

Emotional nourishment begets academic coping during the primary to secondary school transition

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Abstract

The transition from primary to secondary school is widely viewed as the most demanding in a child's educational journey. Despite a wealth of research on this transition, little is known about the children's 'lived experience' of it across different contexts. We target this research void by drawing on semi-structured individual interview data gathered from 24 children (aged 10–12), 12 of whom attend the final year of primary school and so are about to experience the transition, and 12 others who are in the early stages of secondary school and so are currently experiencing the transition. The findings demonstrate that despite holding a range of concerns and worries at primary school, children at secondary school were able to cope with the social, emotional and academic demands that the transition brings through the use of a range of adaptive coping strategies, and that often these abilities were grounded in, and stemmed from the 'emotionally nourishing' practices within the primary school they attended. The research contributes to existing knowledge in its demonstration of how the role of emotionally nourishing schools may facilitate the ability to cope with the transition from primary to secondary school.

KEYWORDS

coping, emotions, schools, transition, well-being

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Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This article investigates children's experiences of the primary to secondary school transition, and the coping techniques they utilise during this time.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Our findings contribute to knowledge in demonstrating not only the range of adaptive coping strategies used by children to meet the social, emotional, and academic demands of this transition, but also how 'emotionally nourishing' practices within the primary school eased the transition to secondary school.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores children's experiences of the transition from primary to secondary school. Specifically, we focus on how emotionally nourishing environments at the former may facilitate the ability to cope with the move to the latter. The transition from primary to secondary school is one of the most intensive and challenging periods in a child's life (Rodrigues et al., 2018), with consequences for academic achievement, well-being, and mental health. However, there is a lack of research that captures the children's 'lived experience' of the transition across different contexts, settings, and time points (Demkowicz et al., 2023), such as those anticipating the transition in primary school and those experiencing it in secondary school. Furthermore, there is even less research that focuses on the coping strategies utilised by children experiencing this transition, and if and how these are influenced by their primary schooling. We address this research gap by gathering the views of final year primary school and first-year secondary school students regarding their upcoming and newly experienced transition, respectively, via individual interviews. Specifically, the article contributes to existing knowledge in demonstrating how, what we term as 'emotionally nourishing' school environments may contribute to a child's ability to cope with the transition from primary to secondary school.

The transition from primary to secondary school

At 11 years old, across countries in the United Kingdom (UK), pupils embark upon their secondary school education, after having completed their primary schooling. This primary to secondary school transition is a crucial milestone in a child's education that heralds great change in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to: differing environments (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019); shifts in social situations and interactions with peers and practitioners (Coffey, 2013); and with it differing norms and expectations (Spernes, 2022); and significant change in curricula, pedagogy and academic pressure (Dunn, 2019). Bearing in mind that all of this occurs at a time in a child's life when they are also experiencing the profound biological changes that adolescence brings, there is now a swathe of evidence that demonstrates how emotionally demanding this transition is for children (see Spernes, 2022), with consequences that sometimes manifest in reduced levels of self-esteem (Evans et al., 2018), general well-being (Eskelä-Haapanen et al., 2017), and poor school adjustment (Coelho & Romão, 2016).

As such, the stress and anxiety experienced at this time has implications for children's mental health and well-being (White, 2020), with some developing symptoms of anxiety and depression (Lester et al., 2013) that last beyond the lifespan of the transition, even into adulthood (Evans et al., 2018). With a well-established finding of a stalling or indeed decline in children's academic progression during this time also (see Galton et al., 2000; Hopwood et al., 2016), it is understandable that the primary to secondary school transition has been positioned as the most challenging period in a child's life (Rodrigues et al., 2018).

Transition has been conceptualised in a variety of ways over the years, including Measor and Woods' (1984) notion of a 'status passage', where there is an expectation on children and their behaviour to change upon moving to the new environment; Galton et al.'s (1999) reference to environmental continuity and discontinuity, that highlights similar or different elements of the transition across the educational establishments; and others that focus on transition cycles, such as Bridges (2001), that place emphasis on the phases individuals experience as part of the transition. Drawing on Jindal-Snape's (2016) seminal work on transition, and her definition of it being the educational, social, and psychological adaptations experienced by moving from one context and set of relationships to another, this study adopts her multiple and multidimensional transitions (MMT) as a theoretical frame. Whilst MMT theory has been critiqued due to its complexity, its focus on a vast number of interconnected domains, and that to fully test it, then investigation is required over time, contexts and domains (see Jindal-Snape, 2023), it is adopted because it not only helps to situate transition as being both challenging and nuanced, but it encourages those interested in its study and application to do so with such complexity in mind. MMT theory posits that children experience multiple transitions simultaneously, in multiple domains (e.g. social, environmental, academic), situated in multiple contexts (e.g. school, home) that have a variety of consequences for the many people part of the transition (e.g. child, practitioner, parent, friends). Although it must be acknowledged that there is by no means a lack of research regarding the primary to secondary school transition – indeed it is one of the most researched of the educational transitions (Jindal-Snape, 2016) – much of this work focusses only on singular not multiple domains, with the social and academic domains being given priority to date (Harris & Nowland, 2021). Furthermore, and in keeping with the principles of MMT theory, research is also limited that captures how transition is experienced across differing contexts, with missed opportunities that may help in comprehending how children anticipate and experience the primary to secondary school transition (Garner & Bagnall, 2024). In this regard, research often either focusses on expectations of an upcoming transition, or on retrospective experiences of the transition, meaning research on the 'lived' experiences is not easily obtained. Whilst undoubtedly there is evidence of the negative consequences of the transition, for some children, these are short-lived (Rice et al., 2021) and for others, it is managed without issue (van Rens et al., 2018). With claims that the primary to secondary school transition can also provide an opportunity for growth and learning (Rice et al., 2015), there is a distinct need to explore how children successfully 'cope' with the transition.

