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Individual Paper

International insights into how can we improve children's emotional wellbeing over primary-secondary school transitions?

Charlotte L. Bagnall, William Barlow, Linda Bhreathnach, Elizabeth F.S. Hannah, Divya Jindal-Snape, & Jennifer E. Symonds

Abstract

The transition from primary to secondary school provides children with opportunities and challenges that can impact their emotional experiences. Recognising that to date there is limited research which focuses on children's emotional experiences of primary-secondary school transition, a group of transitions researchers participated in a symposium at the British Psychological Society Psychology of Education Section Conference 2022, addressing this important topic. The purpose of the symposium was to bring together four international studies, which used different research designs to examine children's emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transition. Through these talks and discussions which occurred during the symposium, current thinking, developments, and practice in this area, in addition to considering some of the challenges and opportunities present within primary-secondary school transitions research, are explored in order to better understand and support children's emotional wellbeing over primary-secondary school transitions.

Keywords: *primary-secondary school transitions, emotional wellbeing, intervention, educational psychology*

Introduction

Most children around the world transition from primary to secondary education between the ages of 10 and 14 years (Evans et al., 2018). Primary-secondary school transitions in England, Scotland, and Ireland, which children make at the age of 11 years old, are critical developmental periods for children and significant others within their ecosystem. During this time, children and their parents/carers, siblings and teachers experience multiple and concurrent psychological, social, and educational changes, due to alterations in, amongst others, environmental contexts (school/home/community), interpersonal relationships (peers/teachers), and psychological roles and processes (e.g., identity as a primary/secondary school child, child/young person) (Jindal-Snape, 2016). *Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions (MMT)* theory proposes that each child moving from primary to secondary school experiences multiple transitions at the same time (e.g., developmental, social, academic) and that the child's transitions can trigger transitions of significant others (e.g., change in parental identity) (Jindal-Snape, 2023). Further, significant others (e.g., the children's parents/carers) may also be simultaneously experiencing their own transitions (e.g., change of job), which can impact the child's transitions, highlighting the multi-dimensional nature of transitions. Additionally, these multiple and multidimensional transitions are affected by the dynamic nature of the ecosystems and environment they are situated in.

Unsurprisingly, primary-secondary school transitions can be emotionally demanding longitudinal experiences for children. For example, the dynamic interaction of multiple transitions, across multiple domains and contexts can be simultaneously exciting for children representing an opportunity for developmental growth and learning, but can also be worrying for children, associated with declining feelings of school engagement and connection (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016), and a time of heightened risk for declines in emotional wellbeing and mental health difficulties (Bagnall & Jindal-Snape, 2023). This can be shaped

by individual-level factors (such as self-esteem, motivation, resilience, and internal coping skills; Bagnall et al., 2021a), external factors such as school size, culture and ethos (Symonds & Galton, 2014), and social factors such as positive, supportive relationships with parents/carers, teacher and peers (Bagnall et al., 2020). Experiences of primary-secondary school transitions can be further shaped by socio-cultural factors such as ethnicity and poverty (Benner et al., 2017).

To address these issues, four research groups participated in a symposium at the British Psychological Society's Psychology of Education Annual Conference 2022. The symposium was organised and chaired by Charlotte L. Bagnall, and featured contributions from research teams in Ireland (Jennifer E. Symonds and colleagues), Scotland (Elizabeth F.S. Hannah and colleagues) and England (Charlotte L. Bagnall and colleagues). In this brief report we overview each presentation to give holistic coverage of the symposium and the findings on children's emotional wellbeing at the primary to secondary school transition.

