Children's Perspectives of Their Wellbeing During the Transition from Primary School to Secondary School

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Abstract

Transitioning from Primary School to Secondary School is cited as one of the most challenging stages of a young person's educational journey (Hopwood et al. 2016). Whilst the voice of the child lacks amplification in existing literature, large scale quantitative studies report feelings of stress and anxiety in young people during transition (e.g. Uka and Uka 2020; Van Rens et al. 2019), leading to a decline in wellbeing and a pause or regression of attainment. This qualitative study advances our understanding of how children perceive their wellbeing during transition to secondary school by prioritising their authentic voice, leading to recommendations for future practice.

This instrumental case study was motivated by three research questions: (1) How do young people perceive the impact of the transition to secondary school on their wellbeing, and why? (2) How do young people's perceptions of their wellbeing relate to the transition to secondary school change over time, and why? (3) What do children tell us about their experience of transitioning to secondary school and how we should manage the process?

Qualitative data was gathered using research conversations and a new research method: multi-literacy research conversations, which were conceptualised as part of this study. The study used a convenience sample of seven children who underwent this transition in 2021 and presents four themes following Reflexive Thematic Analysis of the data: (1) 'An emotional journey': Changing emotions during transition (2) 'Perception is reality': conceptualising secondary school. (3) 'A New normal': The experiences of secondary school. (4) 'A Helping hand': Supporting transition.

The findings challenge current literature that frames transition from the first day of secondary school onwards and focusses on how children adjust to the new setting and expectations. Conversants in this study felt the effects of transition from as early as Year Five which extends the currenting understanding of the boundaries of the transition period, highlighting that they were influenced by feelings of loss and grief at leaving primary school. A refinement of Alderfer's model of motivation is generated as a way of conceptualising how children's wellbeing may be supported during transition.

Acknowledgments

'Life, if you live it right, keeps surprising you, and the thing that keep surprising you most… is yourself'
– William Deresiewicz

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My parents: Lynne and Frank Dillon – for encouraging me to believe that I can do anything I set my mind to.

My friends: far too many to name - Who value me, as I am, and celebrate each little success as if it were their own.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the young people of the United Kingdom, whose voices are both eloquent and powerful.

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Chapter One – Introduction

1.1 Introducing the Study

1.1.1 The Backdrop

The transition from primary school to secondary school has long been recognised as one of the most challenging times in a young adolescent students' education, particularly in regard to their academic achievement. Research evidence from the last 30 years has identified a consistent pattern in students' academic achievement across transition, suggesting that student achievement stalls or even declines in the first year of secondary school. (Hopwood et al. 2016 p.290)

Transitioning from primary to secondary school is considered one of the most challenging stages of a young person's educational journey (Hopwood et al. 2016) and aligns with a period of significant physical, social and emotional change as the young person enters early adolescence (Cross et al. 2018). Transition to secondary school is associated with feelings of stress and anxiety (e.g. Fontaine 2020) which have engendered negative impacts on academic performance and wider education (Pascoe et al. 2020), but the child's voice lacks amplification in transition literature, with most researchers favouring large scale quantitative studies (e.g. Uka and Uka 2020; Van Rens et al. 2019). Despite the acknowledgement of the emotional impact transition can have on children, and the known links to adverse academic outcomes, there are significant gaps in the literature with regard to emotional transition (Ng-Knight et al 2018) and improving wellbeing during this time (Bharara 2020).

At the outset of this research, I was Head of Year 7 and Transition in a secondary school and was responsible for assisting pupils in making this transition each year and have a professional and personal values interest in preventing a pause or regression in personal and academic progress. Secondary schools across England and Wales recognise this abiding concern over transition and have devised a wide variety of 'transition programmes' to support students during this disruptive period (Evangelou et al. 2008). Such programmes often focus on academic transition, with a view to ensuring that students do not develop gaps in their learning with, for example, cross-setting literacy

activities (projects begun in Year 6 and completed in Year 7) to diagnose problems, and secondary school teachers visiting primary schools ahead of transition to establish teacher-pupil relationships. Evangelou et al. (2008) found pupils who had recently transitioned to secondary school felt the work was 'different' and 'a little harder' but were happy with the changes in academic expectations, with the authors citing 'positive transition' and 'well-settled children'. Although briefly explored, the study did not prioritise wellbeing and there is literature on the deficit of 'emotional transition'; ensuring that wellbeing *is* prioritised during this time (Ng-Knight et al 2018), which will be explored herein as part of the literature review. Most transition research to date is based upon large-scale quantitative enquiry which has highlighted that children experience feelings of anxiety and stress during transition to Secondary school (e.g. Makover et al. 2019; Cox et al. 2016) but the voice of the child lacks amplification in existing transition literature. Primary to Secondary School transition coincides with the transition from childhood to adolescence, which is known to be a time of increased risk to wellbeing and mental health (e.g. Black et al. 2019; Yoon et al. 2022) and school climate has been cited as an important aspect of positive mental health and wellbeing during the period of adolescence (Urke et al. 2022). As there is a strong correlation between the mental health of young people and their success at school (Smith et al 2021), the wellbeing of students before, during and after transition requires research in order to improve provision, helping children to develop strategies to strengthen feelings of wellbeing through well-designed transition programmes, and alleviate potential anxiety around transition. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) was enshrined into UK law in 1992 and there has been a rising recognition in the thirty years since that children have a right to be heard, and included in decisions that affect them (Darmasseelane et al. 2022). As part of our commitment to the UNCRC, capturing the authentic voice of the child is crucial so that they are included in future decision-making around transition.

The Department for Education's (DfE) National strategy for improving standards (DfE 2016 p.3) outlined a commitment to 'provide world-class education and care that allows every child and young person to reach his or her potential, regardless of background'. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the Department for Education published their 'outcome delivery plan' (DfE 2021) as a of way outlining the role that education will play in the rebuilding of the economy, shifting away from the potential of individual children. Indeed, in the aftermath of the pandemic, many of the publications from the Department for Education prioritise some of the most vulnerable groups of young people: those with Special Educational Needs, known to social services, and those identified as disadvantaged and eligible for Pupil Premium funding to improve their educational outcomes (e.g. DfE 2023a, DfE 2023b). The DfE have released literature centred around economic rebuilding, such as the development of further education, entering the workforce and ensuring young people can positively contribute to the UK economy (e.g. DfE 2023c, DfE 2023d), as well as early years and childcare reform, to ensure that parents are able to return to work following the birth of a child (e.g. DfE 2023e, DfE 2023f). This suggest that wellbeing is not of concern to the government in an individual sense, but in how it can contribute to a more robust economic position. Despite a consensus that transition is a problematic time for young people, there is no reference in the DfE literature to the many challenges, both academic and emotional, that transition is known to present. This is of major concern when one considers that the last government review of transition, published over twenty years ago (DfE. 1999), highlighted the need for 'social concerns' to be considered and concluded that there was too much focus on narrowing the academic gap. Whilst there has been a change in political leadership, national context, and ideology in the years since the review, leading to an emphasis on education as a tool to drive economic growth (DfE 2021), it would appear that there is little by way of proactive work being carried out by the DfE in relation to transition. It is my hope that the findings of this research will go some way to informing future policy-making with a view to assisting children to successfully transition from primary to secondary school, and to safeguard them

against the negative impacts that are known to be more likely to follow when transition is inadequately managed.

