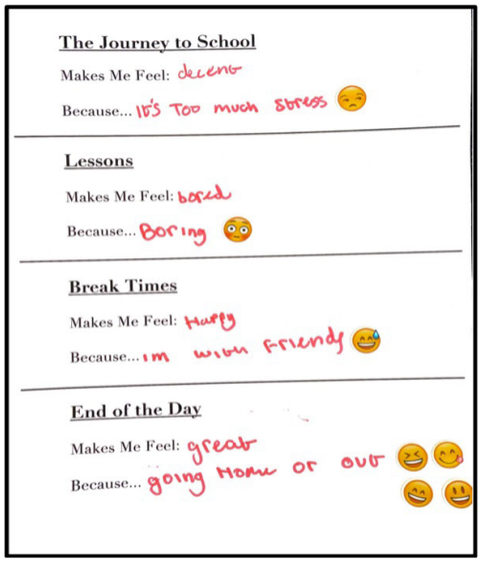


Figure 3: Icebreaker exercise on school emotions



Journey Maps

Journey maps, also known as 'high points, low points' maps, were used to gain deeper, holistic insights into young peoples' lived experiences of primary-to-secondary school transition. Workshop participants were asked to map any 'school, home and community events' that had impacted their educational journeys between Year 6 and Year 8, and explain whether they were challenging or beneficial. Journey maps serve as highly personal records of the pressures, transitional challenges, and protective factors associated with school transition. In each case, young people also chose to describe their map in more detail for the researcher. See page 11 (figure 4) for an example of a journey map.

'Five Things I'd Like to Change'

In order to generate youth-informed recommendations for future support interventions, young people were asked to mind-map at least '5 things they would like to change' about their Year 7 and Year 8 experiences. Workshop participants were then encouraged to discuss practical measures which could be put in place to facilitate these changes, and to support future generations of pupils. See page 12 (figure 5) for an example of this activity.

'Design a Mentor'

At one participating school a mentoring scheme had already begun as a SAFE-led support intervention. Young people at this school were invited to complete the additional creative task of 'designing a good and bad mentor'. Students were given prompts including personal qualities, session ideas, and advice for future mentors. Mentoring-specific recommendations were formed on the basis of the activity. See page 12 (figure 6) for an example of this activity.

Transcription style

In transcribed quotations and extracts of workshop conversations, "R" is shorthand for Researcher, whilst "YP" is shorthand for Young Person. Transcripts have been edited where necessary for anonymity and clarity.

Figure 4: Journey Map

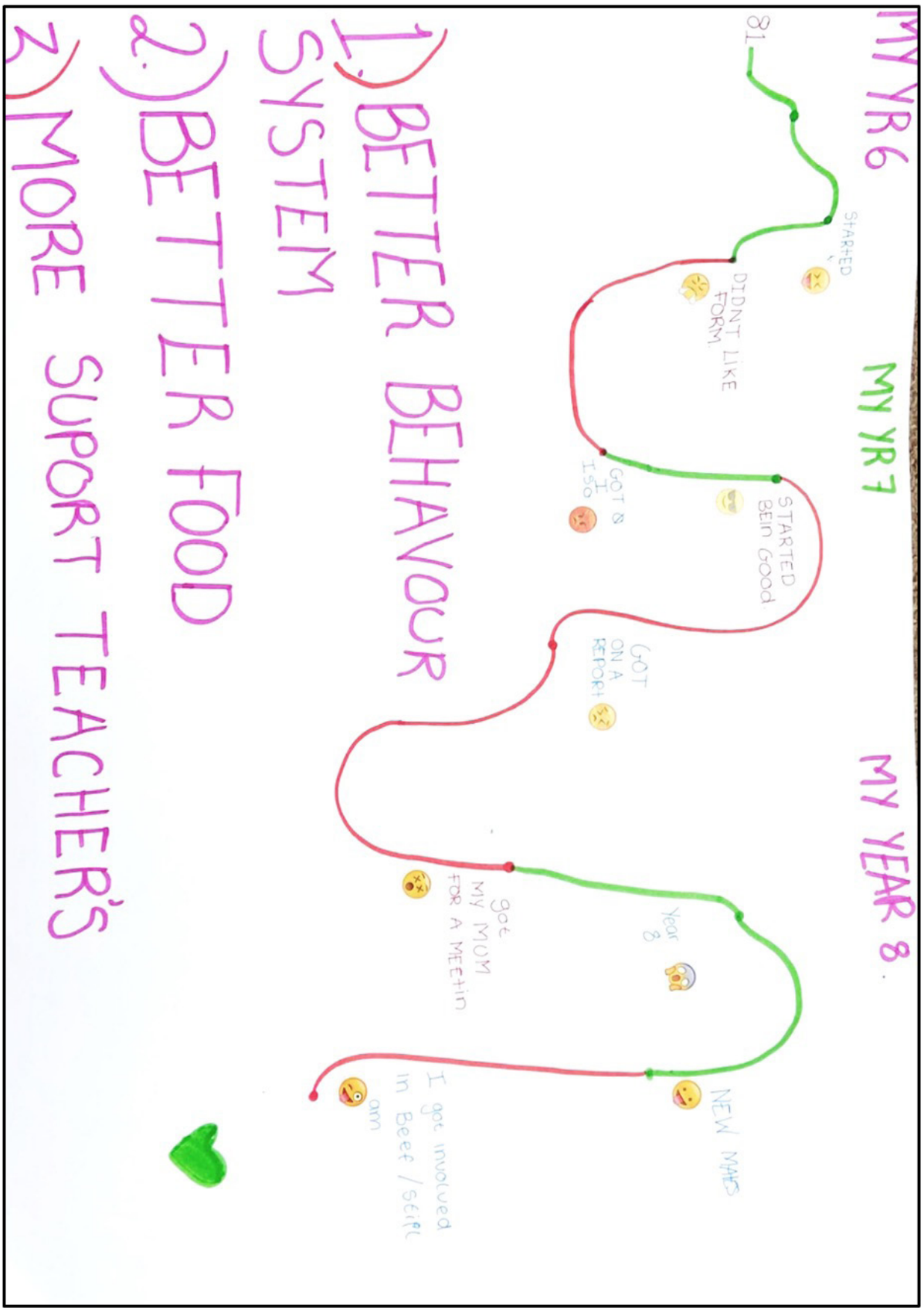


Figure 5: '5 Things I'd Like to Change'

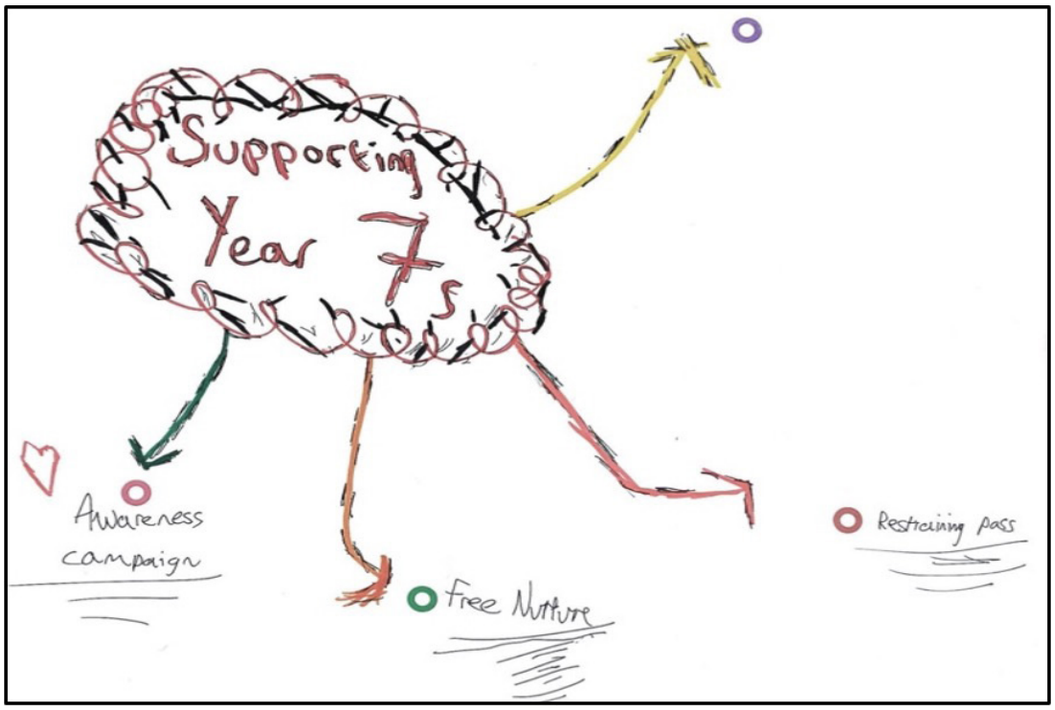
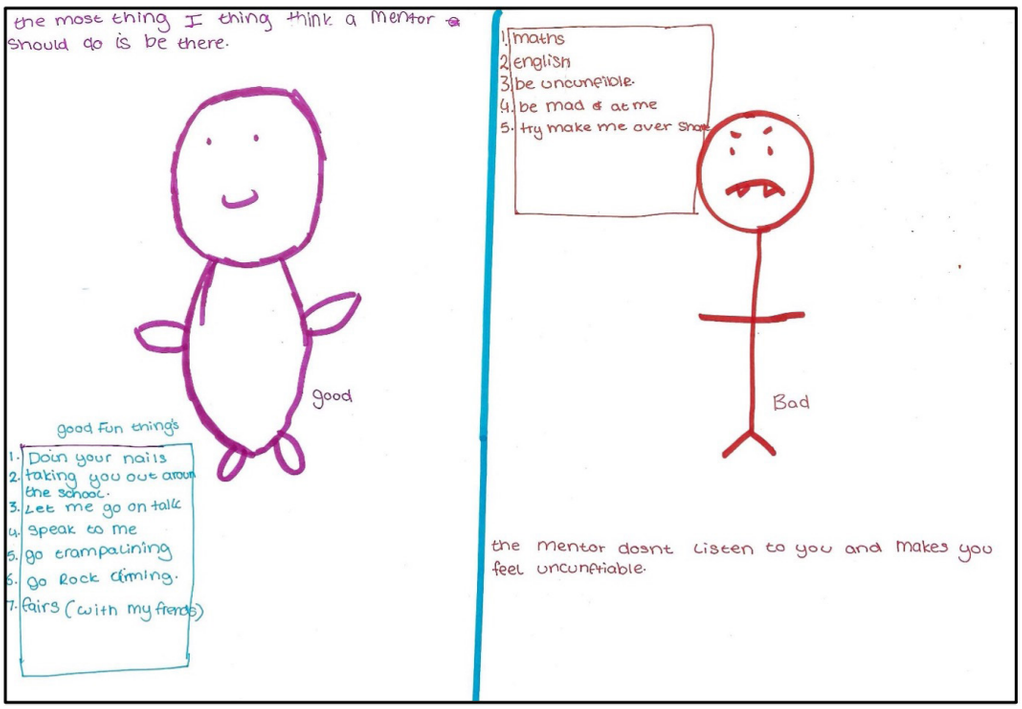


Figure 6: 'Design a Mentor'



Chapter 3:
Findings

Research suggests that primary-to-secondary school transition can be an intensely uncertain and pressurising time for pupils.[7] The environmental, pedagogic, and social differences of primary and secondary school settings can prove difficult to navigate for young people,[8] and the transition itself arrives at a sensitive time in adolescent development.[9] A stressful transition experience can not only have a lasting impact on academic performance and educational engagement,[10] but can have significant and long-term consequences for a young person's mental health and emotional wellbeing.[11] For these reasons, there is an increasing recognition of the need to provide dedicated support for young people undergoing primary-to-secondary school transition.

