








ARTICLE

‘It's scary starting a new school’: Children and young people's perspectives on wellbeing support during educational transitions

Ola Demkowicz¹  | Charlotte Bagnall¹  | Alexandra Hennessey¹  |
Kirsty Pert¹  | Lucy Bray²  | Emma Ashworth³  | Carla Mason¹ 

¹Manchester Institute of Education, The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

²Nursing and Midwifery, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, UK

³School of Psychology, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

Correspondence

Ola Demkowicz, Manchester Institute of Education, The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK.

Email: ola.demkowicz@manchester.ac.uk

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Abstract

Background: Children and young people experience various transitions throughout their education. Theory and evidence highlight that these can be complex, and poor experiences of transitions can be associated with worsened outcomes, necessitating a need to develop and implement wellbeing support. However, children and young people's views are lacking in the literature, and studies tend to focus on specific transitions rather than on what matters for wellbeing during transitions generally.

Aims: We explore children and young people's own perceptions of what would support wellbeing during educational transitions.

Sample: We engaged with 49 children and young people aged 6–17 years, using purposeful maximum variation sampling to facilitate engagement of a diverse sample across a variety of education setting types.

Methods: We undertook focus groups, using creative methods centred around a storybook, asking participants to make decisions as headteachers about wellbeing provision in a fictional setting. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Analysis: We constructed four themes: (1) helping children and young people understand what to expect; (2) developing and sustaining relationships and support; (3) being responsive to individual needs and vulnerabilities; and (4) managing loss and providing a sense of closure.

Conclusions: Our analysis highlights a desire among children and young people for a considered, supportive approach that recognizes their individual needs and their

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connection to educational communities. The study makes a methodological and conceptual contribution, demonstrating the value of adopting a multifocussed lens to researching and supporting transitions.

KEYWORDS

children and young people, creative methods, education, schools, transitions, wellbeing

BACKGROUND

Children and young people experience numerous transitions throughout education. In England, compulsory schooling (aged 5–18 years) typically includes various transitions: beginning school; moving upwards within a setting to new classes, teachers and Key Stages¹; moving between settings (e.g. primary to secondary, move to a new setting for post-16 education for some); and leaving compulsory education. Some also experience individualistic transitions, including changing schools at nontraditional times, moving between mainstream and alternative or special provision² or returning to school after prolonged absences (e.g. illness, school refusal and closures during the COVID-19 pandemic). Here, we explore children and young people's own perceptions of what would support social, emotional and mental wellbeing³ during transitions. Currently, children and young people's views are lacking in transition literature, particularly around wellbeing, and studies often focus on specific transitions. Here, we instead adopt a multifocussed lens to conceptualizing 'transition' as a broad concept going beyond any one change or stage and focus on perspectives on transitions between settings—both typical and individualistic—as well as in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Educational transitions bring numerous changes; while the nature and extent vary depending on the specific transition (and the individual), they broadly include structural changes such as navigating new environments and routines (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019); academic changes including shifts in pedagogy and academic pressures (Dunn, 2019); social changes including new staffing and peer group changes (Bagnall, 2020; Bagnall et al., 2020; Coffey, 2013); and personal identity changes, often shaped by developmental stage (Bagnall, 2020; West et al., 2010). These multiple changes, which often occur simultaneously within educational transition, are categorized themselves as smaller 'transitions' within more contemporary theoretical transition research, specifically Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions (MMT) theory (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). That is, MMT theory posits that in a transition stage, individuals do not simply experience one 'big' transition, but various complex, smaller transitions (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). These 'transitions' can occur across domains (e.g. social, environmental academic) and contexts (e.g. school, home and neighbourhood) and can trigger wider transitions for others within an individual's ecosystem, such as parents/carers and siblings. It is increasingly recognized that educational transitions are emotionally demanding, which can have numerous impacts across various domains and contexts, and may have implications for emotional wellbeing (West et al., 2010; White, 2020). Existing British qualitative

¹In England, 'key stages' refer to phases of the education system, reflecting blocks of years that the national curriculum is organized across. For instance, the first formal stage of education occurs in Key Stage 1 where children progress through the first 2 years of their education before moving onto Key Stage 2, which is a four-year stage, and so on.

²In England, alternative provision settings provide education for those who cannot attend a mainstream school, often but not always due to exclusion; special schools provide education for those who have special educational needs and disabilities and whose needs are unlikely to be met within a mainstream school.

³By wellbeing, we refer holistically to children and young people's social, emotional and mental wellbeing, in line with the approach adopted by [funder redacted], who funded the work underpinning the current study. We refer broadly to this as wellbeing from this stage onwards.

and quantitative studies have shown links between poor transitions and lower emotional wellbeing, as well as associated factors, including various worries and internalizing difficulties for children and young people (Bagnall, Fox, & Skipper, 2021), challenges posed to their identity (Dunn, 2019), a rise in externalizing difficulties (Palmu et al., 2018), and shifts in support-seeking (Bagnall et al., 2020). This can be especially challenging for some, such as those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND⁴; e.g. Fayette & Bond, 2018; Hebron, 2018).