Conceptual framework: Coping with the transition

Academic coping refers to the range of emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and physiological responses that pupils may employ when they encounter stressful issues in their school life (Skinner & Saxton, 2020), such as educational transitions, and so at a fundamental level those interested in this field strive to help pupils develop the skills to deal with the obstacles and problems they face during their academic pursuits. A swathe of strategies and techniques of coping, both maladaptive and adaptive, have been recently identified (see Skinner & Saxton, 2020). Maladaptive strategies, identified as such because they signify

both high levels of stress and poor regulatory functioning, and are more likely to produce negative reactions from others, include escape, helplessness, social isolation, delegation, submission, and opposition. Adaptive strategies, labelled this way because they utilise techniques that constructively regulate the pupil's emotion, motivation, and social contact (Skinner & Saxton, 2020), include problem-solving, information-seeking, support-seeking, self-reliance, and accommodation.

In their recent comprehensive review of the research dedicated to the study of academic coping amongst school age pupils, Skinner and Saxton (2020) concluded that (i) the utilisation of multiple means of academic coping improves chances of academic success as it increases persistence and levels of engagement; (ii) children show steady and high levels of coping at primary school and that this reduces in early secondary school and then stabilises, and (iii) students with strong personal and interpersonal skills are more able to cope with academic challenges. Although undoubtedly comprehensive, motivational theories such as that proposed here by Skinner and Saxton (2020) have been criticised due to their 'under-specified and lack (of) a detailed account of the dynamic causal mechanisms that underpin...behaviour,' (Murayama & von Keyserlingk, 2025, p. 1). Skinner and Saxton (2020) do acknowledge how 'personal and interpersonal resources' may shape coping responses, but detail here is brief. With a reliance on methodological approaches that prioritise statistical relationships between constructs, antecedents, and outcomes, detailed accounts of the influencers of the behaviours and outcomes reported are lacking, with calls now being made for more research that (i) specifies the dynamic causal processes behind the behaviours reported, (ii) unpacks constructs and (iii) develops theory beyond current conceptualisations (Murayama & von Keyserlingk, 2025). In response, and regarding school children's ability to cope with the primary to secondary school transition, research that explores the contexts and microsystems that may support academic coping is required.

The primary school is one such microsystem that may facilitate a pupil's ability to cope with the move to secondary school. In these settings, there can be a plethora of emotionally nourishing contexts and avenues of support that may fall within Skinner and Saxton's (2020) 'interpersonal resources', which could support pupils' ability to cope academically, thus easing the transition. Specific schemes within schools, including 'nurture groups' (see Vincent, 2017) and 'social and emotional learning' (see Wigelsworth et al., 2023), that draw on theoretical positions of 'attachment' (Bowlby, 1969) and 'emotional intelligence' (Goleman, 1995) respectively, explicitly target children's social and emotional well-being. Schools that embrace a 'perceived collective efficacy' (Bandura, 1997) that establishes an ethos akin to Hargreaves' (1995) notion of a welfarist school culture that, as such, prioritises social cohesion and places emphasis on caring relationships between staff and pupils, are well positioned for emotionally nourishing practice. Central to an emotionally nourishing ethos and the practices that stem from them are the practitioners themselves, and their ability to recognise, prioritise, and invest in emotions and feelings as the central pillar of their interactions with children.

Such 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1979), part of an approach to schooling grounded in the 'ethics of care' (Noddings, 1984), that positions care and relationships as both an educational process and a goal, is crucial if practitioners are to fully embrace their feelings and emotions in their interactions with children, as recently advocated (see Recchia et al., 2018). Noddings' (1984) notion of the 'ethics of care' pinpoints the relationships between the 'cared for' and the 'one caring' – the individual acting, guiding, protecting, and enhancing the well-being of the person in their care – as central to the production of caring settings. To embrace caring relationships, the 'one caring' should show engrossment, reciprocity, and motivational displacement, with the needs of the 'cared for' taking priority (Noddings, 1995), and these may be achieved through acts of modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation (Noddings, 2002). Although challenged over the years, and indeed very recently (see Farris, 2025),

being labelled as idealised and for struggling to describe the complexities associated with the power dynamics between the 'one caring' and the 'cared for,' Noddings' (1984, 1995, 2002) extensive body of work is a useful resource to explain the contexts and behaviours within schools that may support academic coping.

Bearing in mind the potential for emotionally nourishing environments having an influence over a child's ability to cope academically (Hoferichter et al., 2022), there is a lack of research that has focussed specifically on how the two are positioned in terms of the primary to secondary school transition. Indeed, the application of theoretical positions such as academic coping (Skinner & Saxton, 2020) has been largely overlooked in the transition-based research. Taking into account, also, recent claims that the dynamic causal mechanisms, context and microsystems that may influence behaviours such as academic coping are severely under-investigated (Murayama & von Keyserlingk, 2025), research that focusses on how transition is experienced across different settings at varying stages of it, including by children anticipating the transition in primary school, to those experiencing it in secondary school, is also lacking (Garner & Bagnall, 2024). With claims that the primary to secondary school transition provides a 'window of opportunity' (Rice et al., 2015) for some children, the dearth in focus of research that captures the 'lived experiences' of transition, according to the children themselves (Demkowicz et al., 2023), provides a similar window for educational researchers, and it is to this opportunity that this article focusses its attention.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research study upon which this article is based focussed primarily on understanding children's lived experiences of the primary to secondary school transition across differing contexts, and was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the main issues, concerns, and challenges for children anticipating and 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 and concerns do children value and identify as beneficial?