1.1.2 This study

Children across England continue to make the transition from primary to secondary schools and remain at risk of a deficit of emotional wellbeing during this significant event. This study focusses on the most common transition of students between state schools in England - from the end of Year Six in primary school to Year Seven in secondary school (DfE 2018), but without the inclusion of middle schools and independent schools due to the small number of such settings in England (Crook 2008). I wanted to establish an understanding of students' own perception of their wellbeing as they transition from primary to secondary school, and how this might change and develop over the transition period. I aimed to do this by gathering the first-hand accounts of experiences and perspectives of young people during and after transition to explore this, with the goal of forging a series of professional recommendations as to how young people might be constructively supported during this challenging time. In line with our obligations under the UNCRC, gaining the authentic voice of the child and applying this to decision-making is a central focus of this study and methods of elicitation are explored and developed as part of the research design.

The Covid-19 pandemic rendered conventional transition programmes impossible to implement due to school closures and risk assessments. In my own school we were unable to invite students into school to familiarise themselves with the site and staff, which is cited as the most important aspect of transition (Evangelou et al 2008). It will be interesting to consider the impact of this deficit on the effectiveness of children's transition as it reflects 'real' lived experiences for pupils and educators and is relevant to my role as an educator-researcher. Once the research commenced, experiences of transition under Covid-19 may have faded in the respondents' minds, however it was important that

the impact of this unprecedented episode was explored. It should be noted that this is not a piece of pandemic research, studying the impacts of Covid-19, but it was likely to be a topic of discussion amongst the participants as the period of lockdown had greatly impacted on their schooling through the period under investigation. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a negative effect on mental health across the globe (Torales et al. 2020) and students are likely to retain residual anxieties from that difficult time. I carefully considered sampling strategies to attempt to isolate specific concerns, and contributions to the research with regards to Covid-19 were to be considered in line with the research aims and questions.

1.1 Research Questions

This study's research questions are set within an interpretivist paradigm (see 3.2.1) and were formulated with children's views at the centre. The research questions do not seek to prove or disprove a theory but to capture the authentic experiences of young people and consider how changes to practice can be recommended to improve personal and academic outcomes:

1) How do young people perceive the impact of the transition period on their wellbeing, and why?

2) How do young people's perceptions of their wellbeing related to the transition period change over time, and why?

3) What do children tell us about their experience of transition and how we should manage the process?

1.2 Introducing the Author

1.2.1 Professional and Personal positionality

According to Carling et al. (2014), a researcher's positionality can affect the research they undertake, meaning that their own characteristics and lived experiences inform the planning and practicalities of the research process. This notion is emphasised by Bukamal (2022 p.237):

> Researchers – with all their beliefs, and all their attitudes forged by background and life-history – are assumed to be an integral part of the research process. (Bukamal 2022 p.237).

My research was set against the backdrop of my personal and professional positionality, the research process required me to reflect on the events that had led me to completing doctoral research. All qualitative research is contextual (Dodgson et al 2019) and in examining the interaction between my research and my positionality I hope to attain greater credibility and provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Berger 2013).

Following completion of an undergraduate degree in Music and a subsequent Post-graduate Certificate in Education, I began my teaching career in a Catholic secondary school on Merseyside. Two weeks after my appointment, the Archdiocese began process of closing the school due to falling numbers. I was promoted to Head of Performing Arts and tasked with ensuring that GCSE Drama, Music and Dance students successfully gained their qualifications. I took the opportunity to complete my master's degree over this period, with my research centering around the effects of the school closure on staff and students. This research experience engendered a passion for qualitative enquiry and the exploration of human experiences together with a desire to provide professional solutions for problems arising in times of challenge. Positioning student voice at the centre of the research allowed their voices and experiences to permeate the final thesis and inform professional recommendations, something that I continued to work towards as part of this doctoral research.

Following the closure of the school, I relocated to my current school in Gloucestershire where I was appointed Head of Music and then Head of Year 7 and Transition, where my interest in the transition from primary school to secondary school grew as I worked with children, colleagues and parents involved in that process. My work involved countless visits to primary schools each year, developing and delivering transition programmes and being responsible for the academic and pastoral welfare of these students during their first year of secondary school. I found this a very rewarding job that brought with it a valuable reminder of the potential challenges that can occur during this transition

and the impact we can have as educators on the personal, social and emotional development of young people in our care.

Subsequently I was appointed to the Senior Leadership Team as Assistant Headteacher with responsibility for safeguarding together with child protection, transition and primary school relationships. I am the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) for the school and The Designated Teacher for Children in Care (CiC) and Previously Looked after children (PLAC) and so have significant professional experience and knowledge of working with the most vulnerable of students. I work alongside staff, students, parents/carers and governors of the school, as well as external agencies including health providers, the police and social services, as part of the local authority Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub, as well as the Early Help Partnership, Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and the Virtual School. My work in child protection and safeguarding further emphasised the vital importance of listening to children and to their authentic experiences to coordinate the most apposite support and intervention at the correct time, to facilitate personal and academic success.

My professional experience to date has highlighted the importance of meeting the needs of vulnerable children and moderating situations that impede their ability to reach their academic and personal potential. I have a strong working knowledge of transition, child protection and safeguarding, and spend much of my working life talking to children and their families about sensitive and difficult topics in a respectful and collaborative manner, always placing the child at the centre. These experiences position me to draw effectively on the experiences of young people and work in a solution-focussed manner to improve outcomes - a crucial aspect of this research.

