

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

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Background. Primary–secondary school transition is a major life event for 11-year-old children in the United Kingdom and can also be a stressful period for parents and teachers. However, most research focuses on the impact of transition on children's academic performance and social well-being and we have a limited understanding of their emotional experiences in the lead up to and during the transition, from the perspective of key stakeholders: students, parents, and teachers.

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

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

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

Results. Students, parents, and teachers were shown to navigate a similar process over primary–secondary school transition. All talked about managing their own and others' emotions, relationships, and expectations. These were shaped by shared communication across primary and secondary schools and between the stakeholders, and impacted by how good transition provision was seen to be.

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

The transfer from primary to secondary school is a major life event for children in the United Kingdom and beyond (Eccles *et al.*, 1993) and is arguably 'one of the most difficult (transitions) in pupils' educational careers' (Zeedyk *et al.*, 2003, p.67). During the transfer, children face simultaneous discontinuities, from changes in their school environment (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008) and academic expectations (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, & Splittgerber, 2000) to the nature of their social interactions (Symonds & Galton, 2014). Transition can also coincide with biological pubescent changes, in addition

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to school-based pressures, such as academic national tests and school choice decisions, meaning children are required to concurrently navigate many 'key rites of passage' (Pratt & George, 2005, p.16).

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

At first glance, transition anxieties can be perceived as short-lived, as many reduce or disappear during the first term of secondary school (Galton, Morrison, & Pell, 2000). However, what many empirical studies do not consider is the temporary 'honeymoon transition period' children experience during initial transition, where anxieties are reduced in the short term as children perceive their new secondary school environment through rose-coloured glasses (Hargreaves, 1984). This quick adaptation and decline in 'transition anxiety' can be shaped by environmental factors; for example, teachers have been shown to be more permissive during the early months (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008), and peers have been shown to be more supportive (Symonds & Galton, 2014). However, as the year continues teachers and peers may no longer show this and adaption can be overwhelming (West, Sweeting, & Young, 2010), with transfer concerns persisting well into their first year of secondary school and fluctuating in response to ever-changing stressors (Stradling & McNeil, 2000). In fact, issues from low self-esteem (Seidman, Lambert, Allen, & Aber, 2003) to more serious long-standing mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression (Rice, Frederickson, & Seymour, 2011), and externalizing problems (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008) can be long-lasting, or even emerge later in the transfer year (Chedzoy & Burden, 2005; Hughes, Banks, & Terras, 2013; Zeedyk *et al.*, 2003).

However, the reasons why some children find the transition more challenging than others are not well understood. Year seven children are exposed to very similar, environmental, social, and academic stressors during transition, and therefore, variation in transition experiences (West *et al.*, 2010) and mental health functioning can be difficult to explain (Vaz, Parsons, Falkmer, Passmore, & Falkmer, 2014). This may be reflective of research designs. For example, while longitudinal quantitative designs are best when testing temporal precedence of developmental outcomes, qualitative methods can help us to better understand complexities and lived experiences inherent in the process and experience of primary–secondary school, which can help us to understand differences between individuals (Ashton, 2008; Graham & Hill, 2003).

Identifying factors beyond the school environment, which can protectively buffer children against transitional maladjustment, is also of paramount concern (Stadler, Feifel, Rohrmann, Vermeiren, & Poustka, 2010). Research has shown that parents, teachers, and peers can provide the most salient sources of support over adolescence, especially during times of change (Eccles & Harold, 1993) and vulnerability (Stadler *et al.*, 2010). The same can be said over primary–secondary school transition where children who report good relationships with parents and teachers are shown to express fewer internalizing and externalizing adjustment difficulties (Bailey & Baines, 2012; Hanewald, 2013).

However, adolescence is also a period of time when social support networks are challenged and restructured, especially if support figures interfere or challenge the adolescent's desire for autonomy (Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 2000). Therefore, understanding the roles of parents, teachers, and peers can be complex, especially over primary–secondary school transition. It is also important to recognize that primary–secondary school transition can be a period of substantial change for support figures, as it is not only transfer children who adjust to new identities, expectations, roles, and interactions, but also parents and teachers face similar challenges (Hanewald, 2013).