Accordingly, authors have offered important recommendations for support, including relationship-building (especially on initial entry to the new environment; Bagnall et al., 2020), and fostering social support and communication across stakeholders throughout the transition period (Bagnall et al., 2020; Coffey, 2013). There is also an emphasis, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, on supporting emotional wellbeing during transitions by scaffolding external assets such as social support and internal assets such as coping skills and self-esteem (Bagnall, Fox, Skipper, & Oldfield, 2021; Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012). Again, for those at risk of difficult transitions, such as those with SEND, approaches like effective communication between stakeholders become especially valuable (Hebron, 2018; Hughes et al., 2013).

Qualitative research eliciting children and young people's perspectives on ways to improve transitions is relatively sparse, and ongoing research is needed to better understand their perceptions (Bagnall et al., 2020). Existing studies tend to ask children and young people about experiences of transitions generally, sometimes with questions about how this could have been done differently, and authors then infer implications for practice. This is useful, but could be complemented by research facilitating open, practically focussed conversations with children and young people about what good transition support could look like, including *specifically* around wellbeing. Research agendas increasingly recognize children and young people's right to have a say on matters affecting them (United Nations Children's Fund, 1989), and evidence shows that children and young people's insights have the potential to meaningfully inform wellbeing provision (Simmons et al., 2015). Furthermore, most qualitative research in this area focusses on children and young people's perspectives and experiences of specific transitions (e.g. primary–secondary). It would be useful to ‘zoom out’, transcending focus on any one transition and instead exploring priorities for children and young people at a broader, ‘meta’ level in relation to wellbeing. Indeed, theoretical ways of understanding educational transitions do not differ depending on transition type, nor do many of the broad empirical and practice-based recommendations drawn from narrowly focussed studies (Jindal-Snape et al., 2021).

Here, we explore children and young people's perceptions of what would support wellbeing during educational transitions. We draw upon focus group data from a project where we engaged with children and young people aged 6–17 years in education settings across England. The project was commissioned by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) to inform national guidelines for social, emotional, and mental wellbeing provision in schools.⁵ Participants acted as headteachers of a fictional school, deciding upon priorities and practices for wellbeing provision, including transition support (specifically, questions focussed on moves between settings—including typical and individualistic transitions—and returns following pandemic closures). Thus, the study complements wider literature presenting direct experiences of transition and support, offering a more aspirational exploration from children and young people on how educators could support wellbeing during transitions generally. We have reported our findings for NICE (Hennessey et al., 2021); here, we revisit and explore our analysis for an academic audience, offering a more focussed account of themes and greater attention to theoretical implications, alongside key issues for wider policy and practice.

⁴Special educational needs and disabilities denotes a learning difficulty and/or disability that necessitates special health and education support.

⁵The guideline referred to in this article was produced by the NICE. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and not necessarily those of NICE.

METHOD

Design and team

We explored children and young people's perceptions qualitatively, to offer in-depth insights. We sampled across varied developmental stages, setting types (mainstream, alternative, and special provision), geographic regions across England, and demographic groups. In May–July 2021, we carried out synchronous remote focus groups, with setting staff supporting, using a 'storybook' where participants acted as headteachers of a fictional setting and made decisions about wellbeing provision. We consulted with 10 children and young people who helped us develop meaningful and engaging methods, specifically, our use of creative methods, strategies for engaging via videoconferencing software and managing the presence of setting staff. A detailed overview of our design and methods is available in Hennessey et al. (2022).

Epistemologically, we adopt a social constructionist lens, conceptualizing reality as socially constructed; participants' perspectives developed in education as a social environment, discussions occurred in groups, and analysis is informed by *our* values and experiences. We are child and youth mental health and wellbeing researchers. Authors [names redacted] 1 and 3 were joint project Principal Investigators, 4 and 7 conducted focus groups, 5 and 6 collaborated on design and interpretation, and two joined for this paper given their transitions expertise. We have wider research foci that potentially affected our methodology and interpretation, including developmental psychopathology, health care, intervention implementation and SEND provision. KP, CM and LB are parents to children and young people in compulsory education.