All young people who participated in this research study supported the view that the move from Year 6 to Year 7 was fraught with multiple worries and challenges. Indeed, whilst many workshop participants felt they had initially been excited about starting secondary school, the majority felt school transition had resulted in a less enjoyable and safe educational experience. In many cases, young people reported that the process of 'settling in' to secondary school had taken 'too long' at the outset of Year 7. Whilst experiences of Year 8 were slightly more diverse, the majority of young people were clear that most of the pressures they experienced in the initial phase of transition continued or worsened in Year 8.

Young people identified numerous pressures, challenges, and support needs associated with the move from primary to secondary school. These are addressed separately in the following sections, but it is important to note that young people always explored these individual factors as overlapping and interrelated when discussing their personal educational journeys. For examples of young people's individual educational journeys, see case individual studies on pages 18, 28, and 37.

Transitional Pressures

"YP: I want to go back to primary school."

For most young people, the difficulties of primary-to-secondary school transition were felt to have emerged immediately when starting Year 7. Young people quickly perceived a range of clear differences between primary and secondary school environments, and highlighted the barriers these presented to adjusting to secondary school. The most frequent transitional pressures

7 Mumford, J. & Birchwood, J. (2021), 'Transition: A systematic review of literature exploring the experiences of pupils moving from primary to secondary school in the UK', Pastoral Care in Education 39(4): 377–400.

8 Symonds, J. (2015), Understanding school transition: What happens to children and how to help them (Abingdon: Routledge).

9 Van Rens, M. et al. (2018), 'Facilitating a successful transition to secondary school: (How) does it work? A systematic literature review', Adolescent Research Review 3: 43–56.

10 Evans, D. et al. (2018), 'A review of the academic and psychological impact of the transition to secondary education', Frontiers in Psychology 9: 1482.

11 Martinez, R. et al. (2011), 'Changes in perceived social support and socioemotional adjustment across the elementary to junior high school transition', Journal of Youth and Adolescence 40(5): 519–530.

identified by young people were:

- Disruption to peer relationships;
- Peer conflict;
- School responses to behaviour; and,
- Expectations of schoolwork.

In each case, young people noted that they had experienced most, or all, of these pressures at some point during their school transitions.

Disruption to Peer Relationships

Nearly all young people highlighted disruption to peer relationships and 'having to make new friends' as a key and immediate pressure of starting Year 7. Many noted that they had initially struggled to make 'enough friends' when starting secondary school and had experienced the move as a period of discomforting social disruption:

"R: Why did you not like Year 7 compared to Year 6?

YP: Because it was hard work and, like, just meeting new people was weird."

———

"YP: In Year 6 was with all my friends that I had known for years and then Year 7 was just completely different."

Whilst for some young people, new friendships did form relatively quickly in the weeks following secondary school induction, others felt this to have been a much lengthier and drawn-out process. Some young people noted that they simply struggled to replace the strong friendships they lost on leaving primary school:

"YP: So my reviews [of the different school years]: Year 6, 100/100.... I had lots of friends and I have tons of memories in Year 6. In Year 7, it's a 0. I was trying to be kind to everybody, but they just didn't care."

Whilst others noted that they had actively disliked those who they had been placed into their Year 7 form with:

"YP: So basically year 6 was a 90, and then I got picked for [this school], which was alright and then I found out my form group, which I wasn't happy with.

R: Why were you not happy with it at the start?

YP: Because I didn't know anyone and some of the people were kind of annoying."

Research suggests that support from friends can be a key predictor for well-being and school satisfaction when moving from primary to secondary school.[12] This was certainly felt to be the case for workshop participants, most of whom noted that they did not 'feel better' about school until they felt they had successfully found new supportive peer friendships.

Peer Conflict

Connected to the pressures of social disruption on starting secondary school were a set of concerns about increased peer conflict. Studies suggest that concerns about bullying and negative peer relationships are very common among young people when starting secondary school,[13] and this was similarly present in young people's discussions of their main 'worries' about starting secondary school.

12 Oriol, X. et al. (2017), 'Comparing family, friends and satisfaction with school experience as predictors of SWB in children who have and have not made the transition to middle school in different countries', Children and Youth Services Review 80: 149–156; Cantin, S. & Boivin, M. (2004), 'Change and stability in children's social network and self-perceptions during transition from elementary to junior high school', International Journal of Behavioural Development 28: 561–570.

13 Zeedyck, M. et al. (2003), 'Negotiating the transition from primary to secondary school: Perceptions of pupils, parents and teachers', Sch. Psychol. Int 24: 67–79.

Many young people, for example, expressed the view that moving to secondary school had immediately exposed them to higher levels of peer conflict:

"YP1: I feel like in high school, more fights happen than in primary school. More stuff can happen than happened in primary school.

YP2: In my primary school there was hardly any fights.

YP3: There was arguments but hardly any fights.

YP2: Here there was 7 fights in one day."

This was sometimes felt to have impacted young people's enjoyment of education quite substantially:

"YP: Okay so how much I enjoyed year 6, [I rate that for enjoyment] 96 per cent because I had a lot of close friends there, no one would beat me up. [For Year 7, my score is way lower]."

Interestingly, young people's perceptions of the reasons for peer conflict in secondary school varied considerably across workshops. Some felt this was connected to the need for their peer group to develop the social skills needed to de-escalate tense situations:

"R: Why do you think there is more fights here [than at primary school]?

YP1: Because people don't know how to speak to each other.

YP2: They don't know how to behave.

R: So it escalates quicker here?

YP1: Yeah."

Whilst others connected it to an overarching concern that they were simply more likely to be targeted by violence as they 'got older':

"R: What about outside [of school]?

YP1: I feel like the older you get, the less safe.

R: Why is that?

YP2: Because you can get involved in stuff.

YP1: Exactly, Manchester's just…

YP2: No one's gonna slap a 2-year-old but someone might slap a 15-year-old."

Certainly, concerns around the increased risk of violence or peer conflict in young people's lives was a theme continued into young people's discussions of their lives as 'visible teenagers' in Year 8. For a discussion of young people's concerns about the ongoing challenge of involvement in peer conflict at school and specifically in Manchester communities, see pages 24–25 of the report.

School Attitudes to Behaviour

Another immediate issue raised by young people with regard to the pressures of primary to secondary school transition regarded school attitudes to behaviour. Current evidence points toward a sharp change in the management of behaviour between primary and secondary school settings.[14] Suspension and exclusion rates are far higher in UK secondary schools than primary schools, as is the use of measures such as detention[15] and isolation.[16] For many young people who participated in this research, the rapid switch in behavioural expectations and management was not only perceived

14 Rainer, C. et al. (2023), Behaviour and mental health in schools report (Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition).

15 Department for Education (2018), Pupil behaviour in schools in England, research report.

16 Barker, J. et al. (2010), 'Pupils or prisoners? Institutional geographies and internal exclusion in UK secondary schools', Area 42(3): 378–386.

during the move to Year 7, but also identified as a key and enduring pressure of school transition.

Across workshops, for example, young people reported feelings of considerable worry in Year 7 about the sudden change in behavioural expectations and the way they felt suddenly treated very differently by teachers:

"R: So do you think that they treat you quite differently in high school?

YP1: Yes!

YP2: [With concern] Like you're expected more of."

———

"R: What are your [enjoyment ratings] for primary and secondary school?

YP: The first one [Year 6] is 92 out of 100. And then Year 7, 26 out of 100.

R: Why is that?

YP: Now I hate school.

R: How come?

YP: The new behaviour system."

Few young people felt that their behaviour had changed significantly on entering Year 7, but many felt that standards of 'good behaviour' had been raised very quickly. This led a large number of young people to feel they had 'failed to meet the expectations' of their new teachers. Indeed, one of the key reasons for the perceived unfairness of secondary school behavioural systems related to the fact that in primary school settings punishment-focused measures had rarely been used for similar behaviour:

"R: How often did you get detentions in Year 6?

YP1: In Year 6? My school didn't do them.

YP2: My school didn't have them.

YP3: I got like four.

R: And how many would you say you've had in here?

YP3: In here?

YP2: Loads

YP3: Over one hundred, I'm not even joking."

The types of behaviour management strategies used by teachers were a significant subject of concern amongst young people, and were in many cases felt to be employed far too readily and frequently in response to 'bad behaviour'. Young people often reported feeling there was simply no room to 'get things wrong' in the initial phase of secondary school and that this caused conflict in their relationships with teachers:

"YP: Sometimes you like really kind [teachers] and they 'let it slide'. Others, you mess up once and they put you through [to punishments] really quickly. Half my teachers are like that to be honest. I don't really get any nice teachers."

———

"YP: [My problem is] the strictness of the teachers and, like, sometimes teachers, like, they say stuff and like sometimes it's pretty rude, it can be pretty rude, and sometimes they don't get done for it."

Being caught up in a cycle of conflict with teachers was certainly associated with far lower self-reported rates of school engagement and enjoyment at all stages of secondary school transition. Indeed, as will be discussed in the following sections, the wish to focus on strengths-based systems of behaviour and to avoid

stigmatisation was a key support need identified by young people.

Academic Concerns

A final transitional pressure of Year 7 identified in workshops related to academic performance. Young people that participated in this study certainly perceived schoolwork as having got considerably 'harder' in secondary school, and some suggested that they felt they were again unable to meet new academic standards:

"YP1: Year 6 is fun. And then Year 7 it was kind of worse than Year 6 cos there was more work.

R: Do you all think overall they expect too much of you at school?

[All workshop participants agree].

R: Is there any pressure on you?

YP2: Yeah, I think so

YP1: I think so too.

Some young people also noted that on entering Year 7 they immediately noticed a difference in teaching style. Whilst this was not universally reported by young people, some workshop participants said that they felt secondary school teaching moved away from 'interactive' learning and towards a more traditional pedagogic style, which impacted their engagement.

"R: What's your rating [for enjoyment] of primary and secondary school?

YP: I put 80/100 for Year 6 and 60/100 for Year 7.

R: Why was year 7 less fun that year 6?

YP: That was because in Year 6 lessons we got to do like fun activities, and in year 7 we barely got to do that.

R: Do you all think there are fewer fun activities in Year 7 than in Year 6?

[All workshop participants agree]."

Young people also felt pressure regarding the amount of work they received, both within and outside the classroom, noting that homework meant they carried academic pressures into their personal lives:

"YP: We spend our whole week at school and then just to go home just to do more work. Do you know homework used to be seen as a punishment when it was first created?"

———

"YP: But the thing is, at home I do a lot of work. But I never get time to myself. I'm always suffering from burnout of some sort. I'm always putting that effort into my work."