Rationale

In sum, transition can be a challenging time for children. However, what is less clear is how children can be effectively supported by parents, teachers, and peers during this period (Bailey & Baines, 2012; Hanewald, 2013). In part, this uncertainty is due to methodological constraints, particularly the dominance of research conducted in the United States, which has limited implications for United Kingdom provision, as children transition schools at a later age there than in the United Kingdom. There is evidence that children who are older and have been exposed to previous life transitions (Adeyemo, 2005; Irvin & Richardson, 2002) adapt to and accept challenges in school transition more easily (West *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, it is important that more research is conducted in the United Kingdom where children transition at a younger age.

In addition, the general reliance on quantitative survey-based designs (Riglin, Frederickson, Shelton, & Rice, 2013) is also a limitation. Using qualitative methods can evoke honest and more in-depth insight, which is especially important given that adjustment can be subject to individual and environmental characteristics (Adeyemo, 2005), and cannot be obtained when studies are reliant solely on quantitative closed questionnaire items (Zeedyk *et al.*, 2003). For example, while there has been a considerable number of qualitative studies investigating primary–secondary school in the United Kingdom (van Rens, Haelermans, Groot, & van den Brink, 2018), most are limited in terms of conclusions that can be drawn. Many studies are small scale, such as Green's (1997) interview research, which included only 10 participants (Green, 1997), or vague with regard to reporting participant numbers. For example, Coffey (2013) did not indicate exactly how many participants took part in interviews following survey data collection, meaning sample size for the qualitative data is unclear (Coffey, 2013).

Additionally, many studies simply collect qualitative data to supplement quantitative findings, without conducting separate analyses (West *et al.*, 2010). In fact, some research in this area has used unstructured and unmoderated class activities as a data collection method, as opposed to focus groups and interviews (Ashton, 2008), which can result in data being less reliable. Other studies employ biased participant selection, such as Evangelou *et al.*'s (2008) longitudinal research where only participants who reported positive experiences of school transition were selected for interview, which means that data cannot be generalized. Longitudinal research is also limited, and, instead, qualitative data have often been collated before or immediately following the transition during the 'honeymoon period' and, as a result, not captured the complexity of school transition (Ashton, 2008).

Furthermore, many qualitative studies assessing primary–secondary school transition are disparate in terms of focus (Mellor & Delamont, 2011; Pratt & George, 2005), which creates indiscriminate lists of strategies to improve this period of time, but no clear

method of prioritization (Evangelou *et al.*, 2008). Thus, as recommended by previous scholars, understanding stakeholders' perceptions and experiences of the process of primary–secondary school transition is more important than unravelling individual factors that shape adjustment (Ashton, 2008; Graham & Hill, 2003). In fact, without understanding how children's, parents', and teachers' views of transition are related, efforts to improve the transition period can only be superficial.

Bronfenbrenner's *Eco-Systemic Model of Development* (1979), which acknowledges the multifaceted dynamic interactions between an individual and environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), provides a useful theoretical framework to guide investigations into understanding developmental processes, such as primary–secondary school transition, and has been referenced in several articles pertaining to this period of time (Brewin & Statham, 2011; Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006). Primary–secondary school transition has been conceptualized as a 'multidimensional process' (West *et al.*, 2010, p.45), and drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theoretical framework, the present research adds to contemporary theory by looking deeper into both proximal (pupils' relationships with their teachers, parents, and peers) and distal (educational policies and practices) influences, which impact students', parents', and teachers' experiences in the lead up to and over the transition period.

The present research also investigates how parents and teachers view transition using asynchronous and face-to-face focus groups. To date, there are no studies that have utilized online focus groups to assess teachers' and parents' experiences of primary–secondary school, despite the practicalities of this methodology for participants who have busy lives. While it will still be the case that those who are interested in the topic will self-select to participate in the study, allowing participants to dictate when they will participate is likely to lead to higher levels of participation from a wider variety of participants. In addition, the anonymous and decontextualized nature of online formats has been shown to be non-confronting and to stimulate honest sharing around sensitive topics (Coulson, 2005). Moreover, as shown in transition literature, using focus group methodologies as opposed to one-to-one interviews is less common (van Rens *et al.*, 2018). However, it has been argued that focus groups are useful, not only in evoking honest and contextualized insight, but also for individuals to talk about their feelings in an open, friendly, and non-judgemental space (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1998).

