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"I get by with a little help from my friends": The importance of peer-led emotion work during the primary to secondary school transition

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Abstract

School children experience a range of normative transitions throughout their compulsory education, with the transition from primary to secondary school seen as the most intensive and challenging. While this transition is well researched, the focus of such work has been labelled disparate and lacking in terms of its focus on the pupils' experiences specifically. Consequently, to alleviate these concerns, this article draws on qualitative data gathered in a series of individual interviews with first year secondary school children currently experiencing the transition. The findings captured showcase a range of difficulties, brought about by the transition, and while the students were able to identify strategies designed to ease these issues, they found most solace in peer-led emotion work-based support. The implications of these findings, in terms of the positioning of children as focal points of support for transition-based concerns, and their ability to engage in meaningful emotion work grounded in the ethics of care are discussed and suggestions for future practice are made.

KEYWORDS

emotions, peers, schools, transition, well-being

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper addresses the challenges and difficulties faced by children experiencing the primary to secondary school transition, and the strategies they find useful in alleviating these concerns.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The paper makes a unique and new contribution to knowledge in demonstrating how peer-led emotion work and the ethics of care help students to navigate the issues brought about by the primary to secondary school transition.

INTRODUCTION

Children and young people experience multiple transitions across their compulsory education, including moving between year groups, Key Stages and teachers, and between sets at Key Stage 3 onwards. While for some, non-normative transitions between schools occur, such as from mainstream to alternative provision, they are rare, with the main educational transitions between settings taking place from nursery to primary school, from primary school to secondary school, and from secondary school to further education, then higher education and/or work. Owing, in part, to their infrequency, children's experiences of transition between schools are fraught with feelings of anxiety, self-doubt and a decline in self-esteem, motivation and achievement (Demkowicz et al., 2023; Otis et al., 2005; Topping, 2011; Wigfield et al., 1991). Although there is now an established evidence base that positions normative transitions between educational settings as important life events that influence social and emotional mental health and wellbeing (Donaldson et al., 2023), the emotional re-structuring and feelings of fear that accompany them are not well understood from the children's perspective specifically (see Curson et al., 2019; Mahmud, 2022). As such, this article aims to provide further insights into these experiences by capturing the views of a range of first year, secondary school students who recently transitioned from primary to secondary school in England.[1] The experiences gathered capture a plethora of issues, worries and concerns for the children, and while they were able to identify targeted interventions designed to lessen the negative consequences brought about by the transition, the children themselves found most relief and comfort in informal avenues of support, specifically that offered by peers and wider friendship groups. Largely unexplored in the research, the 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1979) conducted by peers throughout the first year of secondary school is the main focus of this article, as for the children interviewed it was unanimously positioned as an invaluable source of support to help ease the worries and concerns they experienced.

THE PRIMARY TO SECONDARY SCHOOL TRANSITION

The transition from primary to secondary school is not only a salient stage in a student's educational journey (Mahmud, 2022), but one of the most intensive and challenging periods in a child's life more widely (Rodrigues et al., 2018), with the influence of negative

transitions having consequences far beyond academic success, impinging on longer term social, emotional and mental health difficulties well into adulthood (Lester et al., 2019). This transition coincides with another, from childhood to adulthood, experienced during adolescence, where a range of biological changes for young people makes the primary to secondary school transition especially challenging (Seifert & Schulz, 2007). In addition to the hormonal and physical maturation experienced throughout adolescence, developments in the prefrontal and parietal cortex of the brain bring change in a young person's cognitive, social and emotional skills (Ross et al., 2019). These, coupled with a need to negotiate vast changes in the expectations, social situations, norms and interactions with peers and adults that a new school brings, is particularly challenging for most children, with the consequences for some manifesting in a re-structuring of self-perception and identity (Mendle et al., 2007). The transition from primary to secondary school, and with it from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3, also means significant changes in curricula (Galton et al., 2000), ushering in differing pedagogic practices (Boyd, 2005).

Consequently, we draw on Jindal-Snape's (2016) Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions theory in our conceptualisation of the primary to secondary school transition. As such, we maintain that when moving from primary to secondary school, children experience multiple transitions, and in a variety of ways, including changes in relationships with their peers, educational practitioners, parents and families. Based on the child's developmental growth, including advances in both intra- and inter-personal skills, aspirations for independence are sought at this time. Furthermore, and as mentioned, organisational and cultural differences between primary and secondary school, coupled with the demands of the secondary school curriculum and changes in pedagogical approaches, mean that transition at this phase of a child's education should be viewed as multiple and multi-dimensional. Although this transition is stressful for some, it need be acknowledged that for others it is managed without difficulty (van Rens et al., 2018). That said, research that has focussed on the expectations related to the move has often highlighted how those who fail to prepare for, and those who experience fear prior to the transition have poorer experiences, become anxious and encounter more problems in secondary school (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019). Fear, both prior to and during the transition, manifests in a variety of ways including fear of academic failure, peer victimisation, authority figure victimisation and being alone in the new situation (Stiehl et al., 2023), meaning that for the children, social anxieties take precedence over academic concerns.