1.2.2 Insider-outsider research

A significant consideration when conducting research with children, particularly those whom a researcher teaches, is that of power asymmetry and how this might impact on the study (Kim 2011). As I shared the school community with my proposed research participants, and had considerable experience working in education, I initially considered myself to be an insider researcher, affiliated with members of the study population (Lor and Bowers 2018). It was important for me to explore the insider aspects of my positionally to properly consider my perspective as a researcher who was a member of the same school community as my participants. Whilst it was true that participants and I shared the same space and were part of the same community, there were obvious differences between my role in this setting and theirs. There were also pertinent issues in relation to power that I wanted to explore – could I really be an insider researcher in this context? I was aware that my position as a teacher in the school could affect the design and execution of the study and how this

was likely to be received, and engaged with, by participants (Mills 2018), who might find it challenging to conceptualise, or benefit from, the duality of my teacher-researcher role (Brannick and Coghlan 2007).

Coghlan (2019) asserts that insider researchers are a part of the organisation or community that is being researched and who have access to the hidden organisational realities to which an outsider would not usually be exposed. Conversely, outsider researchers are researchers who join the organisation temporarily for the purpose of conducting the research (Holleland and Johansson 2017). Within these parameters I could be considered an insider research as part of the same school organisation, but I had obvious questions with regard to the extent of this positioning particularly when considering Poulton's (2023) claims that insider researchers are those who share the experience of their research participants. I believed that merely being a member of the school community was not enough to claim that we were sharing the experience of transition, despite the binary options put forward, but I did not consider myself an outsider researcher either. This is a debate explored by Bukamal (2022) who had a comparable experience as a Bahraini national fully immersed in western culture, having lived in the UK and New Zealand for many years. Bukamal acknowledges aspects of her positionality that made her both an 'insider' and 'outsider' in the cultural landscapes of both Bahrain and The West and responded by shifting her insider-outsider positions in each country in which she researched. Bukamal (2022) further argues that she sought to shift her research positioning from insider when interviewing staff members to outsider when observing classroom practice. It seems unlikely that this shifting positioning has credibility when considering that the insider outsider debate has a basis in the relationships and shared experiences a researcher has with participants. This impacts on the ability to move from insider research, with its associated privileges and power dynamics (Dwyer et al. 2009), to that of an outsider, during a bounded piece of research with the same participants. A researcher is an insider or outsider by nature of their experiences and relationships and, therefore, cannot decide which positioning they would like to take, only identify which position they have and how this might impact their research. Whilst this study is not directly applicable to my context, it illustrated to me that the conversation around the insider-outsider debate is active and encouraged me to pursue a more satisfactory framework.

Nakata (2015) proposes a wider perspective on the insider-outsider debate, arguing that rather than a binary categorisation, insider-outsider positioning sits on a spectrum, outlined overleaf (Fig.1) and viewed from the perspective of the teacher-researcher:

	Outsider research	Insider's outsider research	Insider research
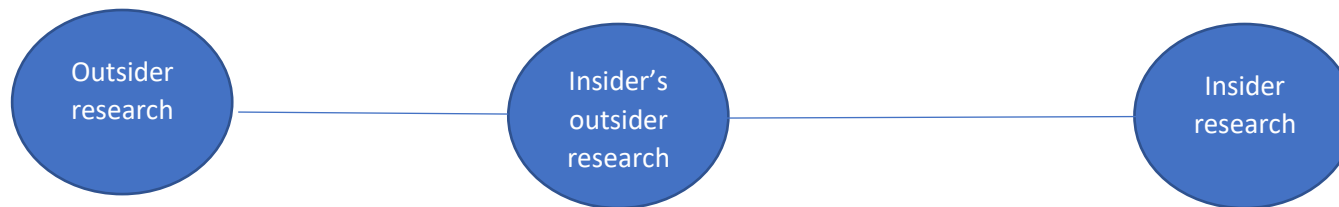
Type of research / Dimensions	Outsider Research (OR)	Insider's Outsider research (IOR)	Insider research (IR)
Researcher	- Third person account: collect and analyse data as a third person.	- Collect data as a first person but analyse it as a third person.	First person account: collect and analyse data as a first person (but with a critical viewpoint).
Student (Participant)	- Students as cooperative generators of data; - a source of data.	- Students as: - collaborators in the research process; - Students as cooperative generators of data. - Students as a source of data.	- Students as collaborators in the research process; - cooperative generators of data; - a source of data. - The practitioner themselves as a source of data.
Contribution	- More to the research field than the practitioners	- More to the improvement of practitioners' teaching, but also to the research field to some extent	- The place for education and professional development - Better understanding the practitioner themselves as well as students.

Figure 1. Dimensions of Research Methodology: Insider-Outsider Perspective – abridged - Nakata (2015)

Nakata's characterisation (2015) helped me to make some sense of my positioning. Insider's Outsider Research (IOR) research felt a more appropriate fit to my context and situation. I was collecting data as a member of the school community and from the student perspective, i.e. first person, however I could not analyse the data from the perspective of someone who was undergoing transition with my participants whereas I could do so from a third person perspective, removed from experiences of the transition process. My evaluation of the 'Student' and 'Contribution' dimensions of the model, too, aligned with my research approach and philosophical positioning by casting the students as research collaborators, thus valuing their voice, and contributing to the research field whilst also informing my own practice. Reflecting on the complexity of my professional positioning in this research, I questioned what was to be gained from identifying the 'correct' category in which to 'shoehorn' myself, other than an opportunity to reflect on the importance that should be placed on my positioning in the research. Whilst I feel that Nakata's Insider's Outsider Research approach might be the best fit for me in this model, I did not feel it allowed for the complexities of my relationships with my participants.

Lu and Hodge (2019) suggest that the conceptualisation of insider-outsider is limited and instead call for a multidimensional approach to positionality that is as unique as the researcher. Relationships with participants can be complex (Yassour-Borochowitz 2014) and it follows that my positionality is best explored within the specific context in which I find myself, the participants, and the research. The debate around insider-outsider research is grounded in relationships with participants and the research context, and how these might impact the research and analysis. Examining my relationships with my participants, rather than settling on which 'type' of researcher I was, seemed to be a more meaningful way to approach this issue.

I have delivered a significant amount of primary school outreach work and have worked with students from reception upwards for nearly a decade. This means that the participants in this research may have had a relationship with me prior to their transition and thus developed trust in me as an adult. I developed a further positive relationship with each student as part of their transition meetings in year six where I met with each prospective year seven student to talk to them about what to expect from secondary school and support them to manage the transition period. On their first day, I was the only teacher already known to them and was a consistent point of contact whom they could approach with any worries or concerns during their first year at secondary school. Randall (2012) argues that this trusting relationship building is important to consider as part of this research as it is likely that students felt more confident to communicate more authentically with a researcher with whom they had a pre-existing relationship. On the other hand, Ladkin (2017) suggests it is possible that students recognised my position of power and authority in the school

community and felt less able to speak negatively about their experiences through fear of repercussions. This is an example of where the insider-outsider paradigm does not seem to allow for the complexities of social interaction and a multi-dimensional approach is a better fit. As with all research, the rapport between researcher and participant is potentially the most important aspect of conducting quality research (Pitts and Miller-Day 2016). My professional experience, and existing relationships with participants, meant that I was in a strong position to develop rapport with students within a research setting, building on existing relationships, but it was important to be aware of the power asymmetry that existed which is explored in the next section.