Sampling and participants

We engaged with 49 children and young people across seven focus groups. Each focus group comprised five to eight participants from the same setting and either year group (mainstream) or general class grouping (in special or alternative provision, where students are not always grouped strictly by age). This sample size, and number/size of groups, is moderate relative to typical focus group studies (Nyumba et al., 2018) and reflected our focus on varied perspectives on a rich, focussed topic (Malterud et al., 2016). We recruited through settings, using purposeful maximum variation sampling to aid diversity. We (a) invited expressions of interest from English settings using local/national networks (e.g. Schools in Mind, Research Schools Network and Twitter); (b) identified seven settings spanning age groups, setting types, geographic regions and varied school-level proportional demographics (free school meal [FSM] eligibility, receiving SEND support and speaking English as an additional language [EAL]); and (c) supported setting staff in identifying diverse participants to invite.

The sample was 6–17 years old, covering all Key Stages (English key education phases) plus post-16 provision, across mainstream, special and alternative provision (see Table 1). 49% ($n=23$) were boys, 61% ($n=29$) were of White British ethnicity,⁶ 32% ($n=15$) spoke EAL, 40% ($n=20$) were eligible for FSMs, and 23% ($n=11$) were identified as having SEND. Our sample represents a diverse range of voices and includes greater proportions than in the general population of children and young people across England of FSM eligibility, non-White ethnicity, EAL and SEND (Department for Education & Office for National Statistics, 2019). This proportionality is noted for transparency in line with our focus on seldom heard voices, but is not indicated to comment on 'representativeness' which was not an aim.

⁶We report the broadest ethnicity categories here, to ensure anonymity of specific participants from ethnic groups that are less proportionally represented in the sample.

TABLE 1 Breakdown of focus groups by *n* of participants, setting type, key stage and age range.

Focus group	<i>n</i> in group	Setting type	Key stage (KS) and typical KS age range in England	Age range of participants in focus group ^a
A	8	Mainstream	KS1; 5–7 years	6–7 years
B	8	Mainstream	KS2; 7–11 years	9–10 years
C	8	Mainstream	KS3; 11–14 years	12–13 years
D	5	Special School	KS2/3; 7–11 years and 11–14 years, respectively, as this was special provision participants spanned KS2 and KS3 in typical year group ages	11–12 years
E	8	Mainstream	KS4; 14–16 years	14–15 years
F	5	Alternative Provision	KS4; 14–16 years	15 years
G	7	Mainstream	Post-16 provision; compulsory education in England is 16–18 years and we focussed on this group, but many post-16 provision options extend to age 25	16–17 years

^aAge range presented here relates to typical key stage ranges for mainstream settings or clarifies where this is more tailored within a particular setting such as special provision. We sampled within these key stages by focussing on a specific year group rather than including all possible ages, as shown in the next column.

Data generation

We used focus groups to facilitate discussion, expansion and exploration of ideas. Given COVID-19 social distancing restrictions, researchers dialled in using Zoom/Teams and for each focus group participants came together in their setting with staff support (with guidance and a confidentiality agreement), lasting a maximum of one hour.

All data generation documents are available via the OSF: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/R6NVW>. We provided visually engaging storybooks, asking participants to imagine they were headteachers in a fictional school deciding how to help children and young people ‘feel happy and okay’ through various scenarios. We integrated wider creative methods for younger groups (school colouring-in picture, name stickers and ‘lightbulb’ flashcards for when they wanted to speak). The storybook covered four sections on wellbeing provision, one of which was transitions. Table 2 shows how transition was presented, alongside questions and follow-ups. Our presentation of transition focussed primarily on children and young people moving across settings, including at ‘typical’ stages and in more individualistic instances, and transitions after COVID-19 closures.

We recorded audio, transferring onto a secure server and transcribing verbatim. We awarded an ‘Active Citizenship’ certificate and £10 voucher.

Ethical considerations

The project was approved by The University of Manchester's Research Ethics Committee (ref: 2021-11252-19677). We used multiple sources to communicate information (Demkowicz et al., 2020), with information sheets for participants, information sheets and consent forms for parents/carers (for those under 16), and videos recapping information and introducing researchers leading groups. Researchers reiterated information before focus groups began, asked whether participants had questions, confirmed they understood participation, and established ongoing assent. As setting staff were present, use of storybooks ensured we did not directly elicit personal experiences.

TABLE 2 Transition scenario, questions and prompts.

	Wording used with primary-aged participant materials	Wording used with secondary/post-16 aged participant materials
Scenario	There are going to be some new children joining our imaginary school These children are excited and are looking forward to making new friends They are also feeling nervous and not sure what to expect of their new school	Young people often experience change and transitions in education. This can include starting at secondary school, going to college or sixth form, or moving to a different school We know that at these times young people are often excited and are looking forward to making new friends, but can also feel nervous and not sure what to expect
Key question	How can we help these children?	In our fictional school, how can we help new young people arriving?
Prompts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you think it is important to help the new children/young people coming to your school? Why?• What questions might the new children have about your school?• Who could help these new children, and how can they do that?• Might some of the new children need more help than others? Why? What sort of things would you do to help them even more?• What about welcoming students back to school after school closures because of COVID-19? Is there anything that can help them with this change?• Finally, is there anything your school could do to help children who are <i>leaving</i> the school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you think it is important to help the new children coming to your school? Why?• What questions might new students have about your school? Might they have any concerns?• Who do you think could help these new students, and can you think of the ways they could do that?• Might some of new students need more help than others? Why? What sort of things would you do to help them even more?• What about welcoming students back to school after school closures because of COVID-19? Is there anything that can help them with this change back to being at school?• Finally, is there anything your school could do to help young people who are leaving the school?