The 'attainment dip' between primary and secondary stages of education is well-documented in current research, with difficult transition experiences potentially impacting a young person's learning over several years.[17] Certainly the young people also felt concerned about their current and future academic performance when describing their school transition experiences. For a discussion of young people's concerns about the ongoing challenge of academic performance, see pages 23-24 of the report.

17 Galton, M. et al. (1999), 'The impact of school transitions on pupil progress and attainment', Transitions and transfers: A review, research report (Department for Education): 1–41.

Case Study 1:

As discussed previously, it is important to recognise that whilst collectively, young people identified a range of general pressures impacting their transition experience, they were eager to emphasise the complexities of their individual journeys. Below is a case study of one young person's journey from Year 6 to Year 7, described from their own perspective.

"So Year 6, LOVELY. But when I found out I was going to [the school I was accepted to] I really didn't want to. There was this school that my dad went to that I really wanted to go to, but my sister didn't get accepted. So I had to come to here.

And then I got like my first friend group in Year 7. But then my form teacher got really annoying. And then I found different friends and I was with them for like a year and a half. And then my mum died. And then the idea of Year 8 was very exciting. But then Year 8 wasn't very exciting.

Then my friendship with my friends was really strong and grew stronger. But then I got put on [a behavioural concerns] report. I got on the [lowest severity] one, because it was my first one. And my dad was supposed to come in for a meeting. Then I stopped being friends with my friends.

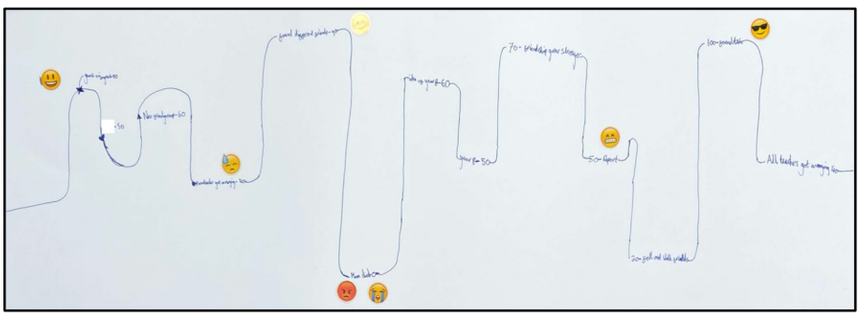
But then I made a best friend and I love her so much which was like 100. And then all the teachers got annoying, and that was basically just it."

For this young person, finding and maintaining a friendship group was their most important priority during primary-to-secondary transition. This was responsible for many of the 'lowest' and 'highest' points on their journey map (figure 7), and remained a key pressure and concern towards the end of Year 8.

In terms of other challenges listed by the young person, they explain that as they were seeking to adjust to Year 7, they experienced the life-altering event of the death of a parent. As they explained, this preceded a period of greater conflict with school and resulted in them being put on a report for behavioural concerns at the end of the first year of secondary school.

What is also apparent from the young person's description of their transition is that whilst some concerns have been solved, they are still very much in a phase of adjustment to secondary school. Indeed, as the young person suggested directly in the workshop, they are still in need of support moving forward.

Figure 7: Young Person's Journey Map



Ongoing Challenges

"YP: Everything you do, it's just never enough."

Research suggests an ongoing, if relatively complex, relationship between young people's experiences of primary to secondary transition and their educational experiences in Year 8. Whilst for many, the pressures of starting secondary school are short-lived and may be resolved by the time they enter Year 8, for a sizeable minority of pupils the process of adjustment to secondary school can take much longer.[18] Current studies suggest that a significant proportion of young people continue to experience significant challenges with their academic performance, education, anxiety, and emotional wellbeing in the years after starting secondary school.[19] This highlights the importance of providing ongoing support for young people well into the period after transition.[20]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most young people who participated in this study identified themselves as part of the cohort for whom getting used to secondary school took significantly longer than their peers. Indeed, the majority of workshop participants reported feeling that their Year 8 experiences were fraught with even greater challenges than Year 7 and a further decrease in feelings of enjoyment and safety at school when compared with Years 6 and 7.

Strikingly, the ongoing challenges of education discussed by young people in workshops were also more numerous than the pressures of initial transition in Year 7. The most frequent ongoing challenges identified by young people were:

- Conflicts over behaviour;
- Relationships with teachers;
- Academic performance;
- Peer conflict;
- External concerns; and,
- Mental health and wellbeing.

Conflicts over Behaviour

Perhaps the most pressing challenge described by young people in Year 8 related to ongoing conflicts over their behaviour. Young people were aware that their behavioural responses to the school environment were sometimes disruptive to school staff and their peers. However, many felt misunderstood or stigmatised, or 'picked on' by school staff even when they made positive efforts to meet behavioural standards.

Existing research suggests that children who feel they are stigmatised as 'troublemakers' at school may be at increased risk of marginalisation and disengagement in education.[21] This can have potentially long-lasting impacts for a young person's self-esteem as well as their school attendance and in-school motivation.[22] Concerns over being stigmatised as 'bad' or 'naughty' were certainly at the forefront of young people's descriptions of their Year 8 experiences.

When completing the task 'my emotions over the school day', for instance, many suggested that they felt upset or worried about attending because they anticipated negative responses to their behaviour:

18 Anderson, L. (2000), 'School transitions: beginning of the end or a new beginning?', International Journal of Educational Research, 33(4): 325–339.

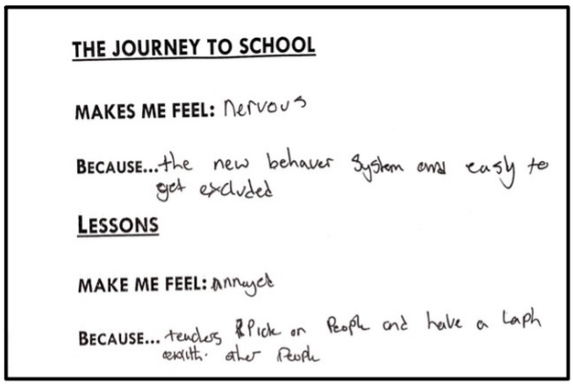
19 Mumford & Birchwood, 'Transition'.

20 Roberts, J. (2016), Improving school transitions for health equity, report (London: Institute for Health Equity).

21 Pyne, J. (2019), 'Suspended attitudes: Exclusion and emotional disengagement from school', Sociology of Education 92(1): 59–82.

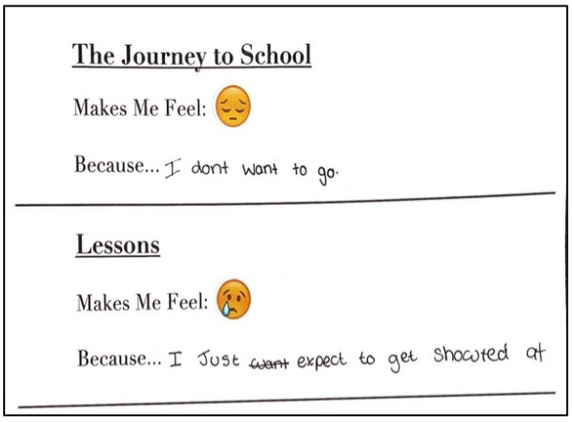
22 Ibid.

Figure 8: Young person's emotions during school



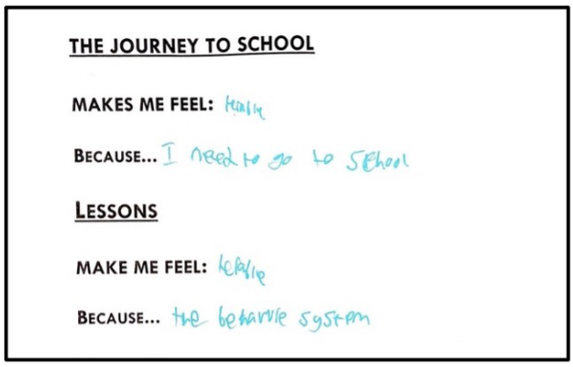
The journey to school makes me feel "nervous" Because... "the new behaviour system and easy to get excluded". Lessons make me feel "annoyed" Because... "teachers pick on people and have a laugh with other people."

Figure 9: Young person's emotions during school



The Journey to school makes me feel [sad emoji]. Because... "I don't want to go". Lessons make me feel [anxious and upset emoji] Because... "I just expect to get shouted at".

Figure 10: Young person's emotions during school



The Journey to school makes me feel "terrible". Because... "I need to go to school". Lessons make me feel "terrible". Because... "[of] the behaviour system".

One of the main underlying reasons for these feelings was the frequency with which most young people had already encountered extremely frequent sanctions within their schools' behavioural systems. Whilst young people had begun to experience detentions or periods of isolation in Year 7, many had received these regularly, along with exclusions by the time they reached Year 8:

"R: So how many times would you say you've been to isolation in at school?

YP1: 10 times.

YP2: Loads.

YP3: More than 10 for me. It's very easy to get in there though."

One source of tension related to the feeling amongst many young people that they continually received these serious sanctions, even for what they felt were relatively minor infractions:

"R: What do you have to do to get into isolation?

YP1: If you don't go to your detention.

YP2: If you speak and are rude to a teacher. Maybe if you get more than two bad behaviour points in one day."

With some feeling that they had become trapped in a cycle of transgression and punishment in their present school experiences:

"YP1: If you get a warning you have to go into isolation.

R: And then what do you do there?

YP1: Just sit there.

YP2: Just sit in silence. If you speak you get moved to the re-engage room and get excluded. And then you come out of exclusion, and you keep doing the same things and going through the same cycle."

Current data questions the efficacy of applying punitively-focused measures in secondary school contexts when young people are struggling with behaviour.[23] In fact, current evidence suggests that rather than creating positive change for young people, such measures may simply increase conflict and result in a decrease in school engagement.[24] Certainly, young people themselves felt that punitive behaviour measures were broadly ineffective and actively hindered their engagement in lessons:

"R: And what is the point of isolation?

YP1: I don't know.

YP2: It's apparently supposed to make you learn about what you've done, but people just go in there and come out and do exactly the same thing and then go in there again, and then they all wonder why it doesn't work, why they're not learning anything."

This concern was coupled with the feeling that there was an absence of positive reinforcement within school cultures and environments. Whilst workshop participants were clear that they did have some good relationships with school staff, they felt that there were few chances to 'get things right', and never experienced the rewards for good behavioural efforts available to their peers:

"YP1: The teachers barely give out points for [good behaviour] but they always give us points [for negative behaviour]. But they want us to try and get 1000 good points to go on the end-of-year trip to Alton Towers, but they don't even give them out.

R: So what do the people receive that don't have those points?

YP1: Nothing, they just have to stay in school.

YP2: While the other people go to Alton Towers.

YP1: I didn't go to any trip ever."

Particularly in schools which operated behavioural points systems, young people often felt that such measures simply left them with a record of failing to meet expectations. As will be discussed in later sections of the report, many young people wanted to simply feel that changes were

23 See Centre for Mental Health (2020), Trauma, challenging behaviour, and restrictive interventions in schools (London: Centre for Mental Health); Clunies-Ross, P. et al. (2008), 'Self-reported and actual use of proactive and reactive classroom management strategies and their relationship with teacher stress and student behaviour', Educational Psychology 28: 693–710; and Cameron, R.J. (1998), 'School discipline in the United Kingdom: Promoting classroom behaviour which encourages effective teaching and learning', School Psychology Review 27: 33–44.