1.2.3 Power

Schools, by their very nature, provide the setting for power relationships in which children consistently feature as "low power" members. (Zhang et al. 2019). Gurdal and Sorbring (2018) found that the relationships between teachers and children are institutional in nature and that children perceive a lack of agency within these settings, to the extent that they fear admonition for seeking it. Aruta et al. (2019) agree with this position: the teacher is in a position of power and authority and the child is in a powerless position with limited, if any, agency. In order to gain the authentic voice of children in research, this power asymmetry needs to be carefully considered and managed, so that children are afforded a research and educational environment that allows them to candidly present their views. Gaining the authentic voice of the child was an important part of this research and so it was important to me that I created a research environment that facilitated this by ensuring the power asymmetry was addressed.

The challenging aspect of this debate on power relations between teacher-researcher and student is that they explicitly exist as part of the social structure of a school environment, and we cannot deny it (Gill et al. 2012). In a school environment, the adults make and enforce the rules, are the imparters of knowledge and are able to make and enforce decisions about young people in their care. So, the aim cannot be to remove this power imbalance, but to manage it in a way that allows the voices of the participants to be present in the research in an authentic way.

Ollin and Porn (2021) discuss ways in which to manage a teacher – researcher power relationship. They argue that dictating rigid terms of research activities, e.g. deciding who speaks when, can emphasise an existing power imbalance as power and control is enacted during the research. To mitigate this, I decided to explore the use of Butcher's (2018) research conversations, and subsequently developed my own multi-literacy research conversations, as ways of reducing this power asymmetry in this project (see 3.4.5).

Gillet-Swan and Sargeant (2018) produced an interesting paper that highlights the intrusion of other school personnel into the research space can interrupt the research climate and affect the engagement of the child with the research. For example, when an interview takes place with a child in a classroom and a member of school staff enters the room, even if they do not engage with the researcher or child, this was seen to be a barrier to full and free participation with the research. I ensured that my research activities were conducted in a private space to avoid intrusions like this, thus preserving a purposeful research environment. This issue is explored from an ethical standpoint later and feeds into the research design, but it is nevertheless a useful reminder of a child's power-positioning in a school setting and the importance of ensuring a safe, secure, and accessible research environment as part of a child-centred approach to research with children.

1.2.4 A Child-centred approach

In line with my axiological positioning, outlined in 1.2.5, keeping the child's voice at the centre of this research, as part of a right-respecting approach is vital. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) was enshrined into UK law in 1992 and has 54 articles that cover all aspects of a child's life and associated rights. Articles twelve and thirteen, perhaps the most apposite here, set out the following:

Article 12

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Article 13

1. The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

2. The exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:

(a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; or

(b) For the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals

Seeking and listening to the views of children is central to the above articles and their publication has led to a greater prioritisation of gaining the views of children in educational research (Gillet-Swan and Coppock 2016). My intent via the research is to put children at the centre as agents of change and as those who know their world best. There has been a long tradition of research *on* children, with them as an object (Faldet and Nes 2021) as opposed to *with* them as part of a collaborative research relationship, which further highlights the power asymmetry that exists in research with children. Children have a right to be included in decisions that are made around transition provision and the lack of amplification in transition research means that they have not had sufficient opportunity to express their views and impart information on a topic that has so much bearing on their lives. My research methodology and personal axiology values the contributions children can make to improving the experience of transition, aligning with the rights they have to do so, which I hoped would lead to meaningful contributions to professional practice.

Sudarsan et al. (2022) discuss the importance of creating a research space that ensures participants feel comfortable and able to access and contribute authentically to the research. All research activities in this study were conducted in a trauma-informed manner to support students to feel comfortable and safe (e.g. Ballin 2022). A trauma-informed approach requires researchers to have an understanding of the significance of trauma in people's lives and support recovery (Auty et al. 2022). I have received professional training in trauma-informed practice and utilised this approach when deploying research methods. For example, research conversations took place in an uncluttered classroom known to the children and not, for example, in my office, which might have emphasised any power asymmetry. I also thought carefully about the layout of the room, ensuring that doors had glass in them, and that each participant was seated nearest to the door with a clear exit route from the room. When working with conversants, strength-based language was used (Brunzell 2021) along with nuances from my professional knowledge and experience of interaction with trauma-affected young people.

In order to best hear the voice of the child I carefully considered the research activities I would deliver which led me to the use Butcher's (2018) research conversations and the later refining of this to multi-literacy research conversations. This is explored further in chapter three.

1.2.5 Axiology

Axiology 'addresses questions related to what is valued and considered to be desirable or 'good' for humans and society' (Biedenbach and Jacobsson 2016 p.140). Exploring this is an important part of the philosophical underpinning of this research as a researcher's sense of value, and their experiences cannot be left out of research and will, inevitably, colour it (Espedal et al 2022). Axiology concerns the 'study and exploration of human values, which enables us to identify the underlying beliefs and values that influence our perceptions and interpretation of our life experiences, our decisions and actions—to understand clearly why we do what we do' (McArdle et al 2013 p.84). As a teacher, I believe that children have a right to a broad and thorough education and that issues surrounding wellbeing have an impact on their ability to receive this education. I believe that professionals and researchers must create environments where children are able to express their views and feelings authentically and that they should be taken seriously and influence policy and practice. I fully endorse the UNCRC, as discussed earlier (see 1.2.4).

I view this topic through a constructivist lens; acknowledging the importance of social interactions and their influence on a person's understanding of the experiences they undergo (Burr 2015). I hold a non-technological expectation of education; that it is not a machine-like system that is necessarily input-output correlated (Biesta 2015) which links to my own social idealist ontology; the world around us, and the ideas within it, are shaped by our experiences and the experiences of others (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004) which is explored in detail in chapter three. The very notion of researching mental health and wellbeing assumes interactional experiences from different perspectives and it is those individual perspectives that I feel are most valuable when researching a topic of this nature. Consequently, this research is of value in several spheres in its potential to enact positive change for young people, and to inform policy and practice, as they prepare for, make and feel the effects of the most challenging transition of their educational lives.