Analysis process

We analysed data using reflexive thematic analysis, used to construct themes that reflect patterns and nuances, with a social constructionist grounding recognizing researchers as shaping interpretation. We followed six-stage guidance from Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) of familiarization, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. We adopted a semantic approach, focussing on explicit statements rather than underlying meanings, since we directly elicited wellbeing support discussions (codes available in [Supplementary Materials](#)). Our reporting of themes here builds upon existing analysis presented in our report to NICE. Our original analysis for NICE was organized deductively under specific topic areas of their interest; here, we instead reviewed, and organized codes and themes more inductively. Throughout analysis, and as mentioned in Hennessey et al. 2021, it was apparent that transitions and ‘getting them right’ were of importance to participants; this paper represents our commitment to focus in depth on this topic.

ANALYSIS

We present four themes:

1. Helping children and young people understand what to expect: ‘it’s scary starting a new school’
2. Developing and sustaining relationships and support: ‘even after the first impression teachers should still be nice’
3. Being responsive to individual needs and vulnerabilities: ‘teachers don’t know any problems you’ve got’

4. Managing loss and providing a sense of closure: 'it tells me they won't forget me'

Here, we explore themes, with illustrative quotes presented verbatim with minor edits for readability (e.g. repetition and filler words). We indicate Key Stage (KS) and setting type against specific quotes for context; this does not indicate whether patterns in points link to specific groups, unless we state otherwise. We end this section drawing together key recommendations for each theme.

Theme 1: Helping children and young people understand what to expect: 'It's Scary Starting a New School'

Participants explored how transition could present new challenges and prompt fears and worries: 'it's scary starting a new school because you don't know anyone and you don't feel safe' (KS2, mainstream). These included practical concerns, social concerns and not knowing what was expected. Practical concerns included navigating unfamiliar spaces and routines: '[pupils] might be afraid to get lost' (KS3, mainstream). Social concerns included developing new peer relationships 'they might be afraid that they'll struggle to make new friends'; (KS3, mainstream) and, in some instances (e.g. the primary-secondary transition), being youngest/smallest again: 'when you go into year 7 it's like you've gone down a pecking order and you need to work yourself back up'; (KS4, mainstream). Worries about expectations tended to be around 'getting in trouble' through unknowingly deviating from policy (e.g. uniform expectations and behavioural standards):

[if there was] a rule about your hair being too short and at their old school it wasn't like that and they had their hair cut the day before they came in, you know, they'll know not to get it too short and get in trouble

(KS3, mainstream).

Such concerns were described as stressful, but participants indicated that this need not be the case. Some felt that simply acknowledging that this may be worrying or feel scary was important, rather than only focussing on positives; this was emphasized around transitions following pandemic closures, where people pretending things were 'normal' felt stressful: 'accepting that things aren't going to be normal is the first step to [...] making things easier on everyone' (Post-16, mainstream). Participants explored how 'old' and 'new' settings could communicate how things will work and what will be expected and provide time to discuss worries and expectations, to address concerns and thus enable children and young people to even enjoy this change:

[Helping children and young people know what to expect] saves a lot of stress and worry on their first day, and I think it just makes the whole experience a lot more enjoyable rather than dread it all

(Post-16, mainstream).

It's really good [for your existing setting] to do anything that will help them talking to them or do a little show to put a little play and stuff so they know what they're doing or show them a video of what they're up to next if they're going to college

(KS2/3, special school)

Participants talked about 'transition' or 'taster' days where children and young people can visit new environments, to aid familiarity: 'that could be stressful for a year 7 person trying to go "oh well which classroom should I go to with this?" You should have practice' (KS4, mainstream). For those joining outside typical transition stages (e.g. midyear), participants suggested sending letters home about what to expect

and bringing them on a setting tour: 'give them a tour of and of the school and talk to them and introduce everyone' (KS2/3, special school).

Older participants felt that education settings focus heavily on preparing children and young people for *earlier* transitions, but less around the move from compulsory education into university, employment and, more generally, adulthood. They felt these transitions could be scary and lonely, but were not matched with transition support:

If you're younger change might be easier for them to accept and it's also exciting for them whereas it's a bit more scary for the ones that are leaving [for] university, you have to accept you're no longer a child you no longer have your parents and teachers to rely on
(Post-16, mainstream).