24 See Commission on Young Lives (2022), All together now: Inclusion not exclusion: supporting all young people to succeed in school (London: Commission on Young Lives); Bennett, T. (2017) Creating a culture: How school leaders can optimise behaviour, report (Department for Education); and Moore, D. et al. (2019), Improving behaviour in schools: Evidence review (London: Education Endowment Fund).

achievable and wanted more support to work towards positive goals and recognising their strengths as students. See pages 29–31 of this report for a discussion of young people's perceptions of support needs surrounding behaviour.

Teacher Relationships

An unfortunate knock-on effect of conflict over behaviour related to a series of corresponding impacts this had on young people's feelings towards their relationships with teachers. Whilst all workshop participants mentioned that they had teachers 'they liked' and who had 'helped them' to overcome important challenges, many expressed the view that overall, their relationships with school staff required improvement.

Concerningly, and connected to young people's worries about stigmatisation, young people felt actively disliked by their teachers:

"YP: I try to [behave] but sometimes teachers don't really care, they just … choose not to like you."

———

"YP: It's just the fact that when you go in, well when I go in, I just expect to be shouted at. Because everything you do, it's just never enough."

A common concern amongst young people was also the perception that being disliked by school staff impacted the way they were treated in lessons. Young people frequently mentioned being 'singled out' in lessons, for instance, or feeling that the threshold for being reprimanded by school staff was lower for them than for their peers:

"YP: When I'm in class and I get chucked out and they say it was me, but it was someone else, the teacher just picks on some people. She mainly just picks on me and some other kids that I like."

———

"R: Do you feel like you get respect back from the teachers?

YP1: No.

YP2: I get told from my dad: 'if you want respect, you show them respect'. And that's what I try to do but sometimes teachers don't really care."

For some young people, the belief that they were disliked also made it difficult to develop trusting relationships and find adults to open up to in a school setting.

"YP: Cos I can't trust anyone. The thing is I can't trust anyone in school either, that's what I feel."

———

"YP: You don't know what teachers you can trust. Say you can tell someone something and they will go and tell another teacher, and then that will get back to another teacher, and that will get home or something. And if it's something, say, you didn't want your mum to know about, you would probably get in trouble at home or something would happen at home."

This finding is concerning given that current research points towards the vital importance of trusted adult support for long-term engagement and success in secondary school settings.[25] Indeed, young people themselves highlighted trusting relationships with teachers as a necessary prerequisite for feeling secure and safe at school on an everyday basis:

"R: What else do you need to feel safe?

YP: Good relationship with teachers."

For this reason, engaging with young people about what they feel can be

25 Waters, S. (2014), 'How does support from peers compare with support from adults as students transition to secondary school?', Journal of Adolescent Health 54(5): 543–549.

done to improve their relationships with teachers at school and find trusted support should be a key priority in building future support initiatives. See pages 31–33 of the report for young people's views on how to respond to their needs in building support networks.

Academic Performance

As discussed, amongst the most lasting challenges of primary to secondary school transition identified by young people was the impact of moving schools on academic performance.[26] Whilst for some workshop participants, the 'attainment dip' experienced when starting Year 7 was fortunately felt to have been short-lived, for others, this was not the case.

Across all workshops, young people reported feeling overwhelmed, worried, and uncertain about whether they could keep up with standards of schoolwork expected at secondary school. These feelings were reported by many to be comparatively more intense in Year 8 than in Year 7, as young people felt academic standards were raised and moved further out of reach:

"YP: I just don't like Year 8.

R: Why don't you like Year 8?

YP: I just don't like it. Because it's the second year of being in high school and it's just, like, they expect more from you... cos you could do bad on a test, cos you only have 3 more years until your GCSEs. Cos how fast this year has gone, I feel like its gonna get faster and I won't be prepared for my GCSEs."

———

"YP: Well Year 8 is more work on top of Year 7. Cos Year 7 wasn't easy work. And it's just more work stacked on top of it."

Many young people reported feeling increasing amounts of pressure as they moved towards important milestones in their educational careers, like their GCSEs. Indeed, by Year 8, a large proportion felt that they were now failing to meet expected standards of academic performance, and that this increased stress throughout the school day:

"R: Do you think overall they expect too much of you at school then?

[All workshop participants agree]."

———

"R: Is there any pressure on you?

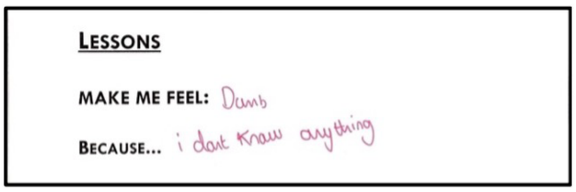
YP1: Yes.

YP2: Yes, definitely.

YP3: Yes."

The impact of worries about academic performance on emotional wellbeing was very clear in workshops, as young people explored their feelings surrounding attending lessons:

Figure 11: Young person's emotions during school



Lessons make me feel "dumb". Because... "I don't know anything".

Most young people identified academic performance as a key ongoing challenge of their secondary school experiences. However, in general, they also felt that that the answer to improvement in this area lay 'outside of the classwork', with the general creation of a more positive and less conflictual school environment,

26 Evans et al., 'A review of the academic and psychological impact of the transition to secondary education'.

with school staff having the potential to make them feel more confident and comfortable in their academic performance. Indeed, many had specific suggestions for support in this area. See the support needs section of the report on pages 29–36 for their recommendations.

Peer Conflict

Outside of their relationships with school staff, another key ongoing challenge of Year 8 identified by young people was again the potential for conflict. As was the case in Year 7, young people continued to feel that navigating peer relationships was a pressure of secondary school, impacting both their feelings of enjoyment and safety. Indeed, when speaking about their lives as Year 8s, most young felt that the risk of peer conflict and 'getting involved in fights' had comparatively increased:

"YP: [The risk of fights] has gone up a little bit more this year. Like, last year there was not a lot of fights but this year the fights have just rapidly gone up like that."

Whilst some young people had found an important means of navigating the potential for peer conflict through forming new friendships and strong peer networks, others felt that they had begun to be targeted by their peers, and had become increasingly subject to physical aggression and bullying:

"YP: I'm just going to be brutally honest here, I've had a terrible experience this year. I have not enjoyed this year. I've been punched, kicked, bullied almost every day. I've been assaulted in school. I've physically been thrown into fences. I've had someone sprain my ankle. I've had someone sprain my wrist. That's all this year."

Young people who reported the most substantial concerns with being targeted by physical aggression or bullying also reported the lowest levels of school enjoyment and safety in comparison with their peers. This was felt to have a negative impact, not only on their capacity to form positive peer relationships, but on other aspects of school engagement, such as academic performance and wellbeing:

"R: Would you say that [bullying] has an impact on how much you've been able to enjoy school or not?

YP: It's making me more conscious of how I feel. It's made me more conscious of how I react to things, and how cautious I am. Because usually I can just get on with a test. But whenever I'm in [nurture] I'm fine, but whenever I'm in lessons or like in the playground, I'm always watching my back."

Indeed, being targeted by peer aggression and bullying was a source of great anxiety for some young people, impacting how they felt about attending and engaging in school on an everyday basis. When one workshop group was asked about whether they experienced anxiety at school, for instance, all attributed their anxiety to fear of bullying and their experiences with physical aggression:

"R: Who would say they have anxiety about school?

[All hands up].

YP1: Extreme [anxiety].

R: If you had to pick a main reason why your anxiety has gone up what would you say?

YP1: I've been jumped at least 25 times this year.

YP2: Safety. Bullying.

YP3: Can I say two? Because they are equal. Pressure and safety.

YP4: Getting punched, getting hit."

Most young people felt that in comparison with other secondary schools in Manchester their school had a poor reputation for peer-on-peer violence. As one student put it:

"R: Do you think that there's more fights on average here than there is at other schools or normal?

YP: The thing is other schools are scared cos of how many fights goes on, how many injuries goes on [at our school]."

A couple of young people also highlighted that peer conflict could be worsened by their increased engagement in online environments, such as social media. Indeed, whilst across workshops most students actually felt that social media was a positive influence in their everyday lives, one group spoke about the need to discuss its potential to increase incidents of peer pressure:

"R: Is social media a problem for bullying?

YP1: Yes and no.

YP2: Yes and no.

YP3: Definitely.

YP4: Mostly yes.

YP1: One thing that I've noticed is in school, and in other places, it would seem [it] is all about peer pressure. I know myself you get peer pressured into doing something. You get peer pressured into maybe doing something illegal, because the person who peer pressured you wants views, likes, they want to be famous off what you've done. Things like social media and the fact you can post anything without moderation, they are free to say whatever, and it can ruin your life."

More positively, young people who felt targeted by peer bullying and violence had a wide array of suggestions for creating a more positive environment for peer relationships. These included, pupil-led anti-bullying, campaigns for dealing with individual targeting, and peer support initiatives. See pages 33–34 of this report for a detailed exploration of young people's suggestions in this area.

External Safety Concerns

Research emphasises the importance of recognising the interconnectedness of pressures in young people's everyday lives, home environments and educational contexts.[27] Interestingly, whilst most young people chose not emphasise events in their home lives in workshop discussions when speaking about transitional pressures in Year 7, they did so far more frequently when discussing their lives and ongoing challenges in Year 8.

One key pressure felt to be unfolding both inside and outside of school for some young people, for instance, was the issue of external safety concerns. As previously noted, a number of young people had expressed the worry that they might become less safe as they 'got older' and by Year 8, a number suggested that their visibility as teenagers was indeed something they felt presented particular dangers in public spaces.

When asked if Manchester as a city was safe for young people, for instance, most workshop participants suggested it was not. Moreover, young people indicated increasing worries about the capacity to be targeted by violence or interpersonal conflict:

"R: Is Manchester safe for young people?

YP1: No

R: What do you think are the dangers for

27 Cooper, P. & Upton, G. (2006), 'An ecosystemic approach to emotional and behavioural difficulties in schools', Educational Psychology 10(4): 301–321.

young people?

YP1: Knife crime, and fights, and peer pressure.

R: Do you ever worry about knives?

YP1: Sometimes.

YP2: Sometimes yeah.

YP3: If I see one."

Whilst, fortunately, few young people had actually ever encountered serious violence, worries over the potential to be targeted by people 'looking for fights' were still quite frequently voiced in workshops. A number of young people also noted that they felt unsafe in their local neighbourhoods:

"R: Would you feel safe walking around after dark, say in your own neighbourhood?

YP1: No.

YP2: Sometimes.

YP3: Not by myself.

YP2: Not by myself, no."

Whilst others thought the areas their schools were in were unsafe:

"R: Do you think it's a safe area that the school is in?

YP1: No.

YP2: Not at all.

YP3: Not at all."

Not all young people felt personally concerned about personal safety growing up in Manchester, but very few felt adequately protected by services like law enforcement. No young people spoke positively about the police when asked if they were approachable, for example, and some represented officers as unsympathetic, or uninterested in their concerns as teenagers:

"R: So you feel protected by the police?

[All workshop participants respond 'no'].

R: Why not?

YP1: They don't do anything much.

YP2: All they'll do is ask you questions and then leave it. That's what happened to me, they just asked me questions and then left it. They didn't come back."