The product of research over the years has aimed to help ensure continuity across primary and secondary settings for children by providing guidance for smooth transitions, but historically and indeed more recently it demonstrates that the first year of secondary school sees not only a hiatus in children's academic progression but for some a decline (see Galton et al., 2000; Hopwood et al., 2016). In addition to the fears outlined above, the decline in academic achievement at this time has often been attributed to a marked decrease in self-concept in individual subjects and as a learner more widely (Mullins & Irvin, 2000), with feelings of anxiety and self-doubt (Demkowicz et al., 2023) having social and emotional consequences also. In the short term, observed negative effects include poor school adjustment (Coelho & Romão, 2016) and a reduction in levels of self-esteem (Evans et al., 2018) and general wellbeing (Eskelä-Haapanen et al., 2017) resulting, for some, in mental health problems (Copeland et al., 2013) including severe anxiety and depression (Lester et al., 2013). The negative social, emotional and academic outcomes for those who unsuccessfully negotiate the transition are not only immediate but can be long lasting, persisting beyond compulsory education into adulthood (Evans et al., 2018).

As a consequence of the transition, first year secondary school children experience change in a variety of ways, including social changes with interactions with new peers and practitioners (Coffey, 2013), academic changes brought about by shifts in curricula,

pedagogical approaches and greater performativity pressures (Dunn, 2019), as well as changes in the learning environment and structures, with differing routines and a larger school space to navigate (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019). How well individuals deal with these changes has consequences for greater risk of failure and poorer social and academic outcomes (Mahmud, 2022), and although successful transition does depend on individual responses (Sirsch, 2003), it is highly influenced by the work carried out within the schools. As such, smooth transitions are influenced by numerous factors and especially the approaches taken by key stakeholders in the child's educational pursuits (Torres & Mouraz, 2015).

Existing and new relationships are crucial resources in helping to ease the concerns associated with the transition. Social support external to the school, especially in terms of that offered by the immediate family, have been seen as protective networks that facilitate the child's ability to be both resilient and to cope with change, improving the likelihood of successful transition (Akos, 2004). While supportive parents who engage regularly with school have long been positioned as a significant predictor of positive transitions (see McGee et al., 2004), students who establish good connections with their new teachers, those able to shift from their single primary school teacher to multiple secondary school teachers, and those that seek out and invest time in developing relationships with practitioners and peers in their new setting, feel less the effects of the transition (Spernes, 2022). As such, and not ignoring the view that the students' ability to control their own behaviour and to regulate their own emotions will impact on their transition experience, schools and their practitioners can exact specific strategies also. At the heart of these, according to Stiehl et al. (2023), is the prioritisation of strong and regular communication, a commitment to a variety of ongoing avenues of social support, and the explicit enactment of activities designed to 'reach' the students experiencing the transition.

PEER-LED EMOTION WORK AS A STRATEGY TO SMOOTH THE TRANSITION: A NEGLECTED FIELD?

Although the primary to secondary transition is one of most researched educational transitions (Jindal-Snape, 2016), the focus of such work is seen as disparate (West et al., 2010) and lacking the students' voice. Practitioner insights regarding their pupils' experiences of transition are undoubtedly important and help in determining the learning processes, social and emotional responses and academic outcomes brought about by the move from primary to secondary school (Mahmud, 2022), but they dominate the findings made (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). Furthermore, existing evidence demonstrates major differences between practitioners and pupils regarding the perceptions of the transition, with the former's concerns focussed on its academic impact on attainment and the latter's on its consequences for socio-emotional issues (Topping, 2011), leading to claims of a lack of congruence between practitioners and pupils regarding the primary to secondary school transition (see Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). As such, and backed by a swathe of opinion recently (see Demkowicz et al., 2023; Mahmud, 2022; Stiehl et al., 2023), there is a distinct need for research that captures the children's perspectives of their transitional experiences in terms of their worries, concerns and fears and the strategies they find helpful in easing the move from primary to secondary school.

This article's conceptual framework is guided by the view that education should be grounded in emotion work (Hochschild, 1979), which itself adopts principles located in the ethics of care (Noddings, 1984). 'Emotion work', for Hochschild (1979), is governed by an explicit recognition, prioritisation and continued investment in emotions and feelings as the focal point of daily interactions, such as those that take place in school. Emotion work, in simple terms, is the 'act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling or

simply 'to "work on" an emotion' (Hochschild, 1979, p. 561). It manifests in two ways mainly: firstly, through self-management of emotions, so that the feelings experienced and behaviours displayed are situation appropriate (Hochschild, 1979); and secondly through harnessing emotions and experiences to provide care and support to others, during day-to-day interactions (Hochschild, 1979). Emotion work is governed by norms and standards that are socially and culturally defined and, as such, these 'feelings rules' specify the emotions and related behaviours that may be deemed appropriate in a given situation (Hochschild, 1979).