Participants discussed approaches that could be used to help older students set realistic expectations and feel more prepared. This included careers support ('make sure you're fully aware of everything you're signing into, so all careers meetings and things'; Post-16, mainstream) and clarifying expectations such as through connecting with current university students, and simulating experiences like lectures: 'you could change a bit in the lessons set out to be more of a lecture [...] that's lessons of thirty people and then this massive lecture is a big jump' (Post-16, mainstream).

Theme 2: Developing and sustaining relationships and support: 'Even After the First Impression Teachers Should Still be Nice'

Participants highlighted the role of relationships and social support, positioning education settings as social environments that should be welcoming and ease people in: 'because it's important not to just kind of plop them in' (KS4, alternative provision).

Participants also talked about the importance of meeting and getting to know key staff members, including in advance. They pointed to staff expected to play support roles, such as key teachers, form tutors, and heads of year: '[a taster day should include opportunity to] meet the teachers that they're going to be with, obviously the first year of year 7 they'd meet their form tutor they'd meet their head of year' (KS4, alternative provision). Participants highlighted that staff should present a welcoming, friendly persona and offer avenues for support and reassurance, including flexibility around rules as students adjust:

I think just the teachers being very friendly and building good relationships with the pupils [...] maybe for the first term, it's up to their discretion on is the student actually a bad student or are they just making some mistakes because, you know, they're nervous, they've only just come up to this school, and just try and seem more approachable because I think one of the worries when you come up to high school is that all the teachers are going to be super serious and that they're going to give you loads and loads of work and things like that so showing a more friendly side to the new students would be beneficial
(KS4, mainstream).

Participants described how staff could check in with pupils as they adjust, both informally and formally, for example: 'after a week or two of them joining we could probably give them like a wellbeing survey to see how well they're doing' (KS2, mainstream). Such points about what staff could offer (e.g. a friendly persona and regular check-ins) were not presented as *only* specific to the initial transition period, but something to be sustained longer-term: 'first impressions are the best but even after the first [impression, teachers] should still be nice' (KS2, mainstream).

Peers were positioned as playing an important role, though participants felt staff ought to facilitate peer relations, such as through buddying systems, although suggestions differed depending on the

nature of the transition. For instance, when talking about a pupil joining at an atypical stage, participants often talked about connecting them with a peer as guide and friend: ‘if they’re feeling a bit new and shy you could show them around and make them make a new best friend’ (KS1, mainstream). After pandemic closures, participants felt it important to create time to reconnect with peers: ‘let them chat to other people for a while ‘cause you’ve not seen each other for however long’ (KS4, alternative provision). At typical stage transitions, participants talked often about connecting children and young people with older students who knew the setting and could act as guide: ‘get a student who’s trustworthy and is always good to get a few more and get one of each [new students] and show them around the different school’ (KS2, mainstream). Participants sometimes indicated that peers could be considered more reliable informants: ‘It’s better for it to be a child because they can speak a little bit more how he feels about school. With teachers they obviously, not in a horrible way, they get paid and they just go “yeah it’s a lovely school”’ (KS2/3, special school).

Theme 3: Being responsive to individual needs and vulnerabilities: ‘Teachers Don’t Know Any Problems You’ve Got’

Participants explored how some may require more tailored support. Examples raised included those with SEND, mental health difficulties, physical illnesses, negative past education experiences, trauma experience, difficulties around forming peer relationships, and those who have arrived from another country and/or do not speak English fluently:

Say if they went to a bad school before

(KS2, mainstream).

If they’re from a different country so they might say stuff on Germany and then move to England it might be harder for them to pronounce in English and it might be hard for them for them to learn to understand more teachers and what they’re teaching

(KS3, mainstream).

Participants felt it was important in such instances to actively build a picture of individual circumstances, including direct discussions with the individual, family and previous setting: ‘you can ask them what happened and then you can just say what do they like, what do they not like’ (KS2, mainstream). Participants emphasized flexibility and discretion, allowing new students experiencing difficulties time to adjust: ‘slowly introduce them and let them know there is support in the school for them’ (KS4, alternative provision). Some explored specific examples of tailoring, such as being especially attentive to building social relationships for those who find this hard, or providing language support for those who are not fluent in English.

This need for information gathering and tailored support was particularly emphasized in one group, with participants attending alternative provision—specifically a pupil referral unit (PRU). These participants talked about how challenging it could be for those with difficulties to arrive in a setting where staff do not understand their circumstances or needs: ‘in mainstream you just go straight from primary school put into mainstream school teachers know nothing about you and half the battle [is] they don’t know any problems you’ve got’ (KS4, alternative provision). These participants contrasted this with more recent PRU experiences, where they felt that staff had been provided with considerable information about them and had already started to make sense of their needs: ‘when you come into a school like this [... you have] teachers that are trained to know about you like certain files that they give like saying everything about us’ (KS4, alternative provision).