Thus, using focus group methodology, the present research aims to investigate stakeholders' (students, parents, and teachers) experiences of primary–secondary school transition and how they feel the transition period could be improved to answer the research question:

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

Method

Participants

Forty-five year seven children (23 females), aged 11 and 12, from three United Kingdom Staffordshire secondary schools participated in seven student focus groups. To recruit a representative sample, local secondary schools' demographic and performance Ofsted Reports and NCOP (National Collaborative Outreach Programme) statistics were reviewed and a top, medium, and low scoring secondary school was selected, to reflect divergent demographic, socio-economic, and performance statistics.

Eight year seven parents (seven females), eight year seven teachers (six females), and eight year six teachers (six females) from five Staffordshire secondary schools and five primary feeder schools, aged between 25 and 40 (mean age bracket 30–40), participated in three online asynchronous focus groups. Schools' demographic and performance Ofsted Reports and NCOP (National Collaborative Outreach Programme) statistics were again reviewed, and schools were selected to represent low, medium, and high scores.

For the present research, seven student focus groups were conducted, which surpasses recommendations that between three and six focus groups are likely to identify 90% of the themes and data saturation for a given topic (Guest, Namey, & McKenna, 2017)

Materials

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

Procedure

Student face-to-face focus groups

Following ethical approval and head teacher consent, a recruitment presentation was delivered to all year seven students, and opt-in parental consent was obtained a week prior to data collection. Randomly selected students were then organized into three groups of eight in one school and four groups of five or six students in the other two schools, by class teachers. This controlled for individual differences such as personality characteristics and friendships groups, which may impact group discussions (Heary & Hennessy, 2002). Prior to data collection, students were briefed, asked to adhere to key ground rules, and informed assent from each participant was obtained. Once the allotted time ended (1 hr), participants were thanked, debriefed, offered the opportunity to ask questions, pointed to sources of support, and informed that they had one week to withdraw their own data.

Parent and teacher online focus groups

Recruitment information letters were distributed to year seven parents, year six teachers, and seven teachers. Self-selected participants who indicated interest were then emailed an information sheet containing details regarding how to access the online focus group and when. On the first day of data collection, all participants were emailed a survey link and presented with further information and a consent form to electronically sign. Until consent was elicited, participants were unable to access the focus group website and questions (which were online for 1 week). Due to anonymity, participants were made aware that they could not withdraw their data once participation had begun. Following the data collection week, participants were presented with an online debrief, pointed to sources of support, and an email address to ask further questions.

Data analysis

Audio-recordings were transcribed using verbatim transcription, and as the intent of the analysis was to describe, summarize, and interpret surface-level patterns in semantic content from the sample as a whole, data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis

within a contextualist framework. Following on from data familiarization and immersion, semantic similarities and differences were compared across each group of transcripts (i.e., student or teacher) to generate codes, which identified features of the data that were considered pertinent to the research question and that stakeholder. Codes were then analysed and combined at a broader level, to develop themes and sub-themes, see Table 1. The themes' external homogeneity and internal homogeneity were then reviewed to ensure that they were accurate and valid representations of the data set, exhibiting clear and identifiable distinctions between groups, but also cohered meaningfully (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). Themes were refined through discussion between the authors.

Results

Three main themes: *Recognition of emotions*, *Managing relationships*, and *Managing expectations* were identified across the 10 focus groups. As shown in Table 1, each theme has a differing number of sub-themes, which are explored separately below using illustrative quotes from participants, see Table 2.

Recognition of emotions

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

Conflicting emotions

Although acknowledgement was made of primary–secondary school transition being a 'rite of passage' (Parent, Angela), in the lead up to and during the transfer period almost all

Table 1. A thematic table to show themes and sub-themes

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

Table 2. Key of in-text transcript referencing. For instance (Student H) equates to transcript H and (Parent) equates to transcript A

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

students and parents expressed experiencing conflicting emotions and strong feelings of loss. Stakeholders could recognize these emotions, in addition to strategies employed to manage them (i.e., repression) in themselves and others.

Students. Prior to secondary school transfer, students faced mixed, conflicting emotions, such as nervousness and excitement: ‘Erm it’s a bit of excitement and a bit of stress and err anxiousness’ (Student E, Joseph) and loss versus progression: ‘I was sad because I was leaving all my friends behind but then I was happy because of like, because a new beginning’s happening in your life’ (Student I, Peter). These conflicts were shown to follow a trajectory, in that once one emotional conflict had been overcome, students were faced with another: ‘at the start of the holidays I felt dead sad because none of my friends from my primary came here and then throughout the holidays got really excited and then the last bit I got really nervous’ (Student I, Molly).