1. Jennifer E. Symonds and Linda Bhreathnach: Autistic students' and parents' perspectives of primary-secondary school transitions in Ireland

While, for most children, adjustment difficulties over primary-secondary school transitions are short-lived following a process of adaptation (Jindal-Snape et al., 2019); children who face added risk factors at the individual and group level are more vulnerable to long-term difficulties. This was investigated by Dr Jennifer Symonds and colleagues (Stack et al., 2020), who explored student and parental perspectives of the transition from primary to secondary school for students with autism spectrum disorder; a sample who are believed to find primary to secondary school transitions particularly difficult (Makin et al., 2017). Much of the previous international research concerning autistic students and the primary-secondary transition focuses on students' and stakeholders' perspectives and experiences of the transition process, as well as the corresponding supports available for students in schools

(Hoy et al., 2018; Richter et al., 2019). However, fewer studies have considered the specifics regarding the suitability of the various school environments to meet the specific needs of individual autistic students during school transition. Information about the characteristics of school environments that appropriately support autistic students could help inform decisions regarding school placement (Makin et al., 2017). Additionally, this information could help inform school practices regarding supporting autistic students before, during and following transitions between schools.

Therefore, this part of the symposium focused on this study which explores the perspectives of autistic students and their parents regarding the transition from primary to secondary school with the aim of highlighting the specific characteristics of the school environment that help or hinder this process (Stack et al., 2020). Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the last term of primary school and again during the first term in secondary school to investigate the experiences of six autistic students, as well as the views of one of each of their parents regarding the features of primary and secondary school environments that were or were not helpful during transitions. Subsequently a Thematic Analysis of the resulting data corpus identified themes that captured the features of the school environment that met and did not meet students' needs (Stack et al., 2020).

The researchers found that overall, participants voiced more positive perspectives of the transition experience in secondary school rather than in primary school. The results elucidate helpful and unhelpful features of the school environment for pre- and post-transition, within the major themes of: *feelings about school, peer relationships, relationships with school staff, curriculum, school organisation, and accommodations*. Stack et al. (2020) discuss how students' and parents' perceptions of the helpful features of the school environment altered across the transition and between participants. The authors outline

the complexity of needs and how the findings can help to indicate the most supportive and problematic features of school environments at times of transition for autistic students.

In sum, this study highlights that the appropriate inclusion and integration of autistic students in secondary schools at times of transition can be a positive experience when the school environments are a good fit with the individual needs of each autistic child. However, the transition can at times be more challenging for children at primary school and when a one size fits all approach is taken (Stack et al., 2020). Indeed, more research is required to further investigate the best practice in terms of meeting the individual needs of each individual autistic child during school transitions.

2. Charlotte L. Bagnall: Design, delivery and evaluation of a universal emotional-centred primary-secondary school transition intervention in the UK

There are a number of interventions, varying in foci, design, and reach, which draw on individual-level factors, external factors, and social factors, to help children navigate primary-secondary school transitions. However, interventions focused on supporting children's emotional wellbeing over primary-secondary school transition are limited, with most programmes focusing on the practicalities of school transitions, preparing children for the new ways of learning, and social changes (Beaston et al., 2023; Jindal-Snape et al., 2020; White, 2020). This is despite emotional wellbeing shown to be directly linked with children's academic functioning (Vassilopoulos et al., 2018) and social adjustment (Coffey, 2013) over primary-secondary school transitions, and deemed as a priority by those supporting children during transition periods (e.g., parents/guardians, teachers) (Bagnall et al., 2020) and within policy (DfE, 2021).

One intervention which overcomes this limitation is Bagnall's (2020) *Talking about School Transition (TaST)* intervention, which was the first intervention discussed as part of the symposium. *TaST* is a universal, emotional-centred intervention focused on supporting

children's short- and long-term emotional wellbeing. *TaST* takes an early-intervention, preventative approach to school transitions provision, overcoming limitations which exist to date in practice, and consists of five one-hour sessions, which are spread evenly within the last two terms of Year 6 (final year of primary school in the UK) and delivered by the Year 6 class teacher.

To inform the design and delivery of *TaST*, three preliminary studies were conducted, collecting data in both the UK (Bagnall et al., 2020) and USA (Bagnall et al., 2021b), in mainstream and special schools (Bagnall et al., 2021c), obtaining insight from multiple stakeholders, including parents/carers, children and educational practitioners. The foci, content and structure of *TaST* is also theoretically underpinned by *Resilience Theory* (Rutter, 1989), recognising that external protective factors, such as social support obtained from key stakeholders (parents/guardians/carers, peers and teachers), and internal protective factors, specifically children's coping beliefs and abilities, can shape their transition appraisals and subsequent adjustment during this time. Further discussion of the theoretical underpinnings and evidence supporting the design of *TaST*, in addition to a description of the content and structure of *TaST* is outlined in Bagnall (2020).