Theme 4: Managing loss and providing a sense of closure: ‘It Tells Me They Won’t Forget Me’

Participants reflected on what children and young people leave behind in transition, and attending to feelings of endings and losses. Participants talked about the loss of long-term relationships with staff and peers, which represented positive connections and sources of support and would be missed:

Some of the Year 11 s that go past our classroom they always talk to the teachers have the conversations before they go off to their lessons.

Researcher: okay, why do you think they do that?

Because they like the teachers and they’re not going to be able to have those conversations with them again
(KS3, mainstream).

Participants talked often about memories, including that they were forming memories through transition processes, but also emphasized *feeling* remembered themselves by others: ‘[a card] tells me that they won’t forget me’ (KS1, mainstream setting). Strategies here included creating keepsakes such as cards or books with messages or photographs from teachers/peers, celebratory events such as parties or discussions of next steps, and more informal ‘fun’ time with peers and staff in the stages leading up to a move:

I got a card that had loads of handprints and just instead was a little note [... it] tells me they won’t forget me [...] I had two best friends in that school
(KS1, mainstream).

Put a little play and stuff so they know what they’re doing or show them a video of what they’re up to next if they’re going to college
(KS2/3, special school).

I would maybe give them less time in lessons and more time to enjoy the moments that they have left at school
(KS3, mainstream).

Key recommendations from children and young people

Table 3 presents key recommendations from participants in relation to themes.

DISCUSSION

Our analysis offers insights into children and young people’s perceptions of what matters to them in transition wellbeing support. Participants talked often at a general level about transitions, and though some did focus more on specific transitions that felt especially relevant at their stage, overall discussions transcended any one transition. Our analysis highlights the importance of helping children and young people understand what to expect in upcoming transitions, offering a welcoming social context, working to understand and be responsive to individual circumstances and managing feelings of loss and providing a sense of closure as students move on. Collectively, themes highlight a desire among children and young people for a considered, supportive approach to transition that recognizes their individual needs and their connections to educational communities.

TABLE 3 Children and young people's recommendations for wellbeing support during transition.

Helping children and young people understand what to expect	Developing and sustaining relationships and support	Being responsive to individual needs and vulnerabilities	Managing loss and providing a sense of closure
'It's scary starting a new school' Offer opportunities to share concerns and worries (including anonymously, e.g. via a postbox) Acknowledge the feelings that children and young people may have regarding transitions Create space and time to explore and discuss concerns and worries Support expectation setting; explain how things will work and what will be expected (including rules, given fears of accidentally getting into trouble) Offer tours and transition/taster days to develop familiarity and support expectation setting Test out ways that things will work in a familiar setting (e.g. 'practising' how university lectures work) Send out information to children and young people and their families	'Even after the first impression teachers should still be nice' Create opportunities for students to meet and become familiar with key members of staff (e.g. as part of taster days) Offer a welcoming, friendly persona from staff Clarify avenues for support and reassurance (e.g. key teachers, form tutors, heads of year) Exercise flexibility and allowing students time to adjust Check in formally and informally as students adjust Consider how positive staff-student relationships and support extend beyond only the initial transition period Support students in connecting and building relationships with peers Connecting new students with peers who can act as a guide and offer an 'insider' perspective	'Teachers don't know any problems you've got' Encourage awareness among staff of varied individual needs and difficulties in the transition process Work to actively build a picture of individual circumstances and experiences where need is recognized, through information sharing and discussion with the individual, the family, and previous setting Provide tailored support that links to individualized needs Be empathetic with children and young people where information is still being gathered Be flexible and patient with children and young people who are finding the transition process challenging, allowing them time to adjust slowly	'It tells me they won't forget me' Be aware that transitions encompass the loss of a social community for a student, and may be looking for a sense of closure Communicate to students leaving a setting their value within the community, and that they will be missed Explore ways to create tangible representations that students can take away that can represent their memories (keepsakes such as cards and books with messages from people) Create celebratory moments and events that support students in sharing the changes happening in a positive way Make time for informal opportunities for connection, including social time together and fun shared activities

Participants highlighted various concerns and worries around transitions, emphasizing a need for preparation and familiarization before and after their arriving. This echoes previous research (e.g. Dunn, 2019; Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019; West et al., 2010) and reflects the concept within MMT that transition is not one single event, but a dynamic, ongoing system, requiring navigation of varying new changes across domains and contexts (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). However, evidence to date has particularly focussed on the primary–secondary transition; our analysis advances understanding that wide-ranging concerns about transition domains, and a related need for preparation, can be considered key tenets of transition more generally. Furthermore, participants highlighted an emotional component, with preparation and familiarization going beyond simply helping one navigate logistical issues but also mitigating stress and worry. This is important, as although previous literature has highlighted such concerns, educational systems and other transition intervention approaches have generally tended to focus more on facilitating academic, rather than emotional, functioning (Bagnall, 2020; van Rens et al., 2018). Relatedly, participants emphasized that reducing worries could help children and young people find greater enjoyment in the process. Indeed, the importance of celebrating the positives of transition has been highlighted (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020), as well as celebrating the passage of time and what has been achieved within the previous school, as shown in US case study research (Bagnall, Fox, & Skipper, 2021).