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

Parents were also negotiating their own emotional conflicts in accepting that their child was growing up and: ‘no longer in the primary school bubble’ (Parent, Laura) and letting go: ‘I definitely agree that it is a process of letting go’ (Parent, Rachael). The process of letting go was shown to get easier with time and shaped parenting behaviours: ‘I have had to learn to ask questions in a different way so they don’t think I’m over protective’ (Parent, Chloe).

Feelings of loss

The motif of loss was shown to be dominant and reoccurring across all focus groups, and central to parents' and students' experience of primary–secondary school transition and for this merits its own theme, to reflect the complexity and depth of the participants' feelings.

Students. For students, leaving primary school was portrayed as a personal loss: 'like you were leaving part of like your family behind, and you were leaving part of like yourself behind' (Student H, Thomas). Losing support, especially from primary school friendships, was a significant concern: 'like some friends you've been through like since Primary so you don't want to lose them and they're been through with you since Nursery, all the way here, so you don't really want to lose them' (Student D, Nora), although students felt that this loss could not always be understood by adults: 'they didn't understand as much erm because like when they were younger it is different' (Student F, Lucy).

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

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

Repression

For students and parents, the notion of repressing emotions either from themselves or others shaped their experiences and interactions over primary–secondary school transition, which is reinforced environmentally in primary schools' delaying of transition support preparation.

Students. For students, repressing feelings of apprehension and anxiety towards primary–secondary school transition was used as a method to protect the self: 'I made myself forget so I wasn't worried' (Student G, Daniella), and mask feelings of vulnerability around peers, 'I think like if it is mainly a personal thing that I should deal with it, I wouldn't open up to any teachers or anybody at school' (Student E, Fred). However, this strategy was also shown to be maladaptive and led to perceptions of being alone in feeling anxious about the transition: 'if you have a problem there is no point not saying because it will get worse inside you' (Student G, Carol). The lack of and delaying of emotional support provision within the school environment was shown to reinforce these feelings and students emphasized the need for more open discussion: 'I think that if we had someone to talk to about how we felt about secondary school then it would have been a bit better' (Student F, Charlotte).

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

Parents. Parents recognized and helped students manage repressed feelings of transition apprehension and felt teachers could help more with this: 'I think more talking about feelings about leaving in class could be done. We spoke a lot at home, but this could have been reinforced' (Parent, Laura). Nonetheless, parents were also aware that they were repressing emotions, as there was a shared understanding that expressing feelings of negativity and apprehension towards the transition in front of transfer students could be harmful. This was also expressed by teachers: 'the hardest situations I have found is where a parent is visibly nervous and agitated about the transition in front of their child, causing their nerves to be passed on' (Y7 Teacher, Harrison) and transfer students: 'I don't think parents should stress that much, that gives kids more work' (Student G, Simon). As a result, parents felt that they too could benefit from transition support: 'It would be great to talk to someone on a 1:1 basis, then if we have concerns we can air them' (Parent, Chloe).

Teachers. Primary school teachers felt that the summer term following examinations is the optimal time to provide emotional centred transition support: 'I think transition is best placed after SATs as they can focus on their next steps once SATs are complete' (Y6 Teacher, Kylie). Provision prior to this was believed to create feelings of anxiety towards the transfer:

I don't think emphasis should be placed on the transfer too early; this may just stretch out the inevitable pre-transfer stress. While obviously it is a big deal for children to move school, we should avoid making a big issue of it. (Y6 Teacher, Donald)

However, primary school teachers also recognized the disadvantages of this strategy, as this delayed provision subtly encourages students to suppress their feelings towards secondary school transition until a more convenient time, and can cause greater problems in the summer term, where 'tensions that have been hidden tend to come to surface' (Y6 Teacher, Mathew). Secondary school teachers also favoured early-onset secondary school support provision: 'the earlier the transition, or 'drip feeding', the students get of their future transition to take place, the more familiar and less painful it will be for them to transfer' (Y7 Teacher, Simon).