Summary

Exploring children's perspective of their wellbeing during transition from primary school to secondary school has a clear link to my professional context, which influenced the planning and execution of this study. I was hopeful that the relationship between my professional positionality and my study would have a positive impact on my practice and wider transition policy and practice, whilst also adding credence to the study due to the acknowledgement that I have personal and professional experience of the transition process. I have familiarity with the challenges students face whilst transitioning from primary to secondary school and I passionately believe that I have a responsibility in ensuring that the transition is as positive an experience as possible. Consequently, it

was essential that I employed some reflexivity by considering how my professional positionality and personal ideologies may shape the design and execution of this study (Dodgson 2019), whilst remaining focussed on improving the provision for students undergoing transition and sharing any relevant new knowledge with other practitioners. There are opportunities for further dissemination of the findings of this research, which include other schools in the multi-academy trust (MAT) to which my setting belongs, our county association of primary and secondary headteachers, professional journals, and scholarly and pastoral journals.

1.3 Structure of this study

Chapter one sets out the foundations for this study, positioning it within the context of current literature and exploring its relevance and purpose. The author is introduced, as is the ideological perspective. The power relationships of teachers researching their students as an insider's outsider researcher are explored.

Chapter two begins with an explanation and justification of the search strategy before literature pervasive in the fields of transition and children's wellbeing is reviewed and gaps identified, providing greater context for the current study.

Chapter three examines the interpretivist epistemological and relativist ontological positionings used as a rationale for knowledge generation as part of a constructivist methodology. The methodological paradigms of the study are explored, and data collection tools are justified. A refined method of eliciting the voice of children is conceptualised as part of this chapter.

Chapter four expresses and analyses the findings of the study using Reflexive Thematic Analysis and the presentation of four themes: Theme one: 'An emotional journey': Changing emotions during transition, Theme two: 'Perception is reality': conceptualising secondary school, Theme three: 'A New normal': The experiences of secondary school and Theme four: 'A Helping hand': Supporting transition. The findings are analysed and linked to existing literature. Chapter five draws together the key findings of this study in the context of the research questions and discusses implications for practice and future research.

1.4 COVID-19 statement

In 2019, the first case of coronavirus disease 2019 was identified in Wuhan, China. Two years of global disruption followed as the world dealt with its rampant transmission, leading to a series of national lockdowns across the United Kingdom, including the prolonged closure of school settings. The pandemic is considered a global trauma that had, and has, significant effects on the mental health of children (Mindel et al. 2022). This research does not deal directly with the impact of Covid-19, though it is important to note that its impact is felt across participants in this research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Within this chapter I review the pervading literature in the field of primary to secondary school transition in England. The concept of wellbeing and the impact this might have on children are also explored and as this research aimed to prioritise the voice of the child, this is also explored within each aspect of the review. In reviewing the literature, I identify gaps that have informed my research questions and research approach. This narrative literature review (Ferrari 2015) aims to contextualise the research questions and place this research in the wider conversation. Ferrari (2015) suggests that a narrative review debates and appraises current literature and is more suitable than a systematic review when seeking focus and rationale for future research. Greenhalgh (2001) explains that systematic literature reviews use selection criteria to identify literature that aims to answer a question that:

> *needs to be defined very precisely, since the reviewer must make a dichotomous*
> *(Yes/no) decision as to whether each potentially relevant paper will be included*
> *(Greenhalgh 2001 p.124)*

This review aims to explore existing literature in the fields of transition and children's wellbeing to generate an understanding of areas for future research, and reasons for pursuing them (Saracci et al. 2019) as opposed to answering a specific question by drawing together existing research.

The study School

The study school is an Ofsted rated 'good', comprehensive 11-16 setting, located in a rural area of the South West of England. The school serves a wide and diverse catchment area and receives children into Year 7 from twenty-five Primary school settings, many of which are small, rural village schools. The school has above average numbers of children who have an identified Special Educational Need, and of children who are considered disadvantaged by the government and are therefore in receipt of pupil premium funding.

2.1 Search Strategy

The amount of potentially relevant literature was very large, and I wanted to focus on qualitative research in the field of education to make this review manageable. As I was intent on prioritising the voice of the child, qualitative research was a sensible initial focus as qualitative enquiry by its nature has the capacity to capture stories and experiences and prioritise voice. As will be discussed, transition research is dominated by large scale quantitative studies, so the scope of the review was broadened to include such studies as a way of gaining an understanding of the foundations upon which this research sits.

During this literature review, I used the University of the West of England (UWE) library and google scholar database searches to generate literature and followed lines of enquiry as the review developed. I also reviewed government publications, particularly from the Departfig. 9ment for Education (DfE), as well as publications from other sources such as mental health charities.

I began by reviewing articles relating to young people's experiences during transition from primary to secondary school, including the search terms '*primary to secondary school transition/transfer',* '*student perspectives of primary to secondary school transition/transfer', 'effects of primary to secondary school transition/transfer',* and progressed to articles exploring their wellbeing during this time; *'wellbeing primary to secondary school transition/transfer', 'anxiety primary to secondary school transition/transfer'*. Before long I questioned what was meant by the term 'wellbeing', as there was disparity in use of language, and spent time reviewing literature that explored this. As the review developed, search terms evolved to include synonyms and terms that were present in the literature that formed new lines of enquiry so to ensure a good level of rigour including *'emotional wellbeing', 'mental wellbeing', 'mental health'*, 'well-being', and *'social wellbeing'*. Despite a lack of agreement on a shared definition it was appropriate to broaden the scope to include a wider range of countries and global policymakers including the United Nations and World Health Organisation to see how other nations had conceptualised wellbeing in children, as a way of gaining a wider perspective.

With regard to searching transition literature, initially I felt it appropriate to focus on literature concerning transition in England as this was most relevant to my context and governed by the same ideologies and legislation in education policy. I was, however, surprised as I had expected more substantive literature on transition in England, but this was not forthcoming with the last full scale government review on transition conducted fifteen years ago (DfE 2008) and there was a distinct

absence of the voice of the child. This was particularly surprising as transition is cited as one of the most challenging parts of a young person's educational journey (Hopwood et al. 2016) and a major life event (Bagnall et al. 2022). Thus, I widened the scope of the literature on transition to include a wider timeframe and literature from nations where the discourse around transition was more active, notably Scotland, The Netherlands and Australia. This material related to education systems that are not dissimilar to those in England, so had relevance and transferability to this study. Whilst children transition school at different ages in other countries (Bharara 2020), some parity of experience has been drawn by Zeedyk et al. (2003), suggesting that the concerns of transitioning English children are like those in other countries.