The evaluation of *TaST* consisted of a longitudinal questionnaire-based design, following a quantitative outcome and qualitative process evaluation. As reported in Bagnall et al. (2021a), the outcome evaluation found that children participating in the intervention showed a greater reduction in Transition Worries over time, from June in Year 6 to December in Year 7, in contrast to the comparison group. Children in both comparison and intervention conditions also reported significantly higher Transition Worries scores in May and July in Year 6 and September in Year 7, than in December in Year 7, shedding greater light on the trajectory of change in children's emotional adjustment during this time, the need for emotional-centred support, and when this support could be most useful. This was further

supported in the process evaluation findings, where children reported *TaST* to be helpful in supporting them to understand and manage their feelings towards primary-secondary school transitions; in addition to helping the development of skills, such as confidence: ‘it filled me with confidence’, resilience: ‘how to deal with things’ and coping efficacy: ‘it showed you how to cope in different situations’. The emotional-centred reflection and expression components of *TaST* were discussed as central to this.

Together, these findings have implications for educational practice and policy in elucidating the importance of supporting children’s emotional wellbeing over this period and demonstrating the viability and success of implementing emotional-centred support intervention in practice. The longitudinal design in measuring outcomes over multiple time points, following the same sample of children, was a further unique methodological contribution of the present findings, and overcomes limitations of previous snapshot and/or cross-sectional evaluations.

3. Beth Hannah, William Barlow, and Divya Jindal-Snape: Supporting Students’ Transition from Primary to Secondary School using Drama

Drama is an ensemble based pedagogical approach which enables pupils to problem solve issues through the creation of fictional worlds. To create a fictional world, pupils are required to suspend their disbelief by adopting roles and acting as if they were another person in a different place and time (Neelands & Goode, 2015). This enables pupils to create scenarios, which focus on a particular aspect of the human condition, through the safety-net of a role – e.g., it is the role and not me who is saying and acting in this manner (Bolton, 1984). In turn, pupils can ‘rehearse for real life’ and find solutions to real world problems within the fiction which leads to new understandings (Landy & Montgomery, 2012). This is particularly useful as pupils develop a ‘felt’ knowledge which would be “genuinely serving the needs and interests of students in the transition years” (Clark et al. 1997, p. 19).

Furthermore, Jindal-Snape (2012) suggests that creative pedagogies (such as drama) support successful transitions as they develop pupils' self-esteem, agency, and voice.

Unfortunately, little has been reported on using drama to support primary-secondary transitions. Those studies that adopt a drama-based approach indicate that it: supports pupils' wellbeing, social skills, agency, motivation, exploration of transitions' hopes and fears, social-emotional development and reduces associated stress (and trauma) (Barlow, 2020 & 2021; Hammond, 2015; Jindal-Snape et al., 2011; Walsh-Bowers, 1992).

Forming part of a longitudinal mixed methods study, during the final two months of primary education in 2022, students from two schools (one urban and one rural), in the same Scottish local authority, participated in four process drama workshops. These workshops were based on the topic of primary-secondary transitions and conceptualised through the lens of *Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transition (MMT)* theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016). After the final drama workshop, students completed a mixed-methods questionnaire.

Qualitative data revealed students' views on learning using a process drama approach; their feelings and confidence about moving to secondary school; and the impact of taking part in the drama workshops. Overall, students were positive about participating in the workshops, and found it to be an engaging and enjoyable pedagogical experience. In addition, they suggested that they developed their knowledge and understanding of their own and others' transitions experiences. This enabled students to discuss their transitions' thoughts and feelings while offering them the opportunity, within the safety-net of the drama, to rehearse for real life.

Students expressed a mixture of positive and negative transitions (Symonds, 2015). They were positive about the impact of the workshops regarding their feelings (e.g., more confident, less worried) which increased their confidence levels. However, this view was not universal.

This study highlights that there is value in using process drama conventions to support pupils' emotional wellbeing during primary-secondary transitions. However, it is acknowledged that this is the first study structured through an MMT lens, using five newly devised drama workshops. In addition, it is the first longitudinal drama primary-secondary transitions study involving partnership at a conceptual and operational level with a Local Authority.