Management of emotions

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

Students. Some students felt that extra support from teachers and peers at school would have been beneficial over school transition to help them manage their emotions, as opposed to repressing them: 'just opening up and talking helps a lot with transition' (Student F, Jackie). However, not all children felt this way and many believed adjustment was instead shaped by students' emotional self-management: 'I don't think it is about preparing them, I think it's about the child's attitude to what they're doing' (Student I, Dennis), and confidence: 'I didn't think I would fit in so over the holidays I was trying to get more confident' (Student F, Jane).

Teachers. In the summer term leading up to transition, primary school teachers reported managing students' internalizing: 'some of the children get a little anxious towards the end of the summer term' (Y6 Teacher, Kylie) and externalizing behaviours: 'some children push the boundaries in terms of behaviour expectations' (Y6 Teacher, Donald). These behaviours were motivated by students' readiness to move on and adults' receptiveness (or not) in managing this behaviour sensitively: 'Those children who are generally less secure or motivated anyway, tend to appear more unsettled and find the less structured nature of the end of the year difficult to deal with' (Y6 Teacher, Mathew).

Once at secondary school, teachers emphasized the importance of fostering collaborative parent-teacher relationships to support parents' and manage their apprehensions: 'parents are much more likely to respond and come to parents evening and support the school and get involved with their child's education, and extracurricular, if they know it means a lot to teachers, as well as their child' (Y7 Teacher, Sarah).

Managing relationships

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

Friendships

For students, peers were their most dominant source of support: 'you need friends, friends are like your brothers and sisters, you have to keep them with you' (Student E, Joseph) and shaped their experiences throughout the transition period.

Students. Peer affiliation was motivated by: fears of being lonely: 'I need to make friends because I won't have anyone to be with' (Student F, Victoria), environmental concerns: 'I just made friends and they just made me more comfortable around school life and everything, so it was easier' (Student I, Miley), students' need for support: 'we all know what each other's going through' (...) 'so if you talk about it together then you can be a lot more confident' (Student E, George), and perceived to be confidence serving: 'I don't really like change that much so like if you're with your friends it's a lot more reassuring' (Student E, Ken).

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

I think that parents should listen to us because I was like I need to make friends because I won't have anyone and to be with when I am here and they didn't really understand and were like you don't need friends you just need to do well and then we will be proud of you. (Student F, Sarah)

Reconfiguration

Both parents and students discussed changes in their relationships with each other and the school, their ability to reconfigure these changes shaping their adjustment.

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

Strains in student-parent relationships, particularly in relation to parents' need for communication, were also discussed: 'I felt more comfortable talking to my parents in primary like now they want to know every detail that you've done' (Student G, Tobias). Eliciting support from relatable others, such as older siblings, was favoured:

I think it is a lot easier to talk about things with my sister because she is in year ten and knows a lot of things about the school and I think that is more helpful than talking to my parents sometimes because they don't really know the school. (Student F, Victoria)

Students also reported reconfigurations in parents' management of school-specific problems, which encouraged students to take greater responsibility for their actions once in year seven:

In Primary school if something ever went on or if I had an argument with my friends, they [parents] would kind of go and speak to the parents (. . .) and when I was in High school and I had a fall out they would just tell me to get on with it. (Student I, Molly)

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

Relationship building

Primary and secondary school teachers were shown to have different approaches to building relationships with parents, and supporting them over the transition period. For students, consistency was best.

Teachers. For secondary school teachers, communication was vital to build relationships with parents and help them reconfigure their new role in supporting a year seven student: 'developing good relationships with parents at transition evenings so that a collaborative approach is used from the first day' (Y7 Teacher, Harrison). This is a direct contrast to primary school teachers' approach to supporting parents over the transition period: 'I have heard very little from parents about the transition process. I would be more than happy to discuss their child but generally I have dealt with new teachers/heads of year about the children' (Y6 Teacher, Sally).

To build relationships with year seven children, consistency: 'it is important for Y7 students to have a consistent form tutor who knows them well and who they trust to discuss their problems at both school and home' (Y7 Teacher, Gail) and adopting a nurturing supportive role: 'I tend to have a nurturing relationship with my students within the first term' (Y7 Teacher, Stephanie) was deemed paramount. However, as discussed in the student focus groups, barriers such as time and competing pressures can prevent this: 'Ideally we would be able to host more transition events but many staff still have full timetables and this cannot be realistically facilitated' (Y7 Teacher, Brenda).