To access both the anticipated and experienced views of the primary to secondary transition, this article focuses on data gathered from one primary school and one secondary school, both located in a large city in the north of England, UK.

The schools

The research team have an existing relationship with both the primary school and secondary school, the former of which acts as a 'feeder' school to the latter. As such, the schools were sampled as a consequence of both convenience and purposive strategies as both were interested in the transition process. Referred to throughout the article as 'the primary school', it is mixed sex, with over 300 students on roll and in 2024 was rated as 'outstanding' by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED), that judges the quality of the services providing education and skills for learners of all ages. The number of pupils attending the primary school identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) is above the national average, as is the proportion of disadvantaged students and those known to be eligible for pupil premium funding. Referred

to as 'the secondary school', it is also mixed sex, has almost 1400 students and in its most recent OFSTED review in 2022 was rated 'good'. The number of disadvantaged students and those eligible for pupil premium funding is over double the national average, as is the proportion of pupils with an identifiable SEND.

Collecting data

The tool of data collection used in this study was semi-structured interviews. The three research questions guided the focus of all interviews, and so discussions were centred around: issues, concerns, and challenges regarding the primary to secondary school transition; strategies and means of support to overcome these issues, concerns, and challenges; the value attributed to, and benefits of these support systems; and the extent to which they alleviated the concerns experienced. The same schedule was used for both the primary and secondary school children interviewees, but adaptations were made to accommodate the specific child's current educational experience/stage of transition. Consequently, questions for the primary school students were framed on anticipated views and expectations of the upcoming transition, whilst the questions for the secondary school students focused on current experiences. All interviews were face-to-face and took place in a quiet private room on each school's site.

The interviewees

Although 32 children took part in the wider project, this article utilises data gathered from the 24 children who were currently attending, or had attended the 'primary school' in the previous year. Consequently, 12 final year (year six) primary school children (aged either 10 or 11 years) and 12 first year (year seven) secondary school children (aged either 11 or 12 years) formed the interviewees. There was a relatively even mix of genders, with 13 girls and 11 boys, from varying ethnic and ability groups. Gatekeepers at both the primary and secondary schools facilitated the wider project, including in accessing, sampling, and recruiting the children to be interviewed in each setting. The only inclusion criteria for the primary school participants were that they were in year six and were going to go on to attend the 'secondary school', and likewise for the secondary school participants, that they were in year seven and attended the 'primary school' prior to their transition to the 'secondary school'. Although the aim of the sampling frame was for children, within these criteria, to be selected at random with all having an equal chance of recruitment, as is the case with gatekeeper involvement in this process, elements of convenience sampling cannot be ruled out (Andoh-Arthur, 2021).

Ethical considerations

The British Educational Research Association (2024) ethical guidelines were adhered to throughout all stages of the research, and full ethical approval for the study was granted by the authors' host higher education institution (23/EDN/037). Ethical concerns regarding confidentiality and anonymity, data protection, and the right to withdraw were guaranteed within the participant information sheet. Distributed to parents and children, information sheets also provided details on the purpose of the study and the focus of the interview, including an approximation of its length and that it would be audio recorded. All information on the sheet was also relayed verbally to the interviewee before the interview took place, and

verbal assent was given by each participant before the interview started. Written informed consent was also gained from parents. Taking account of the interviewees' ages, child-friendly language and a range of prompts were used to lessen the chance of confusion during the interview. In accordance with guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity, the schools are referred to simply as 'the primary school' and 'the secondary school', and the interviewees are referred to as 'Participant 1', 'Participant 2', etc., with the primary school participants allocated numbers 1–12, and the secondary school participants allocated numbers 13–24.

Data analysis

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and organised using ATLAS-ti software. Bearing in mind the 'centrality of the research question to the research process' (Mason, 2018, p. 9), the study's research questions guided the analysis of data, which utilised abbreviated grounded theory as a method (Willig, 2008). That is, the original data were subjected to processes of open data coding, categorisation, comparison, and falsification by the three individual members of the research team separately. Analyses did not guide subsequent iterations of data collection. Drawing on Charmaz's (1990) social constructionist version of grounded theory, and in recognition that codes and categories do not emerge but are constructed and identified, the research team members conducted an initial coding exercise of each transcript, resulting in a swathe of open codes ranging in size and level of commonality. Upon amalgamating these common initial codes into larger categories, a range of both deductive and inductive categories were identified. Deductive categories consisted of concepts explicitly relevant to the research questions such as 'feelings and emotions associated with the transition', 'adaptive coping strategies', etc., whilst inductive categories, popular amongst the data set, that whilst informing the research questions, were identified due to their disparity from the deductive categories, included 'nourishing school environments', etc. Upon completion of this selective coding and deductive and inductive categorisation process, theoretical coding ensued where low-level categories were integrated into higher-level categories and more meaningful themes, such as those that appear in the findings presented next. Following this coding and categorisation of the data individually, the research team met and embarked upon a comparative analysis of their codes and categories. With a distinct focus on how the identified codes and categories, both deductive and inductive, informed the issues captured by the research questions, this comparative analysis identified common features across the research teams' coding and categorisation of the data. With the primary focus of the data analysis process to provide clarity to the issues captured by the research questions, a range of themes and sub-themes were identified that provided the basis for this article specifically, as captured in the table below (Table 1).

