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Systematic literature review of child self-report measures of emotional wellbeing during primary-secondary school transitions

Divya Jindal-Snape and Charlotte Bagnall

Introduction

With approximately 750,000 pupils starting secondary school annually in the UK, it is important to understand the impact of primary-secondary school transitions on them. Primary-secondary school transitions are positive for most pupils but can have a negative impact on some pupils' emotional wellbeing (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020), with evidence of poorly managed primary-secondary transitions leading to serious long-term mental health difficulties (West et al., 2010). However, there is a paucity of research measuring changes in emotional wellbeing during primary-secondary transitions, despite this being a key concern (Bagnall et al., 2019). Further, even in the studies that have looked at the impact of primary-secondary transitions on pupils' emotional wellbeing, there is a lack of clear evidence with studies not using a baseline measure and repeated measures to assess pupils' emotional wellbeing over time.

It is important that we have standardised, robust, sensitive, and accessible measures to assess pupils' emotional wellbeing over primary-secondary school transitions. However, identifying a suitable measure can be challenging for primary-secondary school transition researchers and professionals, especially one that collects data directly from pupils who are experiencing transitions. Therefore, we undertook a systematic literature review to understand what child self-report measures have been used to assess their emotional wellbeing over primary-secondary school transitions and the quality of those measures. The data presented here is part of a larger review.

We conceptualise transitions as multiple, complex and dynamic, with ongoing adaptations due to changes in contexts (school/home), interpersonal relationships (peers/teachers), domains (psychological/social) and/or identity, which can be simultaneously exciting and worrying for a child and significant others (Jindal-Snape, 2016). We conceptualise emotional wellbeing as a change in one's feelings and mind-set that is more than temporary (e.g., change in mood), that can influence one's ability to manage one's own emotions.

Methods

This review is based on the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre's (EPPI-Centre) (2010) approach for undertaking systematic literature reviews. Its seven key steps include: scoping the review, searching for studies, screening studies, describing and mapping, quality and relevance appraisal, synthesising the study findings, and conclusions and recommendations. Table 1 provides the inclusion criteria based on an initial scoping review. Figure 1, PRISMA diagram, shows the process of literature search and inclusion/exclusion decisions.

Table 1: Inclusion criteria

Aspect	Criteria
Relevance	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Relates directly to at least one of the four research questions.2. Used child self-report to assess emotional wellbeing and transitions experiences
Search Terms	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Transition*, 2. Transfer, 3. Mov* in combination with i. primary school, ii. elementary school, iii. middle school in combination with a. secondary school b. high school c. post-primary
Databases	Web of Science (WoS) (Science Citation Index Expanded, Social Sciences Citation Index, Arts & Humanities Citation Index); the Education Resources Education Centre (ERIC; British Education Index (BEI); PsycINFO; and Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA)
Time period	Between 1 st January 2008 and 31 st March 2021
Age-range	10-14 years, to include primary-secondary transitions age across international educational systems
Geographical spread	International
Language	English
Research base	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Empirical research to ensure inclusion of information about scales used: qualitative/quantitative/mixed methods2. Child self-report3. Uses a transition experience and/or an emotional wellbeing measure that aligns with one of the following categories: a. general emotional well-being; b. anxiety symptoms; c. depressive symptoms/low mood; d. coping/resilience; e. self-concept; f. attitudes towards school; g. loneliness
Transparency	Explicit methodology
Reliability/validity	As far as can be determined, the child self-report scale used must be valid and reliable