Managing expectations

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

Students

For students, honest insight into the differing standards and the social and environmental changes they will encounter at secondary school is deemed best to manage expectations so students don't feel falsely prepared: 'Like tell them what they're about to go into, like don't be like 'oh some people might be mean to you', like tell them like what you're going to go into like how you should deal with it' (Student D, Alisha). However, students also felt that transition exposure should be sensitive to their emotional well-being, and preparations should be gradual:

If they make too much of a fuss about it then it does proper worry you, it's like, like a soldier preparing for war like, if they give them a whole entire suit of armour it's then they can think, what are we going against. (Student H, Jacob)

Parents

Parents reported managing their child's expectations: 'we just tried to talk at each opportunity, reassuring that it would be ok' (Parent, Gaynor), in addition to their own, as parents did not want their child to pick up on any of their concerns (see *Repression*). Common advice to future transfer parents was to help children develop realistic expectations, especially as parents were unsure as to how well primary schools had done this: 'They were really excited about the move up from Year 6. I don't know whether they set their expectations too high and that's why they may have found it difficult to adapt' (Parent, Chloe).

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

Teachers

Within primary schools, teachers discussed how they used subtle indirect preparation strategies to manage students' expectations: 'we do not explicitly prepare our children for the movement to Year 7' (Y6 Teacher, Sally). This strategy may be due to prioritization of SAT's examinations: 'there is room for primary schools to start transition work earlier but tests do get in the way' (Y7 Teacher, Lucy), and aiding classroom management, which can be more of a problem during the summer term: 'cockiness in some children or frustration at the rules and regulations within the primary school can be difficult to manage at times' (Y6 Teacher, Kylie).

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

Children that can reason social problems, but seek help from staff when they haven't been successful in rectifying a situation, rather than bottling up issues and telling parents, who then call in on their behalf. These are excellent skills to possess as it allows issues to settle far quicker. (Y7 Teacher, Jessica)

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate students', parents', and teachers' experiences of school transition and how they felt this period could be improved, using focus group methodology.

A particular strength of the present research is the simultaneous comparison of three unique stakeholders' experiences of the transfer period, which has been recommended

by previous scholars (Ashton, 2008), to provide a more holistic, detailed, and in-depth exploration of this period of time (Graham & Hill, 2003; van Rens et al., 2018). As shown above, parents', students', and teachers' experiences of school transition are similar, in that all are shown to navigate an analogous process where they manage (either their own or others') emotions, relationships, and expectations. Nonetheless, students', parents', and teachers' also have different transition experiences, which is shown in the differing number of sub-themes.

Peer affiliation was shown to be a dominant concern for students before, during, and after the transfer period, shaping their appraisals, experiences, and feelings of adjustment, which has been shown in previous research (Pratt & George, 2005; Weller, 2007). However, this concern was perceived to be misunderstood by parents and teachers. Students commonly suggested that schools could assist in transition by focussing on supporting children to manage changes in their peer relationships. These findings are also in line with recent government initiatives, such as Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (Wigelsworth, Humphrey, & Lendrum, 2012) and Targeted Mental Health in Schools initiatives (Wolpert, Humphrey, Belsky, & Deighton, 2013), which highlight the importance of facilitating and promoting students' social adjustment.

These educational initiatives also emphasize the significance of collaborative support over the transition period between parents and teachers, but also primary and secondary school staff, to make the transition period easier for all stakeholders. However, as discussed in themes *Managing Relationships* and *Managing Expectations*, and in line with previous research (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013), academic, social, and environmental discontinuities across primary and secondary school systems can represent barriers. This can prevent relationship formation between schools, parents, and students, in addition to shaping their appraisals and behaviour over the transfer.

Students generally found it easier to seek support from teachers at primary school, as teachers were perceived to be more open, approachable, and available, which is in line with previous research (Bru, Stornes, Munthe, & Thuen, 2010). Nonetheless, these findings are concerning, as children who perceive adults as available, open to communication (Maltais, Duchesne, Ratelle, & Feng, 2015) and more importantly involved in their school life show superior adjustment (Duchesne & Ratelle, 2010). For parents, re-establishing supportive relationships with their child's secondary school was a significant concern (see *Reconfiguration*) and can be exacerbated if they feel their child is not ready for secondary school or do not feel the school communicates well with them, which is consistent with previous research (Zeedyk et al., 2003). Taken together, these findings provide greater support for Tobbell and O'Donnell's (2013) recommendation that on entry to secondary school, greater attention needs to be placed on social provision, especially opportunities for relationship formation for transfer students and their parents (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013).