Pressures of safety clearly intersected for some young people, both within and outside a school setting, leading them to feel more anxious overall in everyday contexts. Indeed, whilst most young people had not personally encountered serious violence, it is important to recognise that vulnerability to this in public spaces was an issue of concern amongst workshop participants.

Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing

A final but crucial ongoing challenge described by young people in Year 8 related to difficulties with mental health and wellbeing. Research shows that young people are particularly vulnerable with regard to their mental health during the process of primary-to-secondary school transition, with long-lasting consequences for those who find the experience particularly difficult.[28]

Young people certainly echoed these concerns when discussing their ongoing challenges in school. Reflecting on the greatest challenge in their lives in secondary school, for example, one particular group selected mental health as their top concern:

28 Donaldson, C. et al., (2023), 'A systematic review of school transition interventions to improve mental health and wellbeing outcomes in children and young people', School Mental Health 15: 19–35.

"R: So what would you say is the most serious issue of all the issues?

YP1: Anxiety. Anxiety stops me from taking a lot of opportunities and it stops a lot of other people from taking those opportunities as well.

YP2: Also depression.

R: Do you think that moving to secondary school actually impacts your mental health?

YP1: Yes.

YP2: Yes.

YP3: A lot. Honestly, I'd say mental health should go at the top of the list."

One of the problems young people identified with mental health issues was that they were not only caused by other pressures (like struggles with behaviour in class or academic performance), but also tended to reinforce those pressures. For example, one young person who described themselves as having anxiety and depression as a result of being bullied noted that this had then produced conflicts with teachers over their capacity to concentrate in lessons:

"YP: Whenever I'm in lessons I always get shouted at for not being unable to concentrate and bear in mind this year [I've been bullied]."

Another young person who identified as being autistic noted that their own difficulties in engaging with schoolwork related both to being targeted for bullying because of their autism, and to corresponding anxiety this caused about attending lessons:

"YP: You know when people scream in class in my ears, sometimes they do it on purpose [to overstimulate me because they know about my autism]. I usually put my head down cos I can't take it. I hate it. … That builds on you. So does the trauma."

Both of these young people perceived mental health to be a key and overarching issue in their wellbeing at school, but both had experienced a very long wait to receive support:

"YP: I figured out that I've been waiting ten weeks for counselling and then only last week I figured out through the counsellor that I'm not even assigned to yet, that I was never on the list."

Indeed, whilst most schools had some form of provision for students who struggled with emotional regulation at school - including nurture rooms and 'sanctuary spaces' which were highly valued by young people - they also noted that access to these was currently too limited:

"YP1: I feel that [nurture spaces] should be open to everyone. Instead of getting a pass. So you can just go in there any time.

YP2: If you want to go in lesson, you need a pass.

R: What is nurture?

YP1: Nurture or inclusion is a safe space where people can go if they are feeling overwhelmed, sad, angry or anything like that.

YP2: We just don't have a pass."

Young people were very eager to see their mental health improve and to overcome the barriers this placed on their ongoing engagement in schooling. See pages 34–35 of this report for young people's suggestions about support they felt could best help them to improve their mental health and wellbeing.

Case Study 2:

As discussed previously, most young people strongly suggested that the challenges associated with their primary-to-secondary transition were very much ongoing. Whilst each young person listed a number of 'high points' when describing their personal journeys of starting secondary school, some felt that their most difficult or uncomfortable experiences had actually occurred when moving to Year 8.

"YP: So basically year 6 was a 90, and then I got picked for [name of their school], which was alright and then I found out my form group, which I wasn't happy with but I'm happy now.

R: Why were you not happy with it at the start?

YP: Because I didn't know anyone and some of the people were kind of annoying. So I made friends and then I joined the football team. And then I had a meeting with my mum this year, and then in the football team we got relegated.

R: What do you mean you had a meeting with your mum?

YP: If your behaviour is bad you have to have a meeting to discuss it. It was bad, it was VERY BAD.

R: Do you think that it makes a big difference about how your parents react if you get into trouble?

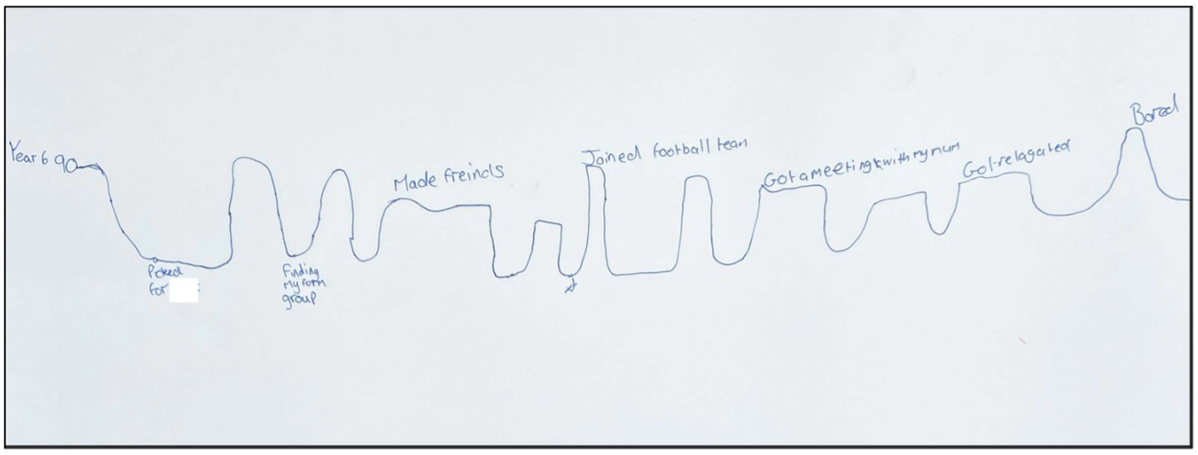
YP: Mmhmm. My mum got angry, but now she's like, bored with it."

As is clear from the young person's description of their personal journey, the initial social disruption associated with the move to secondary school, and in particular their discomfort with their new form group, immediately made for a difficult transition.

Whilst this initial 'low' was something they felt they overcame later in the year, culminating in the high point of joining the school football team and extending their friendship network, these successes were to some extent offset by conflicts over their behaviour.

As the young person makes clear, 'getting into trouble' towards the end of Year 7 marked the start of a new and difficult period. In particular, the involvement of their parent in a meeting about behaviour had proved challenging. At the time of the workshop, the young person felt that they continued to be stressed and 'bored' at school, and struggling with classroom engagement. As they explained subsequently, whilst they had since started support interventions in the form of a mentoring programme, this had not yet seen visible impacts on their feelings about schooling.

Figure 8: Young person's Journey Map



Support Needs

As with the pressures and challenges of starting secondary school, young people who have experienced difficult school transitions are well-placed to identify their own support needs in relation to this process. Indeed, research suggests that active youth participation in the design and delivery of interventions can actively increase the efficacy of support measures and lead to better outcomes for young people.[29] For this reason, youth participation is increasingly being prioritised in the design of support interventions across a range of education, youth justice, and health service settings.[30]

Young people who participated in this research study certainly welcomed the chance to 'have their say' about their needs in relation to school transition and the types of intervention they felt would be most beneficial to them. Whilst most were aware that their schools had tried to provide them with support when starting secondary education, the majority felt that these forms of support could better reflect their needs and priorities. Indeed, young people discussed an array of support needs they felt were current priorities at their secondary schools, along with practical measures they would like to see put in place in the first two years for young people like them.

The main support needs and areas of priority action identified by young people were:

- Strengths-based behavioural support;
- Strengthening support networks;
- Support with peer conflict;
- Supporting mental health and wellbeing; and,
- Upholding the right to participate.

Strengths-based Behavioural Support

Perhaps unsurprisingly given that conflicts over behaviour and behavioural expectations were so frequently identified as transitional pressures by young people, school behavioural systems were also felt to be a key area for priority action. As discussed earlier in the report (see pages

29 Ozer, E.J. (2017), 'Youth-led participatory action research: Overview and potential for enhancing adolescent development', Child Development Perspectives 11(3):173–177.

30 See Smithson, H. & Gray, P. (2021), Supporting children's meaningful participation in the youth justice system (HM Inspectorate of Probation); Larsson, I. et al. (2018), 'Children and young people's participation in developing interventions in health and well-being: A scoping review', BMC Health Services Research 18:507; and Mandel, L.A. & Qazilbash, J. (2005), 'Youth voices as change agents: Moving beyond the medical model in school-based health center practice', Journal of School Health 75(7): 239–242.

19–21), many young people felt that their schools operated behavioural systems which were too strict or too focused on sanctions and punishment, leaving them little room to get things right and/or improve their behaviour. As such, many young people identified a re-design of their school behaviour system as the most important change they felt could be made to support them:

"YP: I think we need a less strict behaviour system."

———

"R: Is there anything we want to tell them [about your needs]?

YP1: Better behaviour [approaches].

YP2: Like a better behaviour system."

Young people were readily enthusiastic about participating in the redesign of school behavioural systems, and had an abundance of ideas on how to achieve positive change within them:

"R: If they redesign, like say they redesigned the behaviour system, would a group of you want to help them to do it?

YP1: Yeah.

YP2: Yeah.

YP3: Yes!"

In most cases young people suggested very achievable changes to their school behavioural systems, and indicated that they wished to see a general shift away from sanction-based systems to strengths-based behavioural approaches. Frequent suggestions identified by young people, for instance, included a less severe approach to minor behavioural infractions, the provision of more inclusion-based measures (such as nurture and quiet spaces for emotional regulation), and less of a reliance on isolation and exclusion.

One group's vision for changing their behavioural system was simply the provision of more chances to 'get things right' on a day-to-day basis:

"R: Give me some recommendations for this school, what might make your experience better, or make you want to attend?

YP1: More chances [before you are put in isolation or exclusion].

YP2: Yeah, more chances in the behaviour system.

YP3: The behaviour system that I would personally do is I'd have the warning, and instead of removal [from lessons] I'd just have you go to reflection, just like you have three chances before you go to reflection rather than one chance."

Whilst another young person's suggestions focused on the removal of detentions for lateness, which they felt were often not the fault of young people themselves but of family circumstances:

"YP1: Removing late-to-academy detentions.

YP2: Yeah. It's like, well, instead of getting immediate detention I feel like you give a reason.

I woke up one day then my mum slept in, even though I kept bugging her to wake up and like she woke up at 8 o'clock and she had 15 minutes to get ready. She got dressed in 15 minutes. But because we got all traffic it was, I got to school by 8:40. There was nothing I could've done. My mum said she would call and get detention taken off, she said she did but they won't take it off, cos I was late at school, even though it wasn't really my fault."

Young people themselves also tended to associate sanctions with the prevention of behavioural improvement rather than

support or the creation of opportunities for positive change in their behaviour. When speaking about their support needs at school, for instance, many young people mentioned that they felt such sanctions were unsupportive for those struggling with attendance:

"R: Would you like to see the use of isolation end then?

YP1: Yes.

YP2: Yes.

YP3: Yes.

YP2: There's no point in coming to school if you are going into isolation, cos you don't do any work."