An agreed and concise definition of wellbeing is elusive in research and professional practice (Tsuji et al. 2023). I therefore begin the presentation of this review by exploring the wide variety of terms associated with 'wellbeing' and reach a concise definition for use in this research. I begin here to reach a working definition before exploring this concept in the context of transition. I then move on to exploring children's experience and perceptions of their own wellbeing before finishing this first section by linking wellbeing to mental health and exploring associated policy.

The next section focusses more explicitly on transition, beginning by exploring what we mean by 'transition' and how it can be bound in a timeframe and whether transition is an important event for young people, before moving on to the effects of transition on wellbeing and academic outcomes and how effective transition can be facilitated. The absence of transition in government policy is then covered, as are potential reasons for this absence, and how policy and practice at a local level is filling the gap. The scarcity of the child's perspective in existing transition research is then explored as is the notion of authenticity of the child's voice.

2.2 'Emotional Wellbeing' or 'mental health' or 'mental wellbeing'? – Exploring terminology

Throughout the literature there are many terms used interchangeably that are associated with the notion of wellbeing, including 'mental health' (Herrman et al. 2005), 'mental wellbeing' (Woodward 2012), 'social and emotional wellbeing' (Lester and Cross 2015), 'welfare' (Van der Daijl 2020) and 'emotional wellbeing' (Qi and Wu 2020). This raised the importance of concisely framing what is meant by wellbeing and its positioning as part of this research. Different perspectives of wellbeing

are explored to ensure appropriate literature is reviewed, to design an effective study and make recommendations at the conclusion of this research that are fit for purpose.

Jarden and Roache (2023) highlight the lack of a shared understanding of wellbeing and how this can be a challenge when attempting discourse around the concept. Clear definitions are thought by some to be impossible to gain as wellbeing encompasses all aspects of a person's life (McNaught cited in Parnham (2017)). Indeed, wellbeing holds a different relevance and meaning across different cultures (e.g. Shakespeare et al. 2020; Hickey 2021) and ages (discussed later in this chapter) and concerns the ontological assessment of individual people (Wellard and Secker 2017). Whilst acknowledging this, Simons and Baldwin (2021) highlight the need for an operational definition to provide some consistency and transferability of understanding so that researchers are working to a shared goal. They suggest the following definition:

Wellbeing is a state of positive feelings and meeting full potential in the world.
(Simons and Baldwin 2021 p.990).

A heavy focus on emotions and feelings is appropriate when considering the wellbeing of children whose emotions must be understood by researchers to adequately meet their psychological needs (Mondragon et al. 2021).

The Royal Society (Cited in Clarke et al. 2011), the independent scientific academy of the UK, acknowledges the individual and community perspectives, arguing that wellbeing is:

a positive and sustainable mental state that allows individuals, groups and nations

to thrive and flourish. (Clarke et al. 2011 p2)

This is a definition that bears resemblance to that put forward by the Department for Education (2022a), who acknowledge there are many and varied definitions of wellbeing, offering their positioning as part of a report on children's and young people's wellbeing, adding more synonyms into the conversation:

[wellbeing is] 'how we're doing' as individuals, communities and as a nation, and how sustainable that is for the future. It is sometimes referred to as social welfare or social value" (DfE 2022a p.32).

The characterisation of wellbeing as 'how we're doing' adds little to the conversation, particularly as there is no elaboration as to which aspect of an individual's life this might be referring and the use of the phrase 'social value', one 'ambiguous to define and slippery to measure' (Barman 2016 p.6), is a curious one in this context, suggesting equating the state of one's wellbeing with one's intrinsic value in society. Whilst I would not challenge the duty of all to contribute positively to society, the use of 'social value' in this primer definition moves wellbeing away from the individual and towards the impact this can have on the nation, as different from other definitions. One would hope that the DfE, whilst having strategic national oversight of education, would keep the child at the centre of its publications and intent.

Despite the DfE (2021) acknowledging the relevance of wellbeing as a method of encouraging sustainable wellness in a community and referencing its importance as part of UN sustainable development goals, the latest outcome delivery plan for education (DfE 2021) is remarkably quiet on the subject. It instead positions education as a method of addressing the post-pandemic economic shortfall by *levelling up* to increase outcomes and reduce unemployment. The Covid-19 pandemic meant that schools were intermittently closed to students between March 2020 and March 2021, leading to missed learning and a subsequent drop in employment (Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2023) alongside significant effects on children's mental health (Cowie and Myers 2020) which are not strategised in this publication. Demonstrably, the United Kingdom Government has prioritised the resurgence of the national economy through employment and educational outcomes (e.g. DfE 2021, DfE 2023c, DfE 2023d) whilst emphasising the responsibility of schools to lead in managing the growing mental health crisis in young people across the United Kingdom (e.g. DfE 2022b, DfE 2023g, DfE 2023h). Nurse and Sykes (2023) argue that the UK government's political focus from 2019 was turned to narrowing the wealth gap that exists between Northern and Southern regions in England, following the referendum and subsequent leaving of the European Union in 2016. Alongside this, there has been significant and rapid changes in educational leadership at national level with the postholder of Secretary of State for Education changing eight times between 2016 and 2022 under six Prime Ministers. This level of uncertainty regarding economic stability and political leadership, amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic (Banks et al. 2020), has led to a policy focus on rebuilding the UK economy. Funding for schools has decreased in real terms since

2010 (Education Policy Institute 2022) meaning that schools are less resourced to meet the increasing responsibilities of supporting children's mental health and wellbeing placed on them by central government (Birch et al. 2020) whilst policy inaction and inadequate funding exists.

The Department for Education refers to individuals and communities as part of the definition of wellbeing, which points us to consider the general wellbeing of school communities, including its adult members. Harding et al. (2019) discuss the relationship between teacher mental health and that of their students, suggesting that poor teacher mental health may negatively impact the relationships teachers hold with students, a protective factor in transition, in turn affecting student mental health. With a significant reported decline in the mental health of teaching staff (e.g. Salinas-Falquez et al. 2022 and Kim et al. 2022), which is often work-related (Evans et al. 2022), alongside the known mental health crisis for young people, there is an alarming lack of action from the DfE in this regard, despite the DfE acknowledging that there is 'more work to do' to tackle teacher workload and its impact on teacher wellbeing (DfE 2019 p.14). The characterisation of wellbeing as 'how we're doing', does not serve to acknowledge the multi-facetted perspectives of wellbeing, discussed hereafter.