Our analysis points to social connection and support as key in transitions, including with staff (particularly those with pastoral responsibilities) and peers. Participants sometimes emphasized the importance of *both* levels of support and highlighted the role of staff in facilitating peer relationships. This intertwined support echoes how transition can be considered as occurring within a complex ecosystem, in line with the bioecological systems theory model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; O'Toole et al., 2014). Our analysis highlights the value of educators presenting a welcoming, friendly presence, actively providing support and exercising flexibility and discretion as students adjust. An interesting point explored by participants was that this connection should be genuine; this reflects evidence that children and young people desire a social context going beyond tokenism generally (Futch Ehrlich et al., 2016), but emphasizes that this is especially true in transition as a vulnerable period.

Furthermore, participants highlighted that peers provide relatable and embedded means of support during transitions and could be mobilized to good effect. Peer support approaches, such as buddy systems, appear common in schools and colleges during transitions and have been highlighted as potentially valuable (Coleman et al., 2017; Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008; Nuske et al., 2019). Our analysis demonstrates that such approaches are agreeable for children and young people and from their perspective can serve the purpose of connecting with others in the same situation as oneself, as well as those who are more established in the setting (and thus helping to set expectation). In the longer term, this can function to develop friendships and provide ongoing support systems, again highlighting the multifaceted nature of transition.

Participants described a sense of loss in transitions and, accordingly, a need for closure, particularly in social domains. This again reflects a bioecological systems theory model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1999), in that changes to a domain of one's environment, has ramifications. This also echoes key MMT tenets, which posit that transitions encompass various small, nuanced shifts and that transitions are by nature nested, wherein it is not only a child themselves making a transition, but those around them—their parents/carers, peers and education staff also experience and negotiate these transition processes, and these various transitions across parties further interact (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). The general concept that transition represents loss as well as new beginnings has been identified elsewhere (Bagnall et al., 2020; Nuske et al., 2019); our analysis adds to this, highlighting the loss of important social relationships specifically, and echoes discussions with young people from Bagnall et al. (2020) that transitions represent the loss of one's place in a community. Furthermore, our emphasis on wellbeing support means that participants directly explored what could be useful in response, which has not always been achieved previously. Participants focussed on creating opportunities for closure, with formal approaches and more informal moments, coming

together to help students feel valued as community members not to be forgotten. Our study offers an important contribution in emphasizing that concepts of and support for transition must focus not only on next steps but also on separation.

Of course, while all students can be considered to benefit from emotional and social support during transitions, this is particularly valuable for those who may experience higher levels of difficulty in transitioning. We refer to such vulnerabilities generally, as participants highlighted various circumstances that may link to particular challenges in transition; this may reflect our engagement with diverse children and young people, including those often seldom heard in research. We also emphasize our use of vulnerability here is not to infer *inherent* vulnerability in any one individual, but to recognize that some individuals are made vulnerable through the ways that transition processes occur. A growing body of evidence highlights the importance of tailored transition support recognizing and catering to individual needs (e.g. Fayette & Bond, 2018; Hebron, 2018), though much of this literature focuses predominantly on students with SEND. A central point from our participants is the importance of *actively* seeking to understand individual circumstances, echoing wider guidance (particularly around SEND) on the importance of communication across settings and stakeholders to support continuity (Hebron, 2018; Hughes et al., 2013). We especially point to discussions with participants attending a PRU, who felt that staff in their mainstream settings had not understood their needs when they arrived, further adding to their difficulties. This echoes existing evidence that failure to attend to emergent difficulties in primary–secondary transitions can feed into longer-term behavioural challenges and, in turn, exclusion (Trotman et al., 2015). Taken together, this indicates that transition can be a pivotal moment for those with complex needs and again taps into aspects of MMT in demonstrating that transition is not a single step but a complex change with potential for wide-ranging consequences (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). A key message is the need to ensure students feel seen, heard and understood as *individuals* arriving in a setting, including any more complex needs they may have. Doing so not only allows tailored provision but also removes a burden on those children and young people to make *themselves* seen and heard.