There has long been an emphasis on the central role of care and relationships as both an educational process and goal, popularly captured by Noddings (1984) as the 'ethics of care'. While Noddings (1984) maintains that everyone is a carer, she emphasises the centrality of relationships between the 'cared for' and the 'one caring', whose role it is to act and guide with the aim of protecting and enhancing the wellbeing of the 'cared for'. For caring relationships between the 'one caring' and the 'cared for' to flourish they need to be based on engrossment, compassion, reciprocity and motivational displacement (Noddings, 1995), with emphasis on the 'one caring' to display four key components: modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation (Noddings, 2002). Traditionally, in educational settings, it is the practitioners who adopt the role of the 'one caring', with the students assuming the role of the 'cared-for' (Noddings, 1992). Indeed, emotion work and related practices grounded in concepts of 'educare' (Osgood, 2005) and 'professional love' (Page, 2018) have consistently been positioned as work performed by practitioners in schools.

Considering the influence of strong practitioner-led emotion work on children's outcomes (see Noddings, 2012; Reeves & Mare, 2017), and bearing in mind the benefits that supportive peers bring to students experiencing difficulties in school and in stressful times more widely (Lyell et al., 2020), there is a surprising dearth of analyses that illuminate young people's lived experiences of the primary to secondary school transition, that focus specifically on peer-led emotion work. Although strong friendships are important for improved self-esteem and confidence, and as a resource for children facing challenging times (Curson et al., 2019), as a result of the transition, peer networks become fractured and unstable (Ng-Knight et al., 2018). Consequently, making friends, fitting in and being part of a peer network are amongst the main concerns that children mention about this transition (Curson et al., 2019). Although friendship groups and peer networks are central to children's thoughts at this time, little is known about the emotion work performed within them to help ease the difficulties and worries brought about by the primary to secondary school transition, and it is to this void in the literature that this article focusses its attention.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

Driven by a desire to gather data to help understand children's experiences of the primary to secondary school transition, the project focussed on answering the following research questions:

1. What are the main issues, concerns and challenges for children experiencing the primary to secondary school transition?
2. How do children seek help and support to overcome these issues, concerns and challenges?
3. What types of help and support that may alleviate these issues, concerns and challenges do children value and identify as beneficial?

One central focus of the wider research study explored the views of those children about to experience the transition, as well as those who already had experienced the transition. To

help uncover both the anticipated and experienced views of transition, the study drew from an interpretivist research framework and the acceptance of a multi-faceted vision of reality (Bryman, 2001). Consequently, we employed a case study design that prioritised qualitative forms of data collection that focussed on gathering the views of transition taking place across one primary school and one secondary school, both located in a large city in the north of England. While the overall, wider dataset will be touched upon below, the methodological considerations applicable to the data gathered from the secondary school, so those children that had experienced the transition from primary to secondary school, will be the focus of this article, including details of the school site, provided next.

The secondary school

Judged to be 'good' by Ofsted in 2022, this mixed-gender, secondary comprehensive, sponsor-led academy has almost 1400 pupils on roll and as such is a large school. It forms part of a multi-academy trust that consists also of two primary schools and a technical college. The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities attending the secondary school, at 16%, is above the national average, although the number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan is below average. The proportion of disadvantaged students and those known to be eligible for pupil premium funding is at 55%, well above the national average of 27%. The school was sampled as a consequence of both convenience, as the researchers have an established relationship with it, and purposive strategies owing to its prioritisation of work that eases transition, captured by their view that they 'go out of (their) way to make the transition from primary school to secondary education as easy and as stress-free as possible'.

Participants

Thirty-two children took part in the wider project focussing on the views of both final year primary school and first year secondary children. This article focusses on data gathered from the secondary school children, of which there were 20 in total: nine boys and 11 girls. All participants were in year seven, the first year of secondary school and so all were either 11 or 12 years of age. A gatekeeper helped in the recruitment of participants for the study so although all children in year seven had an equal chance of being approached to take part in the research, it is acknowledged that elements of convenience sampling on the part of the gatekeeper operated, to help improve accessibility and the availability of participants. Varying ethnic groups were represented amongst the sample, seven of the 20 participants were eligible for pupil premium funding and the children recruited belonged to the range of ability groups in the school.

Data collection

In January 2024, semi-structured interviews were employed with each of the 20 participants, to help appreciate how first year secondary school children experienced the transition from primary to secondary. As per Greene's (2007) advice that 'methodology is ever the servant of purpose and questions, never the master' (p. 97), the study's research questions provided the main focus for the interview phase, which covered a number of primary topics designed to target the issues captured by the research questions. Consequently, the interview focussed on the participants' main issues, concerns and challenges as a consequence of

the transition, the support available to alleviate these concerns, and the value they attributed to such help. Additionally, interview questions and prompts focussed on related secondary topics, including the interviewees' thoughts and feelings on: their ability to navigate the new school structure; how they would seek help if they needed it; how they manage negative emotions inside and outside of class; and break times. All interviews had a duration of approximately 15 minutes, took place in a quiet private room on the school site and were audio recorded to allow for transcription at a later date.