Dodge et al. (2012) acknowledge the decades-long battle of defining wellbeing in research. They cite challenges with existing definitions in that they are too blurred and broad, or too complex, and are therefore not accessible outside of academia. To address this, they put forward a definition that positions wellbeing as a balance between the challenges individuals comes across in their lives and the resources that they can draw upon to manage them. This is illustrated in figure 2. below:

Fig. 2. A model of wellbeing (Dodge et al. 2012)

This conceptualisation essentially emphasises the significance of emotional resilience on positive wellbeing, a position also held by Hewson (2021), particularly with regard to the wellbeing of young people. Horner (2016 p.384) defines resilience as 'an interactive concept to describe the combination of serious risk experiences and a relatively positive psychological outcome despite those experiences' and suggests that levels of resilience in children can be positively affected by their character and positive relationships, and safe, quality schools. Wasty (2022) challenges this notion of resilience, arguing that it relies on the removal of a perceived stress to be a valuable protective factor, and that relying on resilience to navigate challenging experiences is flawed i.e., resilience means bouncing back *after* adversity, not during. Despite this, the notion of resilience as a protective factor to wellbeing is mirrored in the policy discourse of government as they call upon schools to promote children's mental health through the development of resilience (Brown and Shay 2021). The transition to secondary school can lead to a deficit of the factors that affect resilience (see 2.10), therefore how a child copes with low self-esteem, changing relationships and a new school is likely to have an impact on their levels of resilience and overall wellbeing during, and after, the transition period.

Barkham et al. (2019) mirror the position of Dodge et al. (2012) and argue that wellbeing relates to positive feelings about oneself, and the resilience and personal resources to deal with the challenges of life. Mental health, they argue, is a separate and unconnected entity describing the presence of specific and significant issues that have a negative impact on a person who does not have the inner capacity to manage these experiences. The resource pool that a person possesses to deal with challenges presented to them normally grows with time and experience, highlighting that children and young people are more likely to be significantly affected by challenges than adults due to a shallower resource pool. Schools undertake a work to equip children to meet these challenges by supporting students to develop qualities such as resilience and problem-solving that are promised to be invaluable in times of challenge.

2.3 Theoretical Perspectives of wellbeing

McAllister (2005, cited in Tisdall 2015) attempted to draw consensus across the divergent wellbeing literature, concluding that it has both subjective and objective dimensions. Watson et al (2012) discuss objectivist and subjectivist positioning within theories of wellbeing, citing the differences between human experiences and perceptions, and defining what constitutes a positive and negative

impact on wellbeing as a result. This perspective is also explored by Williams (2021) who differentiates between Hedonism, Eudaimonic and Social aspects of wellbeing, which is discussed below to gain a deeper understanding, and work towards a working definition of wellbeing for this research.

2.3.1 Subjectivist theories of wellbeing

Subjectivist theories of wellbeing acknowledge that a person's wellbeing is dependent on their own attitudes such as desiring, liking, valuing and finding attractive or compelling (Konigs 2022), placing wellbeing within a person's preferences and individual desires, meaning that a person's wellbeing is a unique notion affected by personal responses to experiences. Literature pertaining to children's wellbeing is dominated by subjective measurements (e.g. Cho and Yu 2020; Shou et al. 2022) and so I wanted to review literature concerning subjectivist theories of wellbeing to explore why this might be, and to gain a deeper understanding of wellbeing from this perspective. The subjective positionings of Hedonism and Desire-satisfaction are explored below.

Hedonism

The Hedonist perspective, perhaps the most intuitive of wellbeing theories (Mendola 2006 ; Adler and Fleurbaey 2016), equates wellbeing with pleasure, arguing that individual achievements, experiences and relationships are irrelevant other than that insofar as they provide pleasure to a person. It is this pleasure, or conversely pain, irrespective of how it is achieved, that has an impact on our wellbeing (Goldman 2018). Wellbeing from this standpoint is considered experiential in that it is dependent on, not only the individual experiences of a person, but their attitude towards those experiences; for an activity to have a positive impact on wellbeing, a person must positively engage with it. This challenges some aspects of objective list theories of wellbeing, explored later in this section. A Hedonist approach argues that a person's sense of wellbeing is dictated by the balance of pleasure and pain in their lives (Van der Deijl 2021). Perhaps illustrative of life of the general population in 21st Century Britain, unrestrained pleasure-seeking, or radical hedonism (Orsolya 2021), can often couple with a lack of sense of social responsibility or connectedness, and a tendency towards over-indulgence that can negatively affect wellbeing in the long-term.

A Desire-Satisfaction perspective argues that when a person's desires are met, this is an indicator to them that their life is going well which has a positive effect on their wellbeing (Goldman 2018). There are, however, many examples given to suggest that a person's intrinsic wellbeing - things that are desirable in and of themselves - may be prioritised at the risk of their instrumental wellbeing - things that lead to greater wellbeing in the future (e.g. Van der Deijl 2021). For example, a young person may choose to play on their games console in place of going to school. Whilst this may satisfy their intrinsic desires, and so have a positive impact on their short-term wellbeing, they have made a decision that is likely to negatively affect their potential to satisfy their future desires (e.g. Own a home and car, employment they enjoy and that pays well), therefore casting doubt on the security of future wellbeing. This highlights that young people may be more motivated by and engaged with their short-term wellbeing and find it more challenging to appreciate the instrumental impact of some activities known to improve wellbeing.

2.3.2 Objectivist theory of wellbeing

Engagement with sport (Bloodworth et al. 2011), enjoying a Mediterranean diet (Moreno-Agnostina et al. 2018) along with good quality sleep and a sense of purpose (Chow 2020) are all known to contribute positively to our wellbeing. This can challenge the subjectivist theories of wellbeing that state we should follow our personal desires to improve our wellbeing. There are people for whom engaging with sport would bring back painful memories of PE in school, despite acknowledging the positive impact of exercise on wellbeing, and others who are immovable from the intrinsic wellbeing value of a diet of junk food, despite acknowledging it can have a negative impact on their instrumental wellbeing. Objectivist theories of wellbeing acknowledge that human beings, sometimes, do not know what is best for them and provide a checklist.