This study highlights the benefits of researchers working in collaboration with partners including local authority, pupils and parents. Drama appears to support most pupils during primary-secondary transitions. However, a larger-scale longitudinal research is required to fully understand the benefits of a drama approach in the context. Furthermore, it would be helpful for additional workshops to be devised for pupils, parents and teachers together to explore the multiple and multi-dimensional nature of primary-secondary transitions.

4. Charlotte L. Bagnall and Divya Jindal-Snape: An international systematic review of child self-report scales that measure their transitions experiences and emotional well-being during primary-secondary school transitions

As discussed in the final symposium talk, one methodological limitation which is inhibiting progress within the field is the measures currently used within transition research and practice. As Bagnall and Jindal-Snape (2023) explored in their systematic literature review, to date, there is no standardized, robust, sensitive, and accessible quantitative measure to assess children's emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transitions. This presents a challenge to school transitions researchers seeking to identify a suitable measure, within a pool of imperfect measures, and the need for a systematic literature review to provide comparisons of measurement properties to help with these selections. A second implication of their systematic review was to evaluate the common limitations of measures

used within primary-secondary school transition research to date to inform the design of the first robust, standardised and sensitive scale that assesses children's emotional wellbeing longitudinally across primary- secondary school transitions.

To address this gap, Bagnall and Jindal-Snape (2023) conducted a systematic literature review of primary-secondary transitions research that used child self-report school transitions and emotional wellbeing scales or questionnaires. They focussed on the extant literature between 2008 and 2021, using the EPPI-Centre (2010) method, to unpack (a) what measures are being used to assess children's transitions experiences and/or emotional wellbeing over primary-secondary school transitions, (b) whether this has changed over time, and (c) the methodological rigour of measures used.

As reported in Bagnall and Jindal-Snape's (2023) paper, synthesis of the findings identified that the measures used to date to assess primary-secondary school transitions and/or emotional wellbeing have the following key limitations: (1) do not take into account the longitudinal and dynamic nature of primary-secondary school transitions and emotional wellbeing; (2) use negative terminology (e.g. anxiety, worries); (3) use inaccessible formats (e.g. broad number of items); (4) do not assess both transitions and emotional wellbeing in a single scale; (5) inconsistent reliability and validity assessment (especially when measures are adapted); and (6) key constructs (transitions and emotional wellbeing) are not conceptualised and/or theoretically defined. These limitations are a concern, as the findings drawn from studies using these measures could be used to influence future primary-secondary school transitions research, and lead to policies and practices that are not fit for purpose and might not be effective.

In sum, 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. This systematic literature review is the first step

towards developing such a measure, which will not only make an important methodological contribution to the field, having distinct value in improving research data collection and analysis, implementation and evaluation of interventions, but will also have practical utility for children, families and professionals supporting multiple and multi-dimensional transitions of children and families.

Conclusion

In sum, as discussed within this article, to date there is a limited understanding within primary-secondary school transitions of *how* primary-secondary school transitions might impact children's emotional wellbeing, specifically, *which* aspects of emotional wellbeing are most affected, and over *what time period*. The research presented above, sheds some light on these gaps, providing insights into groups of children who might be particularly vulnerable during primary-secondary transitions and how their wellbeing might change during these transitions, reflective of features within the school environment, which fit more or less well with their individual needs. Furthermore, the two intervention studies provided further insight into the trajectory of change in children's emotional wellbeing over primary-secondary school transitions, providing insights into key entrance points for emotional-centred support intervention, what this intervention could look like and its efficacy. Finally, the international systematic literature review findings provided insight into the current instruments used within the field, and their limitations, which will further help to accelerate progress within primary-secondary school transitions research, by helping researchers to make informed decisions in choosing appropriate measures, that can be sustainably and consistently used within the field, to improve primary-secondary school transitions practice. Informed by insights from the symposium, future research is needed to investigate *who* the children at risk of the negative impact on their wellbeing are and *how* this might change over time, *how* they can be identified, and *what* additional emotional support they need.

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