Ethical considerations

The researcher's host higher education institution granted ethical approval for the study (23/EDN/037), and the ethical guidelines outlined by the British Educational Research Association (2024) were adhered to throughout all stages of the research. Bearing in mind the age of the participants, parental and participant consent was gained in all cases. Participant information letters were distributed to parents and children that detailed the purpose and focus of the study and interview, the approximate length of the interview, contact details for the researcher and ethical guarantees around confidentiality andanonymity, data protection and the right to withdraw. Prior to the interviews, the participant information letter was verbally relayed to each participant by the researcher before the research began. Informed consent forms were signed by all interviewees and verbal consent was given by each participant prior to the interview starting. Other ethical considerations were made with participants' age in mind including: the use of a range of prompts, using child friendly language, to help with any difficulties in the comprehension of the questions; a reminder that the interviewees could disclose as much or as little information as they wished; and that they maintained the right to withdraw from the study throughout the entirety of the interview and up until the data was to be analysed. To enhance levels of confidentiality the names of neither the school nor the participants are used in this article; instead interviewees will be referred to as 'Participant 1', 'Participant 2', etc., with the school simply being referred to as 'the secondary school'.

Analysing the data

Throughout the research the study's aims and questions guided the analysis of data. All interviews were transcribed, and ATLAS-ti software was used as the platform to store, organise and manage the data. Data analysis was based in the principles of abbreviated grounded theory as a method (Willig, 2008) and, as such, was subjected to processes of open data coding, categorisation, comparison and falsification by three members of the research team individually. Working with the original data only, an abbreviated grounded theory approach allowed for rigorous coding, categorisation and comparison, but the falsification or negative case analysis only took part on the original data, as opposed to the fully grounded approach that allows for negative case analysis 'outside of the confines of the original data to help broaden and refine the analysis' (Willig, 2008, p. 39). In keeping with Charmaz's (1990) social constructionist version of grounded theory, in that codes and categories do not emerge but are constructed and identified, each member of the research team firstly embarked on an initial coding of data segments, through a line by line analysis, as in keeping with the principles of abbreviated grounded theory, such finite analysis is 'needed to compensate for the loss of breadth that accompanies the researcher's dependence on the original data set' (Willig, 2008, p. 309). Upon identifying numerous open codes ranging in size and level of commonality, there followed an amalgamation of these common initial codes into larger categories (selective codes), and within this process the researchers

were able to identify higher-level categories (theoretical coding) that integrated low-level categories into more meaningful themes. The research team met after each had performed a coding and categorisation exercise of the data to discuss the product of the analysis, and subjected these to a comparative analysis at the time. The aim here was to identify common features, from within each researcher's identification of categories. Following the meeting, each researcher performed a second comparative analysis in addition to a negative case analysis of the data, where the primary focus was on 'falsification' of the categories and themes, searching the data for negative cases, or instances that did not fit with the arguments being formed. As a consequence of both the comparative and negative case analysis, the identified categories and themes, reported next, reached further depth and density, as opposed to their rebuttal. As mentioned, the primary focus of the analysis of the wider dataset was to uncover responses to help understand the issues posed by the research questions, with one of the products, focussing specifically on how friendship groups were identified as an integral resource in easing the worries and concerns experienced as a consequence of the transition, reported next.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

When exploring their experiences of the primary to secondary school transition, the students clarified a range of worries and concerns, both academic and personal, that they found challenging. While pointing to support systems and processes designed to ease these concerns, they largely felt that their impact was limited. Instead, they prioritised informal networks, predominantly peer support and the emotion work it offered as an integral resource in helping to ease the worries and concerns experienced as a consequence of the transition.

Worries and concerns about starting secondary school

Students identified academic concerns including a perceived increase in workload and in the level and depth of learning required, with Participant 13, in relation to his schoolwork, stating: 'there's much more … and it's harder'. Often, such concerns were exacerbated by a belief that there was less time to achieve the tasks set now, when compared with the primary school classroom, as shown by two students below:

> Participant 18: At primary, you had maybe five minutes per task … but here it's like two minutes. In secondary … you have to do your work …, (whereas) in primary, it was like 'take your time'.

> Participant 20: I feel like I've got this time pressure to do something. In primary, you had a whole lesson to do a small task, but here, (at secondary school) they are making you do more and more, throughout the year.

In addition to such academic pressures, and in keeping with Multiple and Multi-Dimensional Transitions theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) that posits that children don't experience one, but many small, complex transitions across academic, social and environmental domains, the adjustments to new rules and disciplinary measures, as well as expectations to demonstrate greater independence in not only academic pursuits, but also pastoral issues, was seen as challenging by the interviewees. In this regard, Participant 20 mentioned that the teachers 'make you do things independently, even if you're stuck', while Participant 18 maintained: 'in primary I felt like if you needed help you could talk to the teachers very openly, but in secondary … it's not always there'.

Making comparisons between primary and secondary school was common, with almost all interviewees citing issues in navigating their new building as a source of concern, owing to it being 'bigger and more confusing', (Participant 11). Further comparisons, in relation to teaching practices, were captured in Participant 7's excerpt that 'the teachers here are a lot different to the teachers that were in primary because they have different ways of helping or teaching' and he continued such comparisons when he pointed to an increase in behavioural issues and a perceived decrease in his voice being heard, in secondary school:

> Participant 7: It makes me feel really stressed and frustrated because my class always act up and we can't really learn anything … but I can't speak out, because our class is very noisy … and our teachers are always occupied by someone.