A secondary comparative analysis, performed by each member of the research team individually, with the aim of falsifying the identified categories and themes then took place, where negative cases were actively sought. Consequently, the findings presented next are a product of this process and have been triangulated by all members of the research team.

RESULTS

The findings presented here capture both the anticipated and lived experiences of the primary to secondary school transition, according to the sample of year six and seven school children interviewed. First, they showcase how the norms, rituals, and underlying

TABLE 1 Thematic map of identified themes and sub-themes, relevant to the RQs.

<p>RQ1 – What are the main issues, concerns, and challenges for children anticipating and experiencing the primary to secondary school transition?</p> <p>1.1 Feelings and emotions associated with the transition: 1.1.1 <i>Worry</i>; 1.1.2 <i>Nervousness</i>; 1.1.3 <i>Confusion</i>; 1.1.4 <i>Stress</i></p> <p>1.2 School site: 1.2.1 <i>Size</i>; 1.2.2 <i>Navigating the site</i>; 1.2.3 <i>School yard</i></p> <p>1.3 Perceptions of change of support at school: 1.3.1 <i>Staff support</i>; 1.3.2 <i>Peer support</i>; 1.3.3 <i>Parental support</i>; 1.3.4 <i>Specialist support</i></p> <p>1.4 Change: 1.4.1 <i>Comparing schools</i>; 1.4.2 <i>Comparing practitioners</i>; 1.4.3 <i>Comparing friends</i>; 1.4.4 <i>Continuity and discontinuity</i></p>
<p>RQ2 – How do children seek help and support to overcome these issues, concerns, and challenges?</p> <p>2.1 Support at school: 2.1.1 <i>Staff support</i>; 2.1.2 <i>Peer support</i>; 2.1.3 <i>Parental support</i>; 2.1.4 <i>Specialist support</i></p> <p>2.2 Strategies to meet individual needs: 2.2.1 <i>Discussing Individualised/Tailored Support</i>; 2.2.3 <i>Proactively seeking out support from practitioners</i>; 2.2.4 <i>Proactively seeking out support from parents</i>; 2.2.5 <i>Speaking with peers</i></p> <p>2.3 Important spaces to ease concerns: 2.3.1 <i>Quiet space</i>; 2.3.2 <i>Pastoral support</i>; 2.3.3 <i>School yard</i>; 2.3.4 <i>Spaces occupied by friends</i></p>
<p>RQ3 – What types of help and support that may alleviate these issues and concerns do children value and identify as beneficial?</p> <p>3.1 Adaptive Coping Strategies: 3.1.1 <i>Independence</i>; 3.1.2 <i>Self-reliance</i>; 3.1.3 <i>Problem-solving</i>; 3.1.4 <i>Information seeking</i>; 3.1.5 <i>Support seeking</i></p> <p>3.2 Maladaptive Coping Strategies: 3.2.1 <i>Fixation</i>; 3.2.2 <i>Avoidance</i>; 3.2.3 <i>Anxiety</i>; 3.2.4 <i>Submission</i></p> <p>3.3 Perceptions of impact of support at school: 3.3.1 <i>Staff support</i>; 3.3.2 <i>Peer support</i>; 3.3.3 <i>Parental support</i>; 3.3.4 <i>Specialist support</i></p> <p>3.4 Nourishing school environments: 3.4.1 <i>Previous and current support from practitioners</i>; 3.4.2 <i>Previous and current support from peers</i>; 3.4.3 <i>Previous and current support from others</i>; 3.4.4 <i>Previous and current perceptions of culture and ethos</i></p>

ethos within some primary school settings frame the children's hopes and worries regarding their upcoming transition to secondary school. Then, they demonstrate how practices within such emotionally nourishing environments may help ease some of the more difficult aspects of this transition by providing academic coping strategies to those children experiencing it.

Valuing emotional nourishment at primary school

Across the 12 year six, primary school children interviewed, one common theme was the value attached to the calming nature of the environment they were currently experiencing at the primary school. Participant 2 referred to the primary school's 'atmosphere being warm and positive', whilst Participant 9 saw the school as a place where they were able to 'calm down' so that they could 'do work by (them)self with no distractions'. Participant 4 hinted at the school's underlying 'welfarist' (Hargreaves, 1995) ethos in providing this calming and emotionally nourishing environment, in the following excerpt:

It's like a sense of calmness here in how everyone is, because I don't like doing something wrong, so the school just like gives calmness, it just like makes me feel more calm.

(Participant 4)

The year six primary school children spoke about the school's small size and their familiarity with the setting as central tenets of why they felt the environment is calming. Furthermore, and again almost unanimously, the children identified the relationships they had developed with their peers, throughout their primary schooling, as crucial aspects of their emotionally nourishing school experiences. Participant 5, for example, identified the 'connections with friends...that makes (them) feel happy', whilst Participant 10 aligned their positive experiences of primary schooling with the friendships they've made, adding that 'my friends support me with whatever I do, and I support them with whatever they do.'