Evidence does strongly point towards the greater efficacy of strengths-based behavioural approaches when compared to zero-tolerance or sanction-focused behaviour management systems.[31] Indeed, current studies demonstrate that a reliance primarily on sanctions like isolation or exclusion can actually preclude sustainable behavioural change for young people, offering limited opportunities to learn and implement positive behaviour.[32]

Overall, young people's suggestions for new measures tended precisely to focus on the implementation of approaches designed to enhance inclusion and engagement in school, such as nurture groups or sanctuary spaces. These were widely viewed in much more positive terms than sanction-based measures for dealing with behaviour:

"YP: I feel that inclusion should be open to everyone. Instead of getting a pass. So you can just go in there any time. Inclusion is a safe space where people can go if they are feeling overwhelmed, sad, angry or anything like that."

———

"YP: I want an inclusion pass, but I'm too shy to ask."

———

"YP: So say I come into a lesson, and I've had an ongoing issue with my normal teacher [I can go to nurture] and I'd say 'can I sit in here just for this period?' And then I'll do work on the laptops, so if it's English or something I'll do English work in the classroom."

In general, young people expressed their wish to work towards something of a culture change at their schools, away from sanction-based systems and towards strengths-based approaches. These were widely felt to offer young people struggling with their behaviour more agency to work on issues like their emotional regulation, or to avoid conflict on 'difficult days', helping them to take important steps towards positive behaviour.

Building Support Networks

Another key area of need identified by young people when speaking about their secondary school experiences was that of help in building networks of trust and support. Whilst many young people felt that by Year 8 they had developed at least one supportive and trusted friendship many still described having no teachers or adults they could turn to with either school-based or personal problems.

Research shows that some young people do experience a reduction in adult-given support when moving from primary to secondary school.[33] The larger size of

31 Rhodes, I. & Long, M. (2019), Improving behaviour in schools: Guidance report (Education Endowment Foundation): 1–52.

32 Sealy, J. et al. (2021), 'Students' experience of isolation room punishment in UK mainstream education: "I can't put into words what you felt like, almost a dog in a cage"', International Journal of Inclusive Education 27(12): 1336-1350.

33 Martinez, R. (2011), 'Changes in perceived social support and socioemotional adjustment across the elementary to junior high school transition', Journal of Youth and Adolescence 40: 519–530.

secondary schools and the shorter time young people spend with individual teachers can make it difficult to form close connections with staff, leaving some young people feeling vulnerable and isolated. Given the social disruption that many young people experienced when starting Year 7, and their frequent mention of concerns over their conflictual relationships with secondary school teachers, it is perhaps unsurprising that these findings were mirrored in the present study.

Some young people, for example, spoke of feeling they had few 'trusted adults' to turn to in comparison with their primary schools:

"YP: Back in primary school I used to have like times where I could go out of lesson just to, like I could ask my teacher to email someone who I could go and have a talk to about stuff that's going on at home. But now, I rarely get those opportunities. I have no real place to take stuff off my chest."

Whilst others felt that that the issue lay in there being few or no school staff that they felt comfortable opening up to:

"R: Do you feel like you can trust the teachers?

YP1: No.

YP2: Some of them.

YP3: I don't like talking to the teachers."

Young people's solution to this support need mainly surrounded providing greater access to adults whose job it was to 'help' and to 'listen to their issues' within everyday school settings. Key suggestions included simply having more of such staff present across schools generally:

"YP: There should be more trusted adults to make people feel better, cos people, like if something happens, they don't go and tell anyone cos they don't feel like they can tell anyone."

Another suggestion was to place teachers, counsellors, or mentors into existing 'nurture provisions', and ensuring that young people had a space where they could go where they knew this support would be waiting for them:

"YP: I've got a sanctuary pass but it's like, so basically if you've got stuff going on at home, like your parents are splitting up or something, you could go there and just let your mind release it all, but because you're supposed to be quiet in there you can't really talk to anyone."

———

"R: So what would you want to happen, right, to sanctuary and student support?

YP1: More teachers there.

R: Would you want someone here whose job it was to listen to you? Like a counsellor or a mentor? Is there any use in that?

YP1: Yes!

YP2: Yeah.

YP3: Yeah I'd like that."

Some young people who did currently have access to nurture or mentoring spoke very positively of the impact of these interventions. When asked about the difference made by the mentoring scheme recently implemented at their school, for instance, young people mentioned that this had indeed provided them with at least some key dimensions of trusted adult support, and in particular a non-judgemental space in which they felt listened to:

"R: What difference would you say having a mentor has made, for those of you that

have one?

YP: Erm like, you can just speak to them and they don't judge you anything you tell them. And like they'll take you on lots of trips and everything. And they just help you with like, say behaviour or like stuff that's going on at home they just listen to you and everything."

Certainly, young people across all workshops felt that finding adults they could trust and open up to at school was a priority matter. This was particularly pressing for those who currently had limited access to pastoral support, but also remained a priority for improvement for those who did have such access. For more feedback on the current advantages and areas for improvement on the SAFE mentoring scheme see pages 38–44.

Support for Peer Conflict and Bullying

As discussed, increased peer conflict was a common discussion point among young people when exploring their secondary transition experiences, though this was not felt to be a priority by all workshop groups and participants. Whilst some young people felt they had found enough peer support by the end of Year 7 to help them navigate this, for instance, some still felt substantially targeted by incidents of peer aggression and bullying,

Young people who felt targeted by bullying in particular wanted to have clear protections in place for individual experiences of aggression, more adult presence in school playgrounds and surrounding spaces, and more peer-to-peer support for things like peer pressure and social media bullying. Indeed, one group in particular developed a wide range of concrete suggestions which they felt would help them to feel more comfortable and safer at school.

The first suggestion provided by this group, for instance, related to the short-term need to reduce the frequency and severity of incidents of bullying and targeting. A number of students described their own experiences of feeling targeted by specific peers, and suggested putting in place a system whereby they were each placed into different lesson groups:

"R: So what do you think would help most with [your difficulties at school]?

YP1: Yes, just like a pass for someone to stay away from that person.

YP2: Yes!

YP3: A restraining pass."

Another short-term solution to deal with peer conflict was felt to be the provision of 'safety officers' on playgrounds. Young people felt that break times were a particular risk for incidents of bullying, and noted that that the presence of more support staff in these spaces could help to reduce this:

"YP1: Could we not have it so certain areas are sectioned off, so each year has their own parts of the grounds where they can't pass?

YP2: Yeah, I'd love that.

YP3: I agree with the idea of having safety officers around, but I wouldn't have them thinly spread, I'd rather have them either hidden or I'd rather have them in eyesight of each corner. So there is nowhere that someone can beat someone up."

When asked about the potential for solving peer conflict in the longer-term, young people also had a wide range of ideas, including anti-bullying campaigns, specific awareness-creation events, and extending their network of school

anti-bullying ambassadors to provide more peer support for those who were struggling:

"R: What could be done about bullying?

YP1: There are anti-bullying ambassadors, but I think we could probably step it up. Maybe we should start like a campaign or programme.

YP2: Some of our anti-bullying officers were meant to be running assemblies.

YP1: We should still do that!"

In each case, young people emphasised that they felt it was crucial that they were consulted and involved as partners in anti-bullying initiatives. Many young people felt that being targeted by bullying when starting secondary school had made them feel disempowered and disengaged in their new educational settings, but were keen to work with school staff to overcome this.

Support for Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the very broad range of pressures, ongoing challenges, and unmet needs young people identified in relation to their school experiences, almost all young people mentioned mental health and emotional wellbeing support as a key priority in one way or another. The vast majority of young people listed emotions such as feeling stressed, anxious, upset, or angry when exploring their emotions throughout the school day, and indicated that they wanted to feel more happy and secure at school on a day-to-day basis.

Across workshops, young people felt that whilst there was some support for emotional wellbeing in their secondary schools, this could be extended and made more accessible. Often, this was related, as previously discussed, to the idea of free access to nurture-style provisions, which were currently felt to be overly restricted:

"YP1: Student Support Centre is where people with a pass can go and basically calm down.

R: Is it good?

YP1: No.

R: Why not?

YP2: Cos you only get like two minutes in there. And then you have to go back."

Indeed, when asked in workshops if they wanted more access to spaces to assist in supporting emotional wellbeing almost all students answered positively:

"R: What about the whole access to a quiet room thing?

YP: If they could make it easier to acquire, sure.

R: So more straightforward for people who need it?

YP: Yeah, instead of having to go talk to one teacher, then talk to the head teacher, then talk to another teachers [make it a straightforward process to access]."

Another key area which connects to prior suggestions about building support networks and accessing trusted adults related to young people's discussions over the potential of mentoring and counselling to assist with mental health issues. On balance, most young people suggested that this provision would be a step in the right direction, but some students were clear that they felt counselling was better for this than mentoring:

"YP1: Counselling is definitely a priority.

R: Is counselling or mentoring better?

YP1: Counselling!

YP2: Counselling!

YP1: Counsellors have more experience, they can help us more.

YP3: They can talk about things in a calm sort of way.

YP1: I'd say the counselling falls under the mental health. So maybe we could campaign for more counselling and the availability of counselling."

Interestingly, young people themselves were keen to take a leading role in building awareness of mental health needs at school, and helping others to understand this. A number of young people noted that they would like to be supported to lead a campaign to ensure that mental health issues and issues like neurodivergence were better understood by peers:

"R: So what would you say we could actually do to improve mental health?

YP1: I think the best bet is to do mental health classes, definitely.

R: Mental health classes, what would they look like?

YP1: Learn about dealing with different problems and also learning about different types of mental health, maybe try to help out, something like that.

YP2: I say instead of adding a new class to the roster what if we changed [PSHE] to do that."

Another idea was to run one-off events to stimulate conversation amongst peers about the issue of mental health and the need to be aware of the needs of others:

"YP: I was thinking why don't we start fundraisers or charity events. You know how schools have things like sports day or stuff to raise money? Could we not try something like that?"

———

"YP: We should do a mental health day where everyone wears green out of one day and do a fundraiser. And I feel like that would be pretty cool cos people would go round showing that they care."

———

"YP: There should be events about mental health and safety and stuff like that. [...] and things that can help them out on an everyday basis when they are feeling down."

Overall, young people were very clear that there was no single intervention which could deal sufficiently with mental health needs and emotional wellbeing concerns in isolation. Indeed, young people were clear that improving their everyday wellbeing both within school and outside it required a full range of considerations, including ensuring more positive approaches to behaviour, strengthening support networks, dealing with peer conflict, and providing dedicated support in the form of counselling where such referrals were needed.

Upholding the Right to Participate

A final area of need that arose across all workshops was the issue of youth participation itself in the design of interventions. As discussed, young people frequently expressed the wish to take a leading role in the design of support measures and to be treated as partners in their implementation, with youth participation conceived as something which should be embedded in any support measure.

Whilst young people in the present study welcomed the opportunity to actively

express their views and to participate in the design and delivery of support interventions, many expressed concerns about whether schools or external bodies like Manchester City Council would follow through on the process begun in these workshops:

"R: Say they [did what you asked and redesigned the behaviour system], would a group of you want to help them do it?

YP1: Yeah.

R: Do you reckon they would do that?

YP2: No.

YP3: No, the school wouldn't do that but I'd like it if they would cos then they could get their students' own opinions on their idea of the behaviour system."