In keeping with previous findings (see Trotman et al., 2015) and as exemplified by this testimony, there was commonality in the belief that the students themselves lacked agency, often owing to the larger size of the secondary school, in both site size and student numbers, which in turn reduced the personalised forms of support for students. Although the interviewees invariably acknowledged their own need to embrace independence in dealing with the challenges faced as a consequence of the primary to secondary school transition, they were able to identify schemes designed to alleviate these concerns, as reported next.

Easing the transition: Avenues of support

In keeping with the research findings explored earlier in the article (see Demkowicz et al., 2023; Evans et al., 2018; Mullins & Irvin, 2000), the emotional responses to the transition from primary to secondary school manifested in student feelings of being 'nervous' (Participant 1) and 'worried' (Participant 2), owing to the new learning environment being seen as 'stressful' (Participant 20) and 'confusing' (Participant 9). The student interviewees identified formal avenues of pastoral support designed to ease such concerns through dedicated behaviour support workers, learning mentors and the approachability of teachers and their 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1979) as important at times, as Participant 2 shows:

> Participant 2: If I struggle I'd normally go to (Learning Mentor's) office and I'd tell her about stuff, … So, whenever you're feeling down, she'll ask me what's up and then I'll tell her and then she'll tell me, 'you don't need to worry, … eventually you'll be alright' … If there's a teacher that I can trust, I'll go to them and they'll help me out. If I'm worried, they'll give me … advice on how … not to be worried on something that's … going through my mind.

That said, as alluded to earlier in the reporting of the findings and in the literature more widely (see Trotman et al., 2015), issues of accessibility of support were identified as a recurring theme for the interviewees that impeded the extent to which they felt fully supported in tackling the issues brought about by the transition. With a view that teachers were often 'occupied', students sought support away from the formal avenues offered by the school and its staff, with some turning to their parents for guidance. In this regard, Participant 13 would 'go home to (her) parents' for help, while Participant 1 explained: 'you can tell your parents or someone you trust outside of school, and they can … give you extra support … with controlling emotions and stuff'. While parents were positioned as a source of support for some, across all interviewees, unanimously, the role of peer support was identified as fundamental to the success of the transition experience. It is to these forms of support that the findings now concentrate their focus.

Friendship groups and peer support

Supporting previously made findings (see Darmody et al., 2012; Spernes, 2022), all of the student interviewees found relationships with peers as central in alleviating the concerns brought about by the transition from primary to secondary school. The pivotal role of peer relationships and their ability to act as support networks for students adjusting to their new school helped in tackling a range of academic, social and emotional issues, as well as more practical aspects associated with the transition, including navigating the school. The sample of students interviewed often referred to their first days and offered support for findings that position difficulties in navigating the larger school space as a concern (see Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019), with Participant 18 saying that 'everyone was getting lost in the middle of the crowd' and Participant 19 mentioning that 'at the start it was … kind of difficult trying to find lessons'. The students identified their peers and wider friendship groups as valuable sources of support to help ease the worries brought about by concerns in navigating their new school, as two students show:

> Participant 14: When I first started, I didn't know that I was going to the wrong class, I was struggling a bit … but I found one of my mates that was in the same class and we all went round together.

> Participant 18: When I started here, it was hard to get around because I didn't know (the school), and everyone was getting lost in the middle of the crowd. I had to even hang on to one of my mate's backpack so we wouldn't get lost. But now I feel like I know everywhere, we've helped each other out loads.

Research has demonstrated how older children, familiar with schools' intricacies, provide security and support to younger children in their daily experiences (see Coffey, 2013). In this study, the interviewees drew on friendships with older children to help ease the concerns brought about by the transition, with the latter seen as a source of practical support, such as help in navigating the school, and pastoral support, in their words of encouragement and advice to new students experiencing emotional challenges brought about by the transition. When faced with difficulties acclimatising to their new school environment some students utilised the support of older friends within school, as is shown:

> Participant 2: Sometimes I'll go to one my older mates in year nine and year eleven and … tell them what's up and they'll tell me, 'you don't need to worry about that because I'd done the same as you when I was in year'.

> Participant 20: I talk to the older children that have been through this and they've been guided through it before and know what to do and it helps as they've got a better ability than me.

One prominent theme identified within the data was the emphasis placed on making new friends, and the impact this had on the transition. Student interviewees, such as Participant 1, spoke about her concerns in this regard when she said it's going to be 'harder to make friends, even though on the first day it should be easier because everyone's nervous'. Most of the students interviewed spoke about the importance of friends to help ease the worries brought about by the transition, and for most, once new friendship groups had been established, the first year of secondary school seemed less daunting, as Participant 18 shows:

> Participant 18: I feel like when I started here, I wouldn't get new mates and I'll just be stuck with the same ones from primary. But when I got here, you just see me talking to people that I've never even seen before and actually getting to have them as my mates. So, I feel like if I just keep on going, and how I'm feeling, my positive attitude, I'm good in life.