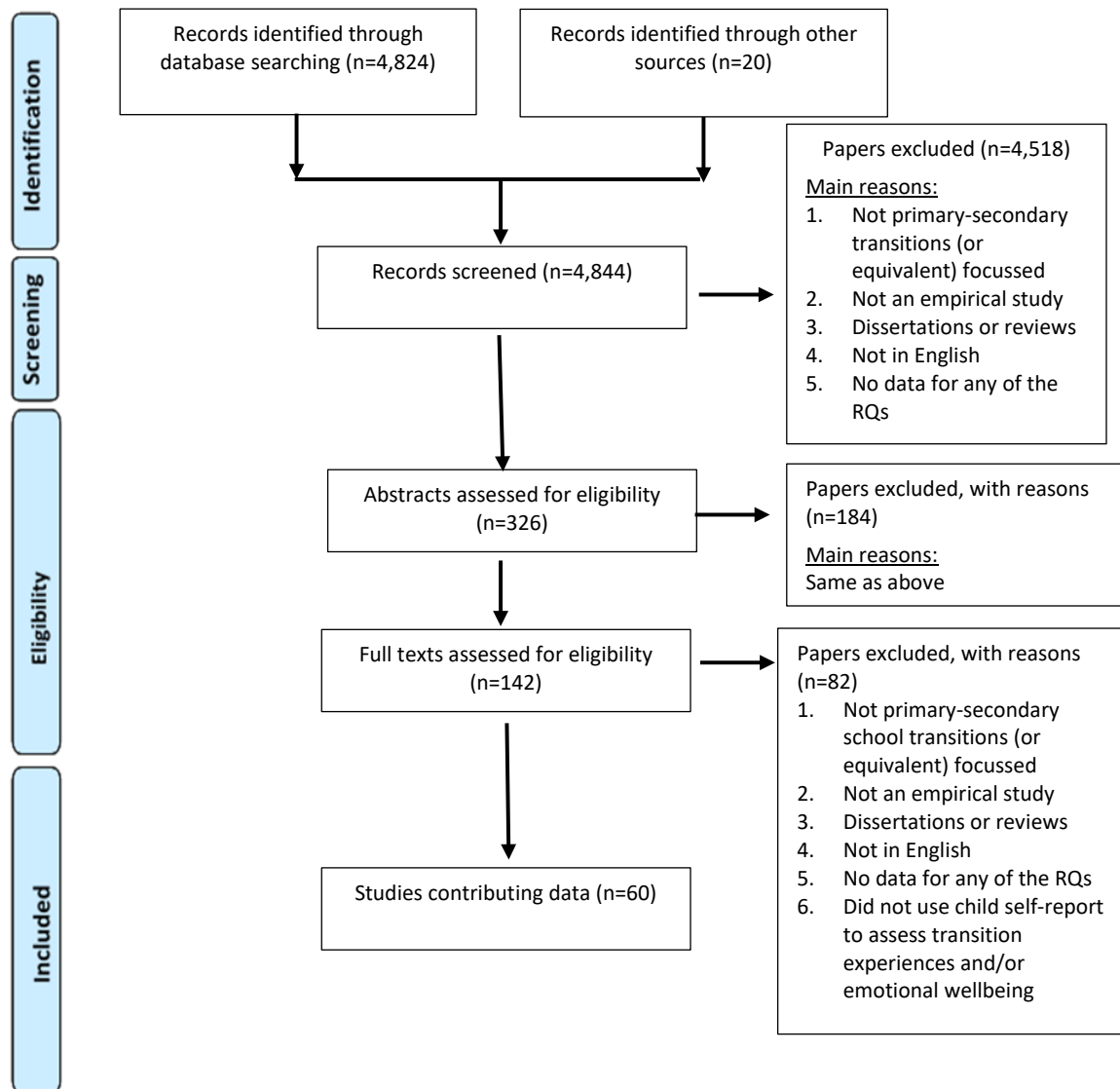


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram of study selection

Results

Using the EPPI-Centre (2010) approach, after a rigorous screening of 4,518 records, 60 papers were included based on the study's inclusion criteria. Of these 60, only 16 papers measured both *Transitions experiences* and *Emotional wellbeing*. The emotional wellbeing scales included those that measure (i) general emotional wellbeing, (ii) anxiety symptoms, (iii) depressive symptoms/low mood, and (iv) broader measures of emotional wellbeing, such as coping/resilience, self-concept, attitudes towards school and loneliness. Some studies, such as Rice et al. (2011), used multiple measures of emotional wellbeing alongside measuring transition experiences. Along with self-created questionnaires, examples of scales used to assess transitions or emotional wellbeing include: School Concerns Questionnaire (SCQ) (Thomasson et al., 2006), The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

(Goodman, 2001), Self-report Screen for Child Anxiety and Related Emotional Disorders (SCARED; Birmaher et al., 1997), The School Connectedness Scale (Resnick et al., 1997).

Overall we found that the measures that have been used to assess primary-secondary school transitions and/or emotional wellbeing have several limitations, namely lack of consideration of the dynamic and longitudinal nature of primary-secondary transitions and emotional wellbeing, use of negative terminology (e.g., loneliness, anxiety), do not assess both transitions and emotional wellbeing in a *single scale*, inconsistent reliability and validity assessment and most worryingly do not conceptualise or operationalise key constructs (i.e., transitions and emotional wellbeing). These limitations are of concern as the results based on these measures might be used to develop transition policies, practices and interventions that might not be effective.

Discussion

This is the first review of scales that have assessed transition experience and emotional wellbeing, and provides insights into a potential lack of robust analysis of the construct and its factors in the context of primary-secondary school transitions, recognising that emotional wellbeing is a multi-faceted concept with multiple dimensions, which need to be measured for a holistic appraisal. The negative terminology of the scales used, e.g., assessing transition worries or concerns, and emotional wellbeing referred to as presence/absence of low mood/loneliness, could possibly give a negative message to pupils about what impact primary-secondary transitions can have on their emotional wellbeing.

We also found that scales of transitions and emotional wellbeing have key limitations including:

1. lack of up-to-date measure/s as most were created almost two decades ago
2. a broad range in the number of items used in the scales without reporting how this can influence the scales psychometric properties and/or accessibility
3. scale adaptations were subject to inconsistent reliability and validity testing
4. do not take into account the dynamic nature of primary-secondary school transitions and emotional wellbeing.

The lack of a robust scale that measures both primary-secondary transition experiences and emotional wellbeing, highlights the need for future research to develop a single, up-to-date, robust and reliable scale. It is important that it is developed in partnership with children to ensure that the language and format are age-stage appropriate. This review is the first step towards developing such a measure.

The authors

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