Our study makes a unique methodological and conceptual contribution to school transitions research, by demonstrating the importance of investigating nonstaged transitions, both typical (e.g. transition within schools), individualistic (e.g. transition to and from alternate provision) and in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through investigating ‘transitions’ through a multifocussed lens, as a broad concept beyond any one stage, the current study paves the way for future transitions research. Furthermore, as recognized in Jindal-Snape et al.'s (2021) systematic mapping review, understanding of children and young people's conceptualizations of school transitions is limited within the literature, and there is no evidence that they have been asked a direct question about this (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019). Thus, our study narrows this gap by seeking to understand young people's conceptualizations of school transition as a broad concept, nonspecific to any one kind of transition such as primary–secondary school. In doing so, the study highlights the gap in support for ‘other’ transitions, especially beyond primary–secondary school, which mirrors the broader landscape of school transitions research and practice (Jindal-Snape et al., 2021). Thus, there is a need for further research examining nonstaged typical and individualistic transitions, using a qualitative approach, drawing on the first-hand insights of children and young people. Furthermore, recognizing the significance of nonstaged typical and individualistic transitions, in the meantime, there is a need for school transitions support provision to be more generalized and take a longitudinal, gradual approach, recognizing that each nonstaged and staged transition can provide a foundation in developing skills for future transition (Bagnall, Fox, & Skipper, 2021). This also has immediate practice implications within schools in presenting school transition as a progression and continuation within children and young people's educational journeys, which can be promoted through regular and consistent transfer acclimatization efforts (Bagnall, Fox, & Skipper, 2021).

Strengths and limitations

A key strength is our engagement with diverse voices, including children and young people often considered at risk of difficulties in transition (and indeed who may have experienced this, as reflected upon by our participants in a PRU). Our spanning developmental stages and varied education settings represents both a strength and a limitation. That is, we therefore engaged both children and young people who had been through transitions recently and were reflecting back on their experiences, as well as those considering upcoming transitions and looking forward, and our broad level of discussion with them can offer higher-level, meta considerations beyond any specific transition. However, specificity is valuable, and we seek to complement that literature while emphasizing a need for further investigation into particular transitions (particularly beyond the primary–secondary transition), to understand convergences and divergences. We point to methodological strengths including our use of creative methods to facilitate in-depth discussion, our engagement with children and young people in designing data generation approaches, and adoption of open science principles and practices, in that we have made available all data generation resources via the OSF (<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/R6NVW>), our reflections on the data generation process (Hennessey et al., 2022) and our codes underpinning the current analysis (see [Supplementary Materials](#)). Finally, we highlight that transitions formed only part of our overall discussions, which focussed on various aspects of education-based wellbeing provision, and thus, data are limited in scope and depth; we encourage ongoing, in-depth exploration across and within transitions with those from seldom heard groups to continue to advance understanding.

Conclusions

Although children and young people experience multiple transitions across their educational careers and these are increasingly understood to be multifaceted, complex experiences, there are critical gaps in evidence including limited representation of children and young people's views, inconsistent attention to wellbeing and related support, and a narrow focus on specific transitions. Our study therefore offers an original and important contribution to advancing knowledge and understanding of children and young people's perceptions of what matters to them in transition wellbeing support. Our analysis highlights the need to create a considered and supportive approach to transition that recognizes children and young people's individual needs and connections to educational communities. In particular, our discussions with children and young people point to the importance of supporting them in building their expectations for what to expect in upcoming transitions, offering a welcoming social context, working to understand and be responsive to individual circumstances, and managing feelings of loss and a need for closure as students navigate these changes. The study offers a rigorous contribution through its engagement with children and young people from various backgrounds and education types and an important methodological and conceptual contribution in its focus on transitions generally, rather than specific stages.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Ola Demkowicz: Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; funding acquisition; methodology; project administration; supervision; validation; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Charlotte Bagnall:** Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Alexandra Hennessey:** Conceptualization; data curation; funding acquisition; methodology; project administration; supervision; validation; writing – review and editing. **Kirsty Pert:** Data curation; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; project administration; writing – review and editing. **Lucy Bray:** Conceptualization; funding acquisition; methodology; supervision; writing – review and editing. **Emma Ashworth:** Conceptualization; funding acquisition; methodology; writing – review and editing. **Carla Mason:** Data curation; formal analysis; investigation; project administration; writing – review and editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

OPEN RESEARCH BADGES



This article has earned an Open Materials badge for making publicly available the components of the research methodology needed to reproduce the reported procedure and analysis. All materials are available at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/R6NVW>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are not available due to the nature of discussions with children and young people, in line with our ethics approval and the consent/assent established with our participants and their parents/carers.

ORCID

Ola Demkowicz <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9204-0912>

Charlotte Bagnall <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7213-2668>

Alexandra Hennessey <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9341-4709>

Kirsty Pert <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0048-4290>

Lucy Bray <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8414-3233>

Emma Ashworth <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5279-4514>

Carla Mason <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6037-4950>

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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