Friendship groups play a range of important support roles for students experiencing the transition from primary to secondary school. In this study, in the classroom, students drew on each other to help navigate the tasks set, and bearing in mind the view that access to the teacher wasn't always readily available, peer networks were seen as crucial avenues of academic support. To this end, Participant 5 explained that he 'gets help in the classroom … off some of my mates because the teacher is helping someone or doing something, so they're busy', while Participant 2 said that as the teacher is often 'talking to another student, then I'll ask (and work with) one of my mates, to see if they know the answer'. Those interviewed spoke of their preference for peer support in the classroom, with students often seeking the help of their friends before their teacher. Participant 9, for example, would firstly 'ask classmates if they know the answer and for help but if they don't know then I put my hand up and ask the teacher', while Participant 12 explained that she has 'friends that help in the class' but if need be she 'can always ask the teachers'. The students interviewed perceived and appreciated a change, from primary to secondary school, in the role of friends as the primary facilitators of learning, with Participant 18, for example, stating that 'in secondary, now, you always ask your mates if they get it, then after that you might then talk to the teacher'.

Group work and the role of peers as co-constructors in learning were also valued by those interviewed. Participant 2 mentioned, 'I don't like working on my own, I like working with my mates because we all like helping each other out', while Participant 14 explained that 'we do group work in science … or in maths … and you can still go through things in your mind but working in a group you can get everyone's opinions'. Opposing the position that children's conversations and relationships are primarily school-related and lack attributes of intimacy and care (see Roach, 2019), the children in this study maintained that the benefits of their peer support networks stretched beyond the classroom, with the majority of the interviewees identifying their ability to provide an emotional outlet for those experiencing the transition negatively, as particularly helpful. The ability to mix with friends during break times and for children to discuss their concerns was valued often, as is captured below:

> Participant 4: Break time is amazing because you get choices that you can do … basketball, football or you can get something to eat, or you can just walk around and talk through worries with your friends.

> Participant 20: At break I get to have a chat with my friends, If my brain's kind of slowed down, and then I talk with them I'm ready to get back to learning.

The influence of peer support manifested in a variety of ways including students modifying behaviours in keeping with their peers, with Participant 18, for example, stating that previously 'I've just always messed around but here not so much, we just (behave) more serious, and stop acting childish'. Furthermore, interviewees such as Participant 11 hinted that her skills of resilience had improved as a consequence of her membership of friendship groups in secondary school, when she said: 'when you first start … you meet new friends … you might get bullied, but at the same time, what I've learned from friends is to keep your head down if you've got problems, and speak to some of your friends and just try and focus on your mind-set'. Students were also forthcoming in explaining their own role in terms of peer support in differing ways,

ranging from a willingness to help peers with academic difficulties to a newfound confidence to talk with fellow first year students experiencing difficulties with transition, and those anticipating it. Such findings are well located in the following excerpt:

> Participant 20: When I first started … I was scared that I wouldn't make any mates, but you're all just kind of mates with mates, and then you just all combine. I've helped others in my year with this and I've told my little brother, because he's coming here in a few years, that there is nothing to worry about. I say 'you think others are going to be all mean cause they're older, but that's only because you'll be the youngest, but if you're just nice, then you're fine'.

Here, Participant 20 adopts the role of the 'one caring' (Noddings, 1984) in his acts of guidance and words of reassurance, designed to enhance the wellbeing of the 'cared for', specifically his peers and younger brother. Indeed, the interviewees demonstrated a further transition in their first year, beyond simply the move from primary to secondary school: the transition from the 'cared for' to the 'one caring'. A range of emotion work and displays of behaviours grounded in the ethics of care are captured in the data above, and next, in the Discussion, we apply these concepts to the children's experiences of the primary to secondary school transition in greater depth.

DISCUSSION

Emotion work and the ethics of care were not only apparent, but the mainstay of peer-led support to ease the concerns brought about by the primary to secondary transition. The findings are littered with examples where peer relationships and the activities within them were guided by principles of care (Noddings, 1984). Predominantly, the student interviewees highlighted their role as the 'cared for' in their relationships with their peers the 'one caring', and this pointed to a swathe of academic, social and emotional benefits of the friendships, including how peers 'help in the classroom' (Participant 5) and 'talk through … worries' (Participant 4). Some also acknowledged a mastery of skills required by the 'one caring', such as Participant 20, who articulated how the experiences gained throughout his first year meant that he was able to offer help, support and guidance to his peers and siblings. While the ethics of care in adult–child relationships in schools, as well as the adoption of the 'one caring' role by adult practitioners, are well established (see Noddings, 1992), the findings made here demonstrate the 'one caring' role adopted by children, and the centrality of care to peer relationships, to aid the concerns brought about by the primary to secondary school transition.