Furthermore, regardless of how hard parents and students try to repress and conceal pent-up anxieties (see *Repression*), this is rarely successful and can have negative outcomes. Parents and students are aware of and influenced by each others' emotions, especially anxiety with letting go, for parents (Lucey & Reay, 2000; Zeedyk et al., 2003). Parents and students also share common appraisals, such as loss. These findings are in line with Bronfenbrenner's *Eco-Systemic Model of Development* (1979), demonstrating how person and environmental factors, especially relationships, are nested and exert differential levels of influence, shaping perceptions, behaviours, coping, and adaption (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Thus, focussing efforts on each party individually may not be necessary for school transition experiences to be improved, and instead, encouraging

parents and students to have open communication channels may help stakeholders feel supported.

Moreover, this research suggests that repression behaviours can cause parents and students to feel alone and unsupported in feeling apprehensive during transition. In part, the delayed or absence of transition provision within primary schools, due to prioritization of National Assessment targets (McGee, Ward, Gibbons, & Harlow, 2003) and behavioural concerns, was shown to shape these feelings and be discordant with transfer students' need to access support (Evangelou *et al.*, 2008; McGee *et al.*, 2003). These findings emphasize the need for year six teachers to integrate transition support provision throughout the transfer year to address anxieties presented and prevent students repressing them (Zeedyk *et al.*, 2003). Although caution should be made when generalizing these findings to school transitions made cross-culturally where children do not sit National Assessments prior to the transfer period, these findings add to the broader transition context by demonstrating the importance of acknowledging students' needs.

However, what has been missed empirically, yet shown in the present research, is the need for primary–secondary school transition provisions to establish a balance between exposure and consistency. In other words, transfer students need a degree of insight into what secondary school will be like and how to navigate differing standards, but this exposure should follow a clear continuum with a limit, as children also need consistency during this apprehensive period of time. For example, students emphasized the dangers of too much primary–secondary school transition provision, too soon, which can cause feelings of being overwhelmed and anxiety. These findings are in line with Hammond's (2016) research, which demonstrated the need for stakeholders to be mindful and not overly protective, cautious, or anxious when discussing primary–secondary school transfer (Hammond, 2016). Gradual preparations were also deemed best, by both secondary school teachers and students, which has so far been unsupported empirically and practically.

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

In sum, in order to improve primary–secondary school transition, acknowledgement that parents, students, and teachers all have a stake in negotiation of this emotionally challenging period is paramount. Given the limited research which has explored proximal (pupils' relationships with their teachers, parents, and peers) and distal (educational policies and practices) influences which impact transitional experience and adjustment in the United Kingdom, the present study has made preliminary progress in understanding this period from the perspective of three distinct stakeholders and made suggestions for how to improve it. However, further longitudinal and intervention research is needed to unravel the pathogenesis and progression of emotional experiences in order to best equip parents and teachers support students over this critical period.

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Appendix : Semi-structure focus group guides

Student focus group questions

1. In general (and without mentioning particular people) how well do you feel year seven pupils have settled into secondary school?
 - Without referring to particular people, have people encountered any problems? If so how were they addressed? Could this have been done differently?
 - What sort of things were put in place by the school to make the transition a bit easier? What do you think of this?
2. How was the summer leading up to the transfer?
 - Were you and your classmates excited/nervous?
 - Could you and your classmates talk about your feelings? Who was best to do this with?
3. Before moving to secondary school what are pupils most looking forward to?
4. Is there anything pupils do not look forward to?
 - How do pupils deal with these worries?
 - What do they do?
5. How would you describe your relationships with your teachers over the transfer period?
 - Do you feel that you have a different relationship with your secondary school teachers than you had with your primary school teachers? In what way is this different?
 - Is this different for boys/girls?
6. Do relationships with parents change over the transition period?
 - When did this change?
 - Why do you think this is (more independence)?
 - Can you talk to them more or less?
 - Is this different for boys/girls?
7. Did your primary schools prepare you for the move to secondary school?
 - What did you do?
 - Would you have liked more support? When?
 - What else could they have done to prepare you?
8. How do you feel we can better prepare pupils for the transition to secondary school? Is there anything you would have liked to have been done differently?
9. What advice would you give to parents to help them advise pupils about moving to secondary school?
10. What top tips would you give year six pupils about to experience the transfer?