Another important element of primary schooling, couched in virtues of emotional nourishment, was the relational approaches of educational practitioners and their ability to offer tailored and individualised support to the children. Practitioners at the primary school were viewed as 'calm' (Participant 3), as being 'nice...in lessons' and creating an environment where children 'feel ready, feel calmer and able to think' (Participant 5). Staff were also viewed as avenues of support as 'they're always by our side when I really need help, ...as they actually take time to come talk to us, and they genuinely care about us' (Participant 12). All in all, the primary school children spoke often about the variety of support they could access, as part of the emotionally nourishing environment they enjoyed, as captured well below:

Here, when we're worried, we can sit outside of a room and then like we have... loads of sensory toys in it, so it can help us feel calmer and we have like a little picture book that helps...and we have our friends, and teachers and they can talk to us and help us figure out what we're feeling...it's just really calm here.

(Participant 11)

When discussing their upcoming transition to secondary school, and in keeping with Jindal-Snape's (2016) MMT theory, a range of worries were shared and a desire for continuity of an emotionally nourishing environment, in secondary school, were central to the children's views. Regarding the views captured above, that support is tailored to the individual's needs, children anticipated that at secondary school, individualised support would not be extensive, and that they would be expected to demonstrate independence when faced with challenging situations. Participant 10, for example, felt that 'at secondary I think we'll have to teach and look after ourselves more...because we won't get as much help as we do in primary school.', whilst Participant 12 felt that 'we'll get less support in high school because it's not like primary...because we'll be more mature and older.... I just worry about being heard and everything, and not being like an outsider'. Others, such as Participant 9, showed apprehension about the extent to which their 'interactions and communication skills will allow (them) to be heard at secondary school'. As has also been affirmed within the literature (see Symonds & Galton, 2014), concerns regarding the size of the school, the increase in student numbers, and the extent to which practitioners will be able to invest time in supporting children with their individual needs, due to the increased pupil pool, were held by the year six interviewees. Two excerpts that capture such points are presented below:

I think there'll be less support just because there's loads of students...more students will get the help if they need it.

(Participant 8)

We'll definitely get less help because there's more students. When you go into different classes, there's different teachers and they don't know what you're like and they don't know what you are comfortable with.

(Participant 11)

To help alleviate such concerns, the year six interviewees expressed a desire for continuity of the emotionally nourishing environment they were currently experiencing, across the transition from primary to secondary school. Children wanted staff at secondary school to 'understand what I'm going through,' (Participant 2) and for 'teachers to help you and to not just leave you.' (Participant 6). There was the hope, amongst the year six children, that the approaches experienced at primary school would continue into secondary school with Participant 7 stating 'I want maybe the structure of the school to be the same, like the same help and approach...like what we have here, in our school, calmness...so small but big at the same time.' Participant 7 here re-affirms the commonly held view that current experiences of primary schooling is one of a calm, emotionally nourishing environment, due in part to the school's size that allows individualised and tailored support. The change Participant 7 speaks of, from 'small' to 'big', and the anticipated concerns provided by those about to experience the transition, as captured so far, are scrutinised in the following section, where the findings focus on the lived experiences of year seven secondary school children, currently experiencing the transition.

Mapping the transition – Anticipated concerns becoming lived experiences?

Although many of the worries captured above were being experienced by the year seven secondary interviewees, some of the children, as other researchers have found (see van Rens et al., 2018), felt that the concerns they too had anticipated about their own transition had not been realised. Regarding the expectation that support would not be individualised, some year seven children argued: 'there's not really any differences because most teachers try to get the students involved in the lesson' (Participant 16) and 'you can ask your teacher... and they help you with your own emotions' (Participant 17). Others also felt that continuity of practice across primary to secondary school was evident, with Participant 15 stating 'it's the same type of environment.... It feels like a safe place where I can get help whenever', and Participant 22 claiming 'when I was thinking about going to high school, it was really nerve wracking and everything, but now I'm here..., it's just like normal...you have nothing to worry about.' It need be said, though, that for most of the year seven interviewees, a marked change when transitioning from primary to secondary school had been experienced, as captured in this excerpt taken from the interview with Participant 19:

At (primary school) it was a much more calmer environment when it was time for lessons or anything, but now since I've moved here, everything became quite difficult.... At (primary school), they were much calmer, we'd come in and we'd obviously calm down. Our teacher knew us and would let us calm down to be in lesson and then we would obviously learn. But here it's like you come in and you have to just get on with things by yourself and everyone's acting crazy.

(Participant 19)

The year seven children shared their experiences of the differences between primary and secondary school, and these included a perceived increase in behavioural, social and emotional issues such as children 'acting up in front of teachers and not caring' (Participant 19) and 'kids always getting into fights' (Participant 22). Examples of the anticipated concerns of the transition, mapping directly onto the lived experiences of it, were realised in the data. These included teachers being viewed as less supportive, indeed for Participant 16 they 'are far more aggressive in general'; as well as the belief that individualised support has

lessened and often the children's voices are not heard with Participant 22 stating: 'in primary school when I needed help, I got it all the time but here I was meant to have a one to one but I don't. This school, it's more bigger and more confusing. So, like I'm really unsure with nearly everything', and Participant 19 stating that 'no one really notices me'. There are examples in the extant literature to help situate such findings, with Trotman et al., (2015) demonstrating how students in primary school believe they had a good relationship with their teachers, but these often become 'disconnected' at secondary school, leaving children feeling 'lost' physically and emotionally (p. 244). Whilst these sentiments were certainly experienced by the children in our study, they showed an ability to cope with such setbacks and in the next section we delve deeper into the mechanisms utilised by the children to deal with the consequences of their transition, by exploring the data that locate some of these academic coping strategies within their emotionally nourishing primary school experiences.