A number of young people also noted that they had previously been on the 'receiving end' of interventions which, in their opinion, had not been participatory. Some noted that these had been implemented with little consultation, for instance, or with minimal effort to elicit young people's active consent to engage as partners in the process:

"R: When they told you that you were going to do interventions, did they ask you what interventions you wanted to do?

YP1: No.

YP2: No, they just pulled us out of lessons.

YP3: I didn't even get told, I got given a piece of paper, which said go here. It said a time and place and go here. Period four or whatever. And no one told me what it was."

This lack of consultation and participatory principles had sometimes left young people feeling frustrated (see feedback on the wish to be considered as partners in the SAFE mentoring programme on pages 41–42). As such, ensuring support for ongoing youth participation in the design and delivery of support measures was felt to be a crucial component of any future intervention:

"R: Would you want a choice about what kind of intervention you do?

YP1: Yeah.

YP2: Yes, because I would also want to pick the person that does it."

This was mentioned along with the chance to act as partners in the ongoing adaptation and delivery of existing support models:

"R: As a group would you be willing to help them design [intervention] sessions?

YP1: Yes.

YP2: Yeah.

YP3: Yes.

YP4: Yes, definitely."

Whilst young people's pessimism over the extent to which participatory opportunities are provided may prove to be an initial barrier to engagement in ensuring youth-led interventions, the clear enthusiasm demonstrated by workshop groups throughout this research process is extremely promising. Indeed, it is the view of the MCYS research team that if youth participation is consistently embedded into future SAFE interventions, this could substantially enhance the outcomes the taskforce is able to achieve in partnership with children and young people.

Case Study 3:

Whilst not all young people reflected explicitly on the theme of support when describing their personal journeys, one workshop participant who had already begun SAFE interventions in the form of the mentoring scheme felt that this had a profound impact on their enjoyment of secondary school. See below for the young person's representation of their own primary-to-secondary school transition:

"YP: My ratings for enjoyment went down when I picked this secondary school. And then it went up when I moved house, then it went down when I started actual work (and homework). And then at some point it went up because it was like, easy work. And then I started getting in trouble. And then it went all the way up when I started getting interventions.

R: What are interventions?

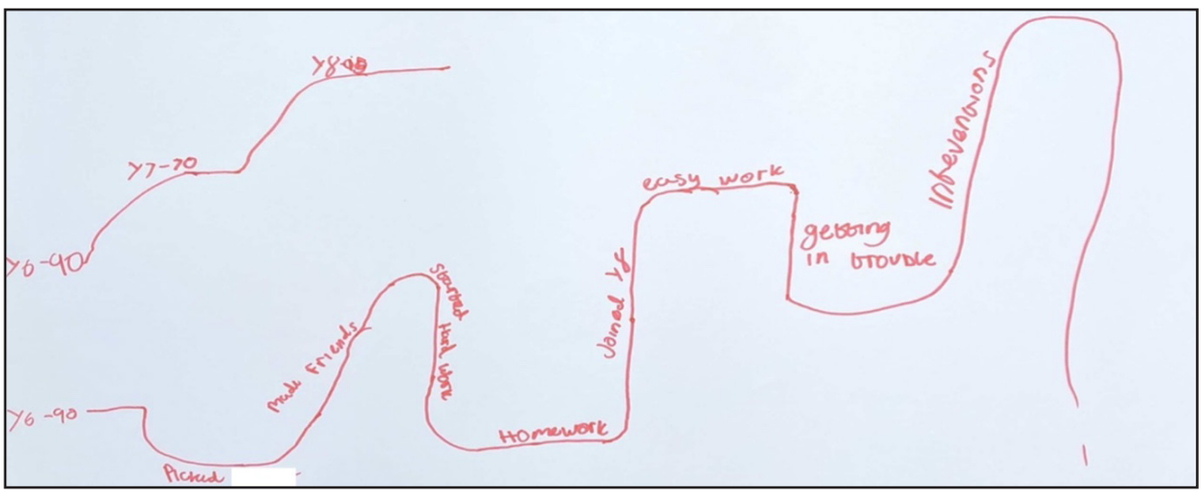
YP: It's just something like this where you miss out on a lesson and then you can go somewhere with your mentor."

As is clear from this journey map, the young person represented their own transitional journey as fraught with ongoing challenges. They found it difficult to adjust to their particular secondary school, marking the start of Year 7 as a 'low point' on the map.

Their experience with the academic requirements of secondary school was somewhat mixed, and in Year 7 they 'started to get into trouble' (they later explained this was for disruptive behaviour).

However, for this particular young person it was starting the mentoring programme which proved a positive turning point in their feelings about school. Indeed, over the course of the workshop, the young person explained that their mentor had provided a crucial form support, which had helped them to feel more engaged and positive in Year 8.

Figure 9: Young person's Journey Map



Feedback on Current SAFE Interventions

As discussed previously, at one of the participating schools, young people had already begun a SAFE-supported intervention. The SAFE mentoring programme provides young people identified as at risk of disengagement from education mentors in cooperation with a range of specialised external services. Mentors are employed to hold weekly sessions with young people in normal school hours, and to support them with any ongoing challenges they face at home or in the school environment throughout the school year. The intervention has so far been rolled out to five schools, with Manchester City Council planning to extend this to five additional schools participating in the SAFE taskforce programme next year.

In view of this, the MCYS team sought young people's feedback on their current experiences of mentoring and their views on the efficacy and future direction of this SAFE intervention. Views were particularly sought on the following areas:

- Understanding of the role of mentors;
- What makes a good mentor;
- Mentoring sessions;
- Views on timing;
- Changes young people would like to see; and,
- The extent of youth participation.

Individual experiences of mentoring were felt to have varied, but young people did identify a range of advantages of participating in the programme, along with some areas for improvement in the current SAFE mentoring scheme. Young people also felt strongly that it was important that youth participation was more strongly embedded into the programme, which they felt could create important and positive developments in its overall effectiveness.

Young People's Understanding of the Role of Mentors

Young people's understanding of the role of mentors was somewhat mixed, with most possessing a general awareness of what the overarching purpose of mentoring was, but few having a clear sense of the role of mentors in their lives specifically:

"R: So what is the point of a mentor?

YP1: To help you and to listen to you.

YP2: To help you develop.

R: To help you develop what?

YP2: My skills?"

In part, this was because not all young people had received a clear explanation about why they were participating in the mentoring programme. Whilst some had deduced their participation was connected to their ongoing challenges with behaviour at school, others were simply unsure why they had been given a mentor:

"R: How do you get a mentor?

YP1: Not sure.

YP2: I think it's about bad behaviour, because I checked right and everyone that has a mentor has a lot of sins.

R: What do you think their goal is?

YP2: To get everything out of you.

YP3: To make us work more, work harder."

Young people were clearer, however, about what the most important role was that they felt mentors could play in their lives and the most important forms of support they would like them to offer ideally:

"R: If I asked you what the most important role of a mentor was, what would it be?

YP1: It would be to be, like, there for you. That's the most important thing a mentor does.

YP2: Helps me with social skills.

YP3: Same. And takes me on trips."

For most young people, the provision of someone who could work with them closely and understand and respond to their particular support needs was a key priority.

What Makes a Good Mentor?

Indeed, when asked what made a good mentor, the mentor's awareness of needs, ability to listen, and capacity to actively work in partnership with young people were identified as key priorities:

"R: What makes a good mentor?

YP1: Like someone who actually listens and like understands.

YP2: Does a lot of trips and activities

YP1: Entertaining you with the time that they've got. Like what they do is they bring like little toys in and food and snacks and like, I don't know how to explain... they'll speak to you about your like future and what you want to do with your life."

In terms of the key professional skills young people felt their mentor should have, most of these surrounded the capacity to build rapport and develop a lasting and meaningful relationship with the young person:

"R: What personal qualities should a mentor have, in your opinion?

YP1: Social skills.

YP2: Social skills.

YP3: Confident."

In the same vein, qualities of a poor mentor were felt to be self-involvement, an inability to listen, and a lack of patience with young people's forms of self-expression and narration:

"R: What qualities should they not have?

YP1: Not taking their bad day out on you.

YP2: When you are telling them something, not speaking over you.

YP3: Not listening to you when you are speaking to them.

YP4: Impatient cos like, if I'm telling you and you're trying to interrupt me, I won't feel as comfortable as I did before."

Views on Mentoring Sessions

Views on mentoring sessions were a key and enthusiastic topic of discussion amongst young people, who felt that this is where their experiences of mentorship most diverged in quality. Most young people felt that they far preferred

activity-based sessions and sessions based outside of school to those which took the form of 'question and answer' conversations:

"R: Do you guys feel like it's better if you are doing an activity?

[All agreed].

R: What do you actually want to do for your sessions?

YP1: Go on trips and take you around places.

YP2: Go out.

R: Why do you want to go out?

YP1: Because I would want to go out and do something fun because like obviously... well, the thing is though when I first got her she used to bring stuff like what's it called? Fidget spinners. So you could play with them while you were doing it so you could feel more comfortable. But now that they think that you're comfortable with them, like they stop bringing it in."

It was not simply that young people associated activity-based sessions with a 'break' from school (which was also felt to be important for emotional regulation and coping with anxiety about lessons), but that having something to do was felt to aid in young people's comfort in opening up and speaking about their lives and experiences:

"YP: When I'm just sat there in a room, I feel trapped, and like I don't feel like speaking to them, but if I'm out and they ask me like a couple of questions now and again then I'll answer them, but like it's really awkward if I'm just sat there and she's asking loads of questions."

For those young people who felt they currently had mixed feelings about their mentoring sessions, this connected strongly to the theme of comfort and boundary-setting. Some young people identified their mentors as assuming they felt ready to talk about their most personal experiences too quickly, leading to feelings of anxiety and discomfort:

"YP: Sometimes she'll want me to speak about home, but I don't want to speak about home, and I feel bad saying no. Cos like I feel like when I'm not used to someone I don't know how to say 'no' to them. So I just end up telling them."

———

"YP: They make you like speak about what you want to do in the future and they just kind of force you to talk about it."

It was not that young people simply wished to never speak about their personal lives, but that they did not wish to be pressured into this, and to approach this at their own pace:

"R: Do you mean like don't pressure you into talking to someone?

YP: Yeah.

R: Would you prefer to talk to them about your life if you had something else to do as well, or do you just not want to talk about it?

YP: Only if I wanted to speak to them. Like I don't wanna be pressured to talk to them."

Respect for young people's boundaries was felt by young people to be an absolute prerequisite for an effective and safe mentoring session, and this was an issue they mentioned consistently.

Views on Timing

As to the timing of mentoring programmes, interestingly young people who had already received mentors felt very strongly that this should begin in Year 8, as opposed to Year 7. When asked

this question directly, this was attributed both to the need to be given enough time to adjust to secondary school before facing an intervention:

"R: So when do you think you should get a mentor, Year 7 or Year 8?

YP1: Year 8.

YP2: Year 8.

YP1: Just cos you are used to school more and you know when you need a mentor."

Relatedly, young people were concerned that if interventions were put in place before this point it might cause them to be stigmatised by other students or staff members for being 'troublemakers':

"R: Should you get a mentor at the start of year 7?

YP1: The teachers should see how you are.