Parent focus group questions

1. How has the transition period been?
 - Have you or your child encountered any problems? If so how were they resolved?
2. How was the summer leading up to the transfer once your child had left year six?
 - Were you excited/nervous/sad to say goodbye?
 - Could you talk about your feelings with your child and vice versa?
3. In your opinion, does children's behaviour change as the transfer draws nearer?
 - When?

- How did you deal with this?
 - What about communication, how was it?
4. How was the support from your child's primary school and secondary school?
 - What support did you receive?
 - Was this useful?
 - Could it have been better?
 - What type of support provisions would have been more helpful?
 5. Some parents have discussed the transfer as a process of letting go. Would you agree?
 - Do you feel that children's readiness/level of preparation plays a part?
 - Has knowing/having older children already navigated the process had an impact?
 6. Does the parenting role change over the transfer period?
 - Do you feel that children's readiness/level of preparation plays a part?
 - Does your own willingness to transfer responsibility shape this?
 7. Now that you have navigated the process, is there anything you would do differently if you were to do it again?
 8. What top tips would you give parents about to experience the transfer?

Teacher focus group questions (Year 7)

1. On the whole how well have the children in your classes settled into secondary school?
 - Have you encountered any problems? If so how were they resolved?
 - How does this year compare to previous years?
2. Are you noticing changes in your class' behaviours and dynamics now they are a few months into the transfer period? What are they?
 - When did they manifest?
 - How do you adapt to this?
3. How would you describe the teacher-child relationship over the transfer period?
 - Does this change?
 - Is this different with boys/girls?
4. With reference to past experience, how do you feel is best to address transfer problems?
 - What have you done in the past?
5. The transfer from primary-secondary is a significant life event for parents in addition to children? What are your thoughts concerning the parent role?
 - Can parents influence the adjustment process? (positive and negative)
 - What are your experiences working alongside parents?
 - How do you feel is best to manage parental concerns?
6. What are your thoughts concerning levels of pre-transfer support?
 - Should primary schools be placing more emphasis on the transfer?
 - Should provision be earlier/integrated into the year six school year-possibly alongside as opposed to post national assessment work?
 - Should school transition support work continue into the first few weeks of year seven?
7. In your experience what qualities do well transitioned pupils possess?
 - Level of parental support
 - Degree of insight into what to expect
 - Certain skillset/resilience to negotiate challenges

8. How do you feel the transition could be navigated more smoothly? Is there anything that could be done differently?
9. What top tips would you give parents about to experience the transfer?
10. What top tips would you give students about to experience the transfer?

Teacher focus group questions (Year 6)

1. On the whole how well were the children in your class ready for secondary school in the weeks leading up the transfer?
 - Were there any problems? How were they resolved?
 - How did last year compare to previous years?
2. Did you notice changes in your class' behaviours and dynamics as the transfer period drew nearer? What were they?
 - When did they manifest?
 - How do you adapt to this?
3. How would you describe the teacher-child relationship over the weeks leading up to the transfer period?
 - Does this change?
 - Is this different with boys/girls?
4. With reference to past experience, how do you feel is best to address transfer problems?
 - What have you done in the past?
5. The transfer from primary-secondary is a significant life event for parents in addition to their children? What are your thoughts concerning the parent role?
 - Can parents influence the adjustment process? (positive and negative)
 - What are your experiences working alongside parents?
 - How do you feel is best to manage parental concerns?
6. What are your thoughts concerning levels of pre-transfer support?
 - Should primary schools be placing more emphasis on the transfer?
 - Should provision be earlier/integrated into the year six school year-possibly alongside as opposed to post national assessment work?
 - What else could secondary schools do to support you?
 - Should school transition support work continue into the first few weeks of year seven?
7. In your experience what qualities do prepared pupils possess?
 - Level of parental support
 - Degree of insight into what to expect
 - Certain skillset/resilience to negotiate challenges
8. How do you feel the transition could be navigated more smoothly? Is there anything that could be done differently?
9. What top tips would you give parents about to experience the transfer?
10. What top tips would you give students about to experience the transfer?