The children experiencing the transition also displayed key components, skills and behaviours that facilitate caring relationships. Motivational displacement (Noddings, 1995), which requires the 'one caring' to shift their focus and attention from themselves to the 'cared for', and to locate the relationship and the actions primarily within their needs, was inherent amongst the interviewee's thoughts. As an example, when seeking academic support, peers were always on hand to provide guidance, to the point where students preferred help garnered from friendship groups above that offered by teachers. In such instances, the 'one caring' needed to not only demonstrate 'motivational displacement' but also 'commitment' to the 'cared for'. Commitment, another key component for Noddings (1995) that prioritises shared feelings and experiences as the basis for thriving relationships, was on display in instances where children engaged in group learning, as captured by Participant 14's view that 'working in a group' helps you 'get everyone's opinions', and those examples where she struggled to navigate the school building, but felt more at ease when along with

her friends they 'went round together'. Additionally, interviewees such as Participant 20, in his acknowledgement of the fear that his sibling has towards his upcoming transition, and his words of advice to appease such concerns, demonstrates an emotional investment in, and prioritisation of, his brother's needs. Such 'engrossment' (Noddings, 1995) in the needs of the 'cared for' is further evidence of the display of principles central to the ethics of care, and demonstrates its importance to school children experiencing the primary to secondary school transition.

In keeping with Noddings' (2002) advice of how the 'one caring' must display modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation, the interviewees alluded to these central elements of care often. Dialogue, where engagement in communication brings about growth of the 'cared for', was prominent within the data, taking place in a range of school settings such as with peers at 'break' (Participant 4 and 20) on the school yard, and with 'older children that have been through this (transition) before' (Participant 20). With dialogue between adults and children having an established evidence base regarding its benefits for their open-ended conversations, decision making and shared understanding (Noddings, 2005; Owens & Ennis, 2005), in this study, we observe its role in peer-led support, guidance and care, in peer-to-peer relationships specifically. Furthermore, during interactions on the yard, where children valued the fact they could talk freely with their friends (see Participants 4 and 20), the 'one caring' and the 'cared for' were presented with opportunities to 'practice' care actions together (Noddings, 2002). Classroom based group work and the role of friends and peers as co-constructors of the learning process, such as that captured in Participant 2's interview, illustrate elements of both modelling (in that the 'one caring' demonstrated care in their actions) and confirmation (with affirmation central to the interaction and relationship). Noddings' (1984) notion of the ethics of care is widely applied to practitioner–child relationships (see Noddings, 2002; Osgood, 2005; Page, 2018) in educational settings, yet far less so in peer-to-peer interactions. Consequently, the findings made here contribute explicitly to knowledge in demonstrating how ethics of care may be central to peer-led emotion work between children, to help ease the difficulties experienced during the primary to secondary school transition.

In keeping with Hochschild's (1979) position, the children in the study also attempted to change the quality and degree of feelings and emotions in their peers in a variety of ways, drawing on the three techniques of emotion work: expressive, bodily, cognitive. Expressive techniques, those that aim to change gestures in the 'service of changing inner feelings' (Hochschild, 1979, p. 562) were drawn upon by students to support some of the concerns brought about by the transition. Participant 11, for example, spoke about being 'bullied' but as part of the support she valued from peers, she had 'learned' to keep her 'head down' declaring 'if you've got problems … speak to some of your friends and just try and focus on your mind-set'. The product of emotion work here, for Participant 11, manifested in a change in her behaviours that communicated her emotional state and reaction to the difficulties faced (Hochschild, 1979). Regarding bodily techniques, those designed to change the physical symptoms of emotions, Participant 10, for example, mentioned that when worried, discussions during break time with his peers meant that upon returning to the classroom 'you just … calm down'. Cognitive techniques, those intended to 'change … ideas, or thoughts in the service of changing the feelings associated with them' (Hochschild, 1979, p. 562), were evident in the advice offered by those older children who had experienced the transition previously, such as captured in guidance given to Participants 2 and 20, that they needn't worry too much about the difficulties faced acclimatising to their new school environment.

Implicit within the advice offered from the older children to those experiencing the transition was an inherent appreciation of 'feelings rules', socially shared norms applied to emotional experiences that grant 'permission to be free of worry, guilt, or shame with regard to the situated

feeling' (Hochschild, 1979, p. 565). Advice such as 'you don't ned to worry about that because I'd done the same as you when I was in year 7' (Participant 2), demonstrates an awareness and degree of empathy of the 'one caring' in the concerns of the 'cared for', but also advice that they are situational and that based on feelings rules they needn't worry. An appreciation of feelings rules not only allows individuals to ascribe meaning to situations, but also helps to validate how demonstrations of feelings are situation-specific, in turn helping to shape a shared set of appropriate emotional responses, or an 'emotional culture' (Thoits, 2004). Participant 18, during his interview, demonstrated an appreciation of feelings rules at secondary school and their role in creating an emotional culture that was distinct to his experiences at primary school when he stated that 'in primary school' he 'just always messed around' but at secondary school his behaviour is 'more serious', with his friendship group no longer 'acting childish'. Thus, such findings capture the centrality of feelings rules to the emotion work enacted as part of peer-led support, in turn helping to establish a shared set of beliefs regarding the situational nature of the emotions and feelings experienced as a consequence of the transition.