Coping with the transition from primary to secondary school

Despite the realisation of the worries, concerns, and anxieties associated with the transition from primary to secondary school, the year seven secondary school interviewees maintained that the changes had not been as negatively impactful as expected. Indeed, most of the children spoke about their ability to cope with these changes, as the following excerpts capture:

A lot has changed but it's ok because I haven't really needed any help because I've got on with everything in the school.

(Participant 16)

What I've learnt moving here is to keep your head down if you've got problems... to me you just try and focus on your own mindset and how you're tending to yourself.

(Participant 23)

An overriding theme identified from the interviews with the year seven children was their sense of stoicism when facing up to the difficulties that the transition had brought, with Participant 14, for example, stating that at 'at secondary school, it's hard to work, but I just get on with it'. Instead of dwelling on the perceived decrease in support brought about by the transition, Participants 16, 23, and 14 here, coped by drawing on techniques associated with mindfulness by remaining in the moment and focusing on the task in hand (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). This strategy was part of an armoury of coping techniques utilised by the year seven children experiencing the transition, situated primarily in displays of independence where the child themselves sought out avenues of support for the challenges they face. Seeking out environments that the children found beneficial to them, specifically, when faced with emotionally challenging situations, were referred to widely during the interviews with Participant 16, for example, stating: 'when I'm stressed I take myself to a quiet area, a place where I will get quiet...because places like that it is easier to concentrate'. Whilst parents have long been identified as important to the transition (see Darmody, Robson, and McMahon, 2012), the children in this study spoke about how they themselves now take ownership of the issues they face, with examples that they are now far more proactive in terms of seeking help at home, when compared with their time at primary school, as is shown below:

To help with how I feel (I) can tell (my) parents or someone you trust outside of school, and they can ring up school to give you extra support, like my mum did to me, since I need extra support with controlling emotions and stuff.

(Participant 13)

When I go home, I now always ask my mum if she would like, tell me and help me and she would help me, but at primary I didn't do that because I had the teachers.

(Participant 14)

Re-affirming the existing literature base (see Topping, 2011; Spernes, 2022), children also coped with the changes by seeking support from their friendship groups and peer networks more often. Indeed, for many, these relationships and avenues of support were favoured over those offered by teachers. In this regard and referring to the perceived decreased nature of individual support from teachers in the classroom at secondary in comparison to primary, Participant 17 said 'the teachers at secondary school are always busy with other kids, so then, firstly, I just like ask one of my friends in the class if they know what to do'. This coping strategy of proactively seeking support from peers was captured across the secondary school interviewees, with Participant 18, for example, claiming that 'in secondary, now, you always ask your mates if they get it, then after that you might then talk to the teacher' and Participant 24 stating that they 'always now ask friends to help in the class' but if needs be they 'can...ask the teachers'. Teachers, too, were sought out for help if this was required, but such support was usually always initiated by the children themselves. Some children, like Participant 20, felt that as the teachers' 'door is open, it is up to us to get the help from them', whilst Participant 14 emphasised their own role in seeking out support when they said:

Most of the time I feel like I just go to the teacher that I can trust, I'll go to them and they'll help me out if I'm worried.... I now ask them for help on the thing that is worrying me and they'll give me...advice and give me feedback.... I'll think over what they said, and then I'll like put together the stuff they told me, (and I use that advice) for next time. If I'm struggling I now think there's got be another way to do it.

(Participant 14)

The secondary school year seven interviewees, such as Participant 14, often pointed to their independent coping strategies when facing the worries and concerns experienced as a consequence of the transition to secondary school. Participant 14 went on to recall their experiences at primary school, and how the support they received there had helped their independent stance now, when they claimed: 'at primary, we just stayed in our class and had different lessons with the same teacher, and we really got know her but here that helped as I try now to get to know my teachers'. Other secondary school children, like Participant 18, echoed such sentiments when stating: 'my teachers at primary knew me really well but here now they don't, so I have to go to them instead'. The primary school's emotionally nourishing environment, where practitioners were invested in developing and maintaining relationships with children, had normalised such practices in the pupils' minds, so that at secondary school, whilst maybe initiated differently, the children could still access such support. Other secondary school children referred to the culture and ethos of the primary school as a source of 'good practice' (Participant 16) and drew on experiences garnered there when making the transition to secondary school, as is shown below:

I've now realised that all the people in my class are like kind of the same type of people from (primary) but from different schools, and different staff, but they've got like the same personality as them.

(Participant 15)

When I first started here (at secondary school), I was very anxious to just start asking for help because I wanted people to think that I could do everything by myself, and then I started realising the kids and teachers actually care...just like at my primary school.

(Participant 19)

Above, secondary school Participants 15 and 19 have utilised their emotionally nourishing primary school experiences as a resource to allow them to navigate their transition to secondary school. Such previous experiences, grounded in the ethics of care (Noddings, 1984), had helped to either alleviate the worries and concerns brought about by the transition or had been fruitful resources that the children drew on to help cope with the challenges they faced. In the discussion that follows, we ponder on the principles of the ethics of care and its potential role in influencing children's ability to cope with the transition from primary to secondary school.