YP2: Yeah I think if they just judge you off what you look like and go like, 'yeah they're gonna be [a problem]'."

Additionally, young people emphasised the importance of being able to choose whether or not they accepted a place in the mentoring programme. Whilst all young people did want to participate in mentoring, all of them felt that it should be okay to decline this provision:

"YP1: But like say if you don't want a mentor. You should be able to say that. They shouldn't just assume that you want a mentor and you just be put into the session.

YP2: I mean I do want one.

YP1: Yeah, I do want one but it's just like some people might not want to sit there and speak about things."

Whilst young people did offer a certain level of critical feedback regarding the current SAFE mentoring programme, they always did so in ways that were constructive. Indeed, young people felt extremely strongly that they should be equal participatory partners in decision-making regarding the mentoring programme and already had their own recommendations for future direction.

Upholding the Right to Participate

In relation to the theme of participation, young people did consistently suggest in workshops that they would have appreciated more of a say about their engagement in the mentoring scheme and a clearer understanding of the process early on:

"R: When they told you that you were going to do interventions, did they ask you what interventions you wanted to do?

YP1: No.

YP2: No, they just pulled us out of lesson.

YP3: I didn't even get told, I got given a piece of paper, which said go here. It said a time and place and go here. Period four or whatever. And no one told me what it was."

Young people felt that a more participatory approach would likely result in mentors and mentees being matched up according to a more genuine rapport with each other, for instance:

"R: Would you want a choice about what kind of intervention you do?

YP: Yeah because I would also want to pick the person that does it."

They likewise felt very strongly that they would like to play an ongoing and consistent role in designing future sessions:

"R: As a group would you be willing to help them design sessions?

YP1: Yes.

YP2: Yes.

YP3: Yes.

YP4: Yes, definitely."

In general, young people felt that an important principle of mentoring interventions was upholding their right to have their voices heard and to participate in decisions which had an impact on them:

"R: Do you think it's important you have a say?

YP1: That we have a part in it as well.

YP2: Yes, cos like they just assume [that we agree with how the programme is running]."

An additional key area that young people felt they wanted a greater say in was the kinds of information and records kept on them in relation to their mentoring sessions:

"YP: They write down everything that you are saying!

R: Do they keep a file?

YP: Yeah.

R: Are you allowed to see it?

YP: No."

Whilst they accepted that a record of sessions may be needed for planning purposes, they had the impression that they would be refused the request to view the information held about their progress:

"R: What do you think it's for?

YP1: Like some teachers will have different sessions. So that they know what to ask us next time.

YP2: But I don't know if they write other stuff in there because we are not allowed to see it."

This was felt to further prohibit young people's participatory partnership in the programme.

Changes Young People Would Like to See

As discussed previously in this report, research demonstrates that young people's partnership and active participation in decision-making over the support interventions that affect them can increase the success of these programmes. Certainly, young people had a wealth of ideas for small changes which could make a real difference in the success of their mentoring sessions and ensure that these felt authentic and meaningful.

One key area in young people felt that could benefit from change related to the initial phase of rapport building. Young people felt that whilst mentors came in with certain assumptions about their school experiences as a result of receiving most initial information from teachers, they had capacity to provide just as much information about their school engagement as school staff:

"R: Okay what kind of activities do you want to do?

YP: Walk around schools with your mentor and talk about each class that you have. Just walking through the places and asking if you like that lesson or not.

R: So that they've actually got a sense of what you think of the school and what you actually want?

[All agree]."

Young people also felt that a more youth-focused approach to initial information gathering about school experiences would create a stronger foundation from which to develop. A number of young people felt that their mentors had simply been told what they were 'good' or 'bad' at in school and they wanted the chance to express their own feelings.

Another key area for change young people identified surrounded the sensitive information about them. One young person, for instance, noted that they had lost their mother before the mentoring programme had begun, but despite having explained this to their mentor, this information kept being misremembered:

"YP: He sits there and asks me questions about my mum. I'm not even joking. ... Like 'how's life at home, how's your mum, how's your dad?' And it's like, they should know that my mum's dead. Yeah, he brings it up all the time. Like we are going on this trip, 'I can call your mum or your dad for you'."

Young people felt that the best way to deal with a situation like this was to have a system in which key information was shared as a priority with mentors before mentoring began. If young people then wished to share additional information, they could choose to do this at their own pace:

"R: Do you think that one of things they should have to do then is to have the basics down?

YP1: Yeah before they ask you about parents or stuff.

YP2: I think they should get told that. Like they shouldn't ask you. They should ask like a teacher."

Relatedly, young people also felt that improving the recognition of boundaries in general was a priority. As another young person explained, their experience of telling their mentor about an argument with their father resulted in them feeling like their boundaries had been transgressed, rather than supported:

"YP1: I was chatting to her and I brought my dad up and she was like really interested in it cos she's not heard about my dad before. And then the next session I was in with another person and she brought it up in front of the other person.

YP2: Did she actually?

YP1: She went: 'So have you heard anything from your dad?'"

This had resulted in ill feeling about their mentor and about subsequent sessions, which they felt could have been avoided through a greater respect of her privacy:

"R: So one of the things is privacy?

YP: Yeah. Cos I would have thought what I told her would have like, stayed between just me and her. Cos she said it in front of them. And she went 'So have you heard anything from your dad?' And I felt like, I didn't feel like crying but I did at the same time I did, because I was just really embarrassed because I didn't wanna speak about it in front of everyone.

R: So you want boundaries?

YP: Yeah."

Though they may not vocalise it to their mentors or teachers, young people often associated mentoring sessions with feelings of anxiety or being upset, because they were unused to opening up about their lives and experiences. This was itself not problematised by young people, but it was felt that a positive change would surround more recognition of mentoring as 'work' in school contexts.

Indeed, some young people had experienced the perception from some teachers that they were 'lucky' or privileged to participate in support interventions:

"YP: [That teacher] holds it against me because I go to them, and like whenever I walk out of lesson he forces me to go back in and is like, 'I do so much for you, I let you go to interventions'."

Most young people felt that changing school attitudes to mentoring to recognise that they were engaging in 'work' would create a more positive view of their participating in mentoring and cause less stigma around their involvement.

A final priority that young people described was the importance of mentors to more consistently be able to provide a safe and stable emotional connection in mentoring sessions. Some felt that their mentors occasionally let their own lives impact sessions:

"YP: Cos the thing is with my mentor, on a good day she's always trying to make you feel good, but then when she's in a mood she's in a mood, she's like never there."

Whilst others felt that their mentors should recognise that certain activities may be difficult or challenging to them, and not force them to go beyond what was comfortable:

"YP: Like some of them they like sit there and just talk, and then some of them you like, do activities and dance, and some days I don't want to do the dance yeah, so I don't even try... and she's screaming at me that you are not dancing properly. I'm like, I don't want to! I would rather go to one of my lessons than go to that mentor."

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"YP: [My mentor] made me sit there and do an interview. She made me do an interview and said, 'well what do you want to do when you get older?' So I said I don't know. She said 'well I'll just do you as a nurse' or something like that. .... And then it made me so uncomfortable she actually made me sit there and act like I was being interviewed."

Young people identified one way of dealing with this issue constructively, suggesting that the design of sessions could be done in a participatory way between mentors and mentees. On this theme, young people suggested the following:

"YP: Yeah. Like before, the week after. Like so you'd be doing something but before the session ends they would give you five minutes or like a minute and ask you what do you want to do next week or discuss a bunch of ideas that they could do."

Participatory session design was something all young people felt would increase their motivation to go to mentoring sessions, and to see this as an equal and consensually based ongoing partnership. Whilst young people were open and honest about the aspects of mentoring where they would most like to see changes, many very strongly valued the opportunities to have support from a trusted adult and genuinely wished to strengthen the success of this intervention.

Young people felt that with some greater participation, the mentoring programme has excellent potential to help them at school, and could provide others like them with crucial support during their secondary school activities. See page 45 of this report for a summary of youth-led recommendations on the SAFE mentoring programme.

Chapter 4:
Recommendations

Key Recommendations

Embedding the right to participate

- All SAFE taskforce interventions moving forward should be designed with the active participation of young people. Any existing interventions should integrate provision for ongoing youth participation, to ensure responsiveness to feedback and youth input into decision-making regarding direction and delivery.

Encouraging strengths-based behavioural approaches

- The SAFE team should offer support for schools to redesign current behavioural systems around strengths-based approaches as a matter of priority. Young people should be supported to participate in the re-design of school behavioural systems. The use of zero tolerance, 'points-based' or sanctions-focused behavioural systems should be actively discouraged at schools participating in the SAFE programme.

Linking with existing nurture provision

- Newly designed SAFE interventions should link in with existing nurture-style programmes in schools and enhance these programmes where possible. Young people participating in SAFE interventions should be considered as having met the threshold to access to nurture and sanctuary spaces to aid in emotional regulation. They should be supported to engage with these provisions more freely.

Counselling and mentoring

- Counselling and/or mentoring should be considered as a widely applied SAFE intervention, as this can provide crucial support for young people. It is vital, however, that young people's views on what they need and want from counselling or mentoring sessions are sought on a regular basis, and that young people are treated as partners within any such process.

Supporting young people with peer conflict

- Programmes for resolving and preventing peer conflict should be considered by the SAFE taskforce in consultation with young people and relevant professionals. It is important that support for young people to deal with conflict, both within and outside a school setting, is considered.

Supporting young leadership on mental health

- Support for youth-led mental health campaigns and awareness classes should be considered by the SAFE taskforce. The taskforce should consider offering young people the chance to work in collaboration with relevant professionals to explore how they can act as young ambassadors for mental health.

Supplementary Recommendations

Current SAFE mentoring interventions

- Young people should be clearly informed about why they have been offered SAFE mentoring when selected for the programme. It should be explained that consent is optional, and that young people may withdraw from sessions for any reason. The goals of individual mentoring programmes should be designed in collaboration with each young person. Young people should have an ongoing role in the design and delivery of sessions, and should be treated as partners by their mentors. It is vital that mentoring is recognised as work, rather than reward, within school cultures.

Training on participatory youth practice for mentors, schools, and the SAFE team

- The SAFE taskforce should consider implementing training on participatory youth practice for all individuals engaged as professionals facilitating or delivering SAFE interventions. This will help to ensure sustainable practice in relation to youth participation and help to embed consistency of youth partnership in interventions. This could be provided by any relevant professional body with experience of participatory youth engagement.

Training for schools on strengths-based behavioural approaches

- The SAFE team should consider implementing training for staff at participating schools on alternatives to sanctions-based behavioural management. This would support a general culture shift at schools in Greater Manchester to evidence-based models for increasing school engagement and providing sustainable opportunities for positive behaviour.

Training for young people participating in SAFE interventions on youth leadership

- The SAFE taskforce may benefit from offering young people the chance to participate in leadership training programmes, so they feel more confident acting as partners in the design and delivery of interventions they are involved in. This will enhance the quality of participatory youth practice, and ensure that young people are offered the chance to develop their skills in the area of leadership.

Pathways to further support

- The SAFE taskforce should consider embedding pathways to further support, such as NHS provision, within existing interventions.

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We hope that you have found this report useful. If you would like more information on the Manchester Centre for Youth Studies, you can get in touch with MCYS Director, Paul Gray:
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