In adopting the role of the 'one caring', in exhibiting engrossment, commitment and motivational displacement in their relationships, and by demonstrating modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation in their interactions with the 'cared for', the ethics of care (Noddings, 1984) were central to the emotion work between peers. Furthermore, emotion work was performed through expressive, bodily and cognitive means, and with feelings rules (Hochschild, 1979) guiding the advice between peers, an emotional culture (Thoits, 2004) was created that provided a shared understanding regarding the demonstration of feelings and emotions, and the behaviours that stemmed from them, to help frame the children's experiences of the transition. Although findings have illustrated the benefits of emotion work and the ethics of care within practitioner–pupil interactions in schools (see Noddings, 2002; Osgood, 2005; Page, 2018), this article contributes to knowledge specifically in its identification of their appearance as central elements of peer-led support, to help combat the worries experienced because of the primary to secondary school transition. With this contribution in mind, as well as findings made elsewhere (see Curson et al., 2019; Stiehl et al., 2023), demonstrating how friendship groups play a key role in the transition experience, there is a need to return to positions, strategies and interventions that acknowledge how peer-led emotion work can influence the likelihood of 'smooth' transitions for pupils.

With peer support the strongest protective factor for mental wellbeing, and membership of a strong friendship network predictive of emotional wellbeing (Riglin et al., 2013), strategies within schools that support the development of skills central to effective peer relationships should be prioritised. Calls for greater scrutiny of schools' practices designed to support peer relationships have long been made (see Evangelou et al., 2008), but they persist in more contemporary literature with recommendations that early adolescents, specifically, need support and guidance in skillsets that encourage friendships at school (van Rens et al., 2018). Again, interventions designed to facilitate peer relationships, that explicitly teach children social and emotional skills that result in stronger friendships, are nothing new (see Humphrey et al., 2010), yet schemes designed to ease the worries of transition, that locate the children at the heart of the support, such as peer-assisted learning, cooperative learning and assigning older peer mentors to new children, are not widely adopted (see Keay et al., 2015; Topping, 2011). As such, we call for a re-visualisation of the support offered to children, that prioritises emotion work, scaffolded by an ethic of care, that is offered by peers specifically. To enhance the likelihood of this, schools themselves must strive to establish practices and cultures that adopt concepts and skills grounded in Hochschild's (1979) and Noddings' (1984) principles as fundamental to their whole school ethos. Only by establishing whole school approaches to emotion work, driven by the ethics of care, will the children themselves become one of the focal points of support for emotional issues.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There is a need to acknowledge some of the limitations of the study and dataset, as a means of demonstrating the boundaries and scope of the claims made. As the data were gathered within just one secondary school, located in a city in the north of England, it is recognised that there are limitations regarding the generalisability of the findings made and so, as such, it is recommended that future research focuses its efforts on exploring the extent to which peer-led emotion work takes place across multiple schools and settings, that may vary in terms of their location, socio-economic status, culture, etc. The data reported are also homogeneous in nature, as they focus specifically on themes important to the students themselves. Consequently, to understand if the principles of emotion work and the ethics of care are viewed as pertinent to peer-led strategies to ease concerns brought about by transition, it is suggested that future research draws on the insights of a wider pool of educational stakeholders, specifically parents and school staff. Although it is acknowledged that the findings presented and discussed in this article are not immune to the criticism of a lack of generalisability, in that they are derived from one setting, or that they may not capture the views of parents and educational practitioners, they contribute to our understanding of the role of peer-led emotion work, grounded in the ethics of care, during the primary to secondary school transition.

CONCLUSION

The findings reported in this article captured a range of issues, concerns and worries experienced by children as a consequence of the primary to secondary school transition. While the children interviewed identified strategies designed to ease these concerns, they found most solace in peer-led support. The data revealed how this peer-led support was largely grounded in emotion work via child-led expressive, bodily and cognitive techniques, and an adherence to 'feelings rules' (Hochschild, 1979), as well as the ethics of care, where peers adopted the role of the 'one caring' (Noddings, 1984), with the aim of alleviating the concerns of the 'cared for'. Although emotion work and an ethic of care have provided a framework for practitioner–pupil relationships in schools and adult-led support (see Noddings, 2002; Osgood, 2005; Page, 2018), this article contributes explicitly to knowledge in their location as central components of peer-led support, in response to the primary to secondary school transition. Bearing in mind the importance of friendship during this transition, and the potential for peers to engage in meaningful emotion work driven by an ethic of care, schools may find it beneficial to position the children as front and centre of the primary to secondary school transition, and to harness their skills and attributes to help ease the concerns brought about by it.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT
The researchers' host higher education institution granted ethical approval for the study (23/EDN/037), and the ethical guidelines outlined by the British Educational Research

Association (2024) were adhered to throughout all stages of the research. All ethical considerations are explored in detail in the main article.

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Endnote

[1] In England, primary education is generally from the age of around 5 to 11 years, and secondary education is usually from the age of 11 to 16 years. Children are taught the National Curriculum, which sets out the programmes of study and attainment targets for all subjects, across four Key Stages. Key Stages 1 (children in years 1–2, those who are 5–7 years old) and 2 (children in years 3–6, those who are 7–11 years old) are delivered in primary school. Key Stages 3 (children in years 7–9, those who are 11–14 years old) and 4 (children in years 10–11, 14–16 years old) are delivered in secondary school.

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