DISCUSSION

Adaptive academic coping strategies (Skinner & Saxton, 2020) were often utilised by the children to help overcome the issues they faced as a consequence of the primary to secondary school transition. Whilst maladaptive strategies, such as submission and a fixation with negative events attached to the transition were drawn upon, as with Participant 22's view that life at secondary school is confusing and that they are often unsure of the practices there, the data consistently revealed adaptive coping displays of independence and acts of self-reliance, problem-solving, information seeking, and support seeking. A sense of stoicism in tackling the transition was central to the secondary school children's views, with self-reliance, and its strategy of regulating behaviour or emotion by bolstering confidence, and being the primary control in engagement with the task, utilised widely (Skinner & Saxton, 2020). Displaying components of self-reliance (Skinner & Saxton, 2020), there was a distinct emphasis on both self-encouragement and a desire to handle problems alone, such as in Participants 14's and 16's approach of getting on with things and in Participant 23's strategy of focusing their own attention on their own issues. Figuring out what to do to solve problems or to prevent them in future encounters was another adaptive coping strategy utilised often by the secondary school children interviewed. Such acts of problem-solving took shape in displays of 'rational problem-solving', 'cognitive decision making' and 'planning' (Skinner & Saxton, 2020), as evidenced, for example, by Participant 16's strategy of moving to places in the school that are free of distraction to provide the space to concentrate.

The most popular forms of academic coping were adaptive strategies of both 'information' and 'support seeking', sought by the children from a range of adults and peers involved in the transition from primary to secondary school. Participant 14, for example, demonstrated how their displays of 'self-reliance' and problem-solving stemmed from such 'support seeking' when stating that after seeking out emotional and academic support from teachers, they draw on these strategies if similar issues arise in the future. The children's ability to seek out emotional support, reassurance, and consolation (Skinner & Saxton, 2020) from teachers

was evident within the data set, including in Participant 20's view that the practitioners at secondary school are supportive, but that the expectation is on the children to access these support systems. Furthermore, parents were also identified as avenues of emotional support, such as demonstrated in Participant 13's strategy of accessing help at home with emotional control. 'Information seeking' for Skinner and Saxton (2020, p. 6), the act of seeking out 'teachers or other adults for instrumental aid in understanding material or in figuring out how to learn more effectively', was utilised often as an adaptive coping strategy in response to the transition, with a swathe of examples identified by children including Participants 14, 20, and 13. 'Teachers or other adults', however, were not the main source of information seeking, with friends most often sought out by the children when they required assistance, such as captured by the data offered by Participant 18.

The secondary school children regularly recalled their primary schooling experiences as a source of emotional nourishment when discussing their ability to cope with the transition. Participants 14, 16, and 18, for example, utilised their positive interactions and relationships with their previous primary school teachers as an exemplar of how information could be sought from teachers at secondary school, but instead here with the child being the active agent in initiating the interaction. Furthermore, Participants 15's and 19's reference to the calm, kind, and caring nature of peers and staff at secondary school being similar to primary school further captures how the primary school environment and the practices within it were often positioned as an important context and microsystem that helped influence the child's ability to cope with the transition. The final year primary school interviewees, such as Participants 4 and 9, hoped for a continuation, from primary to secondary school, of their caring and calm educational experiences so far, with Participant 2 also maintaining that the emotional support experienced at primary school was constant, and the context was warm and positive. As such, the year six children anticipating the transition, and the year seven children having experienced it, both placed emphasis on their primary schooling experiences being calm and caring. In this instance, both the culture of the primary school and the practitioners within it abided by 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1979), socially shared norms applied to emotional experiences that, in this case, helped create an 'emotional culture' (Thoits, 2004) that normalised a calm and caring context as the mainstay of the emotionally nourishing school environment.

Both the final year primary and first-year secondary school children interviewed as part of this study referred widely to examples of 'the ethics of care' (Noddings, 1984), as the focal point of their emotionally nourishing primary schooling experience. On these occasions, both practitioners as well as the children's peers adopted the role of the 'one caring', whose main role it was to guide the 'cared for', with the distinct aim of bettering their well-being, (Noddings, 1984). Numerous examples of caring practices can be located within the data shared. Participant 10's claim that their friends offer academic, social, and emotional support, and vice versa, is an example of 'motivational displacement', or the act of shifting focus from one's own needs to those of the 'cared for' (Noddings, 1984). Participant 12's belief that their primary school teachers are always supportive and consistently attending to the children's emotional needs is a demonstration of 'engrossment', an emotional investment in, and prioritisation of the needs of others (Noddings, 1995). Other examples that Noddings (2002) identified as components central to the notion of the 'ethics of care', that the 'one caring' must display, such as modelling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation, were referred to also by Participants 9, 10, 11, and 12. Participant 11, for example, identifies 'dialogue' and 'practice' as an important aspect of their emotionally nourishing primary school experience when they referred to their peers and practitioners helping them to comprehend, control, and display their emotions. Later, they go on to express concern that principles of care like engrossment, commitment and motivational displacement, central tenets of their emotionally

nourishing primary school experience, would not be present at secondary school, when pondering if the support at secondary school would lessen due to number of students there.

Components of the emotionally nourishing school environment included a socially cohesive, welfarist culture (Hargreaves, 1995), an atmosphere and ethos that was calm and caring, and aspects of a whole school approach that placed emphasis on targeted and specialist support schemes with the aim of benefitting children's well-being and the development of their social, emotional, and behavioural skills. Additionally, practitioners and children within this environment embraced key principles of the ethics of care (Noddings, 1984), establishing practices of emotion work (Hochschild, 1979) where the children, the 'cared for', were emotionally nourished by the 'ones caring', their teachers, support staff, and peers. It need be noted, though, that emotionally nourishing schools ought to embrace other components, which facilitate truly whole school approaches, including affective home-school relationships, holistic training of all staff, and student input (Cavanagh et al., 2024). Furthermore, emotionally nourishing schools must strive to establish teaching and learning practices that pay attention to students' emotional experiences and intelligence through adherence to principles of emotional pedagogy (Wilce & Fenigsen, 2016). These emotionally nourishing environments also stem from strong and clear leadership strategies, which focus school policy, provision, and resulting practices on approaches to the curriculum that are 'compassionate' (Gilbert, 2014), in that they prioritise student and staff well-being, and caring relationships between the two. Emotionally nourishing schools, thus, take a holistic approach to embedding the social-emotional-relational drivers and processes of student individual needs, welfare, and care into the school ecology, as part of their culture, ethos, systems, pedagogy, policy, provision, and practice.

The findings presented in this article contribute to knowledge in answering recent calls for research to examine children's perspectives, across multiple domains and contexts (see Garner & Bagnall, 2024), to better comprehend the complexities of the lived experiences (Demkowicz et al., 2023) of the primary to secondary school transition. In demonstrating that a child's ability to cope with the social, emotional, and academic demands of the transition from primary to secondary school is influenced by the environment of the former, we contribute to knowledge further by detailing the practices and underlying mechanisms that underpin behaviours, such as academic coping, urged by the likes of Murayama and von Keyserlingk (2025). Such practices and mechanisms were captured under the term 'emotional nourishment' and consequently we encourage schools and educational stakeholders involved with them to embrace the principles introduced above to establish these environments. Emotionally nourishing practices may not only facilitate an ability to cope with the demands of transition, but also the swathe of social, emotional, and academic challenges children face daily in their lives, and consequently, we think it is wise if educational policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers focus their efforts on the principles fundamental to it.

CONCLUSION

To help position the contributions made within the field, we must acknowledge the limitations associated with them. Data were gathered from children attending two settings, one primary school and one secondary school, both located in a large city in the north of England, UK, and in both, the proportion of disadvantaged students and those known to be eligible for pupil premium funding was higher than average. Consequently, the reader should be aware of issues of generalisability and transferability that can be applied to the claims made. That said, whilst there were limitations in terms of the number of settings recruited, derived from just one city, we feel the healthy sample of 24 children, spread across primary and secondary

schools, appeases Demkowicz et al. (2023) call for the capture of 'lived experiences' of transition across different settings and time points. To placate this call further, though, and in response to another of this study's limitations, we encourage future researchers to capture the 'lived experiences' of multiple educational stakeholders, such as the practitioners and parents, in addition to the children, as the latter's views were the only population included in this piece.

Despite its limitations, this article captures how children anticipate and cope with the transition from primary to secondary school, according to final year primary school students' views on their upcoming transition and first-year secondary school students currently experiencing it. Whilst the anticipation of the move from primary to secondary school was marked by worry and concern, the actual lived experience of it, according to first-year secondary school students, demonstrated a distinct ability to cope with the social, emotional, and academic pressures that this transition brings. Specifically, the data revealed how worries and concerns voiced at primary school were met with adaptive academic coping strategies (Skinner & Saxton, 2020) of self-reliance, problem-solving, and support and information seeking at secondary school. Furthermore, the interviewees often referenced their emotionally nourishing primary schooling experiences when discussing their transition to secondary school, as a key influence on their ability to cope with this change in educational setting. The emotionally nourishing primary school context took shape in terms of its 'emotional culture' (Thoits, 2004) and through the demonstration of key principles of 'the ethics of care' (Noddings, 1984) such as motivational displacement and engrossment in the needs of the children (Noddings, 1995) and through acts of modelling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation (Noddings, 2002). Whilst work on components of caring environments has been carried out, including loving practitioner–pupil relationships in schools (see Page, 2018), the use of schemes designed to improve social and emotional skills (see Vincent, 2017; Wigelsworth et al., 2023) and whole school approaches to these areas (see Cavanagh et al., 2024), this article contributes explicitly to knowledge by making the case that such examples form only part of an 'emotionally nourishing' school environment.

To achieve this fully, and in addition to the components detailed above, schools fundamentally need to embrace approaches to teaching, learning and the curriculum that position care, emotion, and compassion as their central tenets, re-affirmed in its culture and leadership, and embedded throughout its policy, provision, and practice. Additionally, this article contributes further in its demonstration of how emotionally nourishing primary school environments may help to ease the transition from primary to secondary school, in their valuing of practices that facilitate an ability to cope with the demands brought about by the transition. With a recognition that the primary to secondary school transition is the most challenging in a child's educational journey (see Rodrigues et al., 2018) and bearing in mind also that little is known about children's 'lived experience' of the transition, across multiple contexts (Demkowicz et al., 2023), those interested in the field may find it valuable to explore how the primary school context – and specifically the extent to which this is 'emotionally nourishing' – influences a child's ability to cope with the demands of the transition.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This work was not supported by funding.

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 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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How to cite this article: Wood, P., Putwain, D. & Freitas Fernandes, P. (2026). Emotional nourishment begets academic coping during the primary to secondary school transition. *British Educational Research Journal*, 00, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.70119>