Eudaimonism and perfectionism

Rooted in the musings of Aristotle, eudaimonism theories propose that there are objective needs that, when met, are conducive to optimal human development and growth (McMahan and Estes 2010). There is disagreement amongst objective list theorists with regards to what should feature on the supposedly definitive list of human development and wellbeing (Lauinger 2012) as, dependent

on an individual's cultural and social context, different capabilities will be relevant in reaching optimum development within that social arena. There is much literature on the effects of yoga and aerobic exercise (Welford et al. 2022; Al-Johani 2022), engaging with nature (Baur 2020), mindfulness intervention (Fazia et al. 2021) and Diet (Moreno-Agostino et al. 2018) on wellbeing. Engagement with these activities is widely recognised as having a positive impact on mood and wellbeing and have become a source of focus in modern society, supporting the objective eudaimonic position. Whilst aspects of this literature are driven by the and sports and leisure industries (e.g. tourism (Smith and Diekmann 2017), the veracity of the activities above to protect wellbeing is condoned by public health research (e.g. Wang and Lin), World Health Organisation (WHO 2022) and National Health Service (NHS 2022). Children are more likely make choices that positively impact their intrinsic wellbeing, so may find it more challenging to engage with an objective wellbeing position. For example, Grubliauskiene et al. (2012) found that children could only be meaningfully encouraged to make healthier food choices when given rewards that adequately fulfilled their intrinsic, subjective wellbeing (e.g. a chance to play games and receive positive praise and applause from adults) underlining the notion that a child's wellbeing, at least in the short term, is more dependent on subjective influences. This is an important consideration for professionals working with children and adolescents when deploying wellbeing interventions that rely on objective interventions.

Perfectionism sits alongside eudaimonism but extends the theory further arguing that only capacities that can be developed should be, advocating for an efficient and personal approach to improving wellbeing, as an objective list theory (Goldman 2018). This seems to refine the eudaimonistic perspective, suggesting a selection of the most appropriate activities or processes relevant to an individual person, despite their personal desires.

This raises the question of a child's ability to engage with objective 'wellbeing activities', such as those outlined above, if it is not something that inherently interests them. An adult can perceive their wellbeing as a blend of subjectivity and objectivity, but later I argue that a child has a more hedonistic, subjective perception, meaning it is likely that we will gain more of an insight through this lens. This is explored later in this chapter.

Theory of wellbeing conceptualisation from McMahan and Estes (2010); Goldman (2018)			
Objective list theories		Subjective	
Eudaimonism	Perfectionism	Hedonism	Desire-satisfaction
Objective needs rooted in human nature and conducive to human growth. Realisation of one's true potential. Contributing positively to the lives of others.	Focus on what is needed to maximise and fully develop mental, rational, physical and social capabilities.	Pursuit of pleasure Pleasure = wellbeing Avoidance of negative experience	Satisfying desires When desires are fulfilled, a person's life is going well.

Table 1. Theory of wellbeing conceptualisation (McMahan and Estes (2010); Goldman (2018)

There is evidence to suggest that the experience of hedonistic pleasure can positively impact on wellbeing in the short term, whereas the effects of Eudaimonist activity can last longer (McMahan and Estes 2010). I am sure we can all relate to the mental battle between the intrinsic pleasure from a chocolate bar and the instrumental benefit of exercising, which may account for motivational issues with children engaging with Eudaimonist activity. Western and Tomaszewski (2016) argue that it is likely that a person's conceptualisation of their wellbeing may draw on both aspects; objectivism and subjectivism and, indeed, there are strong links between the two. Feelings of stress and anxiety during the transition from primary school to secondary school may have greater significance for a child's long-term wellbeing when considering the link between subjective and objective aspects of wellbeing as put forward by Western and Tomaszewski (2016).

2.3.3 Models of wellbeing

In an attempt to provide workable conceptualisations of wellbeing that have practical applications, many scholars have attempted to make sense of this widely contested landscape by developing models of wellbeing. Due to the intention of universal application, the models discussed approach wellbeing from an objective perspective, though the objective aims can be reached by subjective means as is explored.

2.3.3.1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Abraham Maslow's theory is one of the most enduring and widely cited theories of human motivation (Abulof 2017) and continues to be used as a framework to understand young people's state of mental health and wellbeing (Crandall et al. 2019). Maslow theorised that humans are driven by a motivation to have their needs met and there is a hierarchy to those needs outlined in fig 3. The consideration of Maslow's hierarchy is valid here, in its potential for analysing the effects of transition on the wellbeing of young people; offering a way of linking subjective wellbeing, and my conversants' perspectives, to an accepted model of measuring mental health and wellbeing.

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs is based on the premise that a person cannot access a level of need until the preceding levels have been fulfilled. It begins with physiological needs, such as food and shelter, before rising to the higher levels illustrated below, with a person unable to advance until the needs of each preceding level are met. According to Mathias et al. (2018), the worries children have before and during transition are centred around social hurdles; the fear of bullying, and the ability to make new friends and being able to 'fit in'. When considering Maslow, three out of the five levels (Safety and security, love and belonging and self-esteem) are concerned with our sense of self and how people view us, linking to the pre-transition perception of 'not fitting in', worrying about friendships and gaining and maintaining the respect of others, aligning clearly with this model.
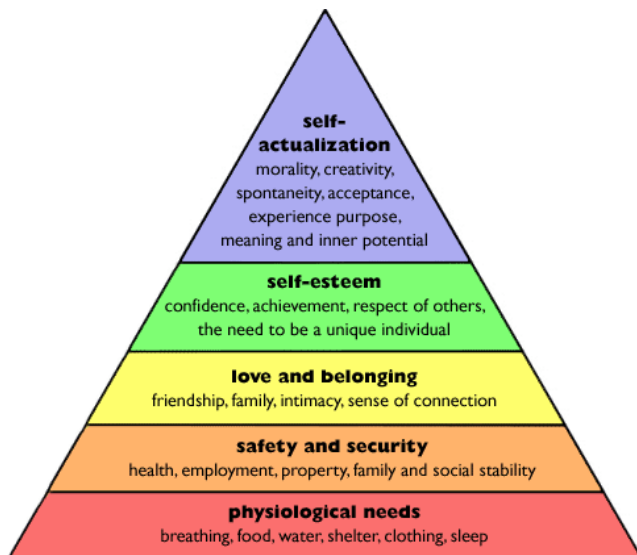
Fig 3. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow 1943)

Whilst Maslow's hierarchy of needs was not designed as an educational model of wellbeing, it has been used as a lens through which to explore issues in education including; improving underperforming schools (Fisher and Crawford 2020), developing school meal programmes (Tikkanen 2009) and motivating children to excel through ranking systems (Parhan et al. 2020) in an attempt to keep children at the centre of research, with Fisher and Crawford (2020) suggesting a 'Maslow's hierarchy to support struggling schools' (fig. 4.) that centres around the needs of children through the lens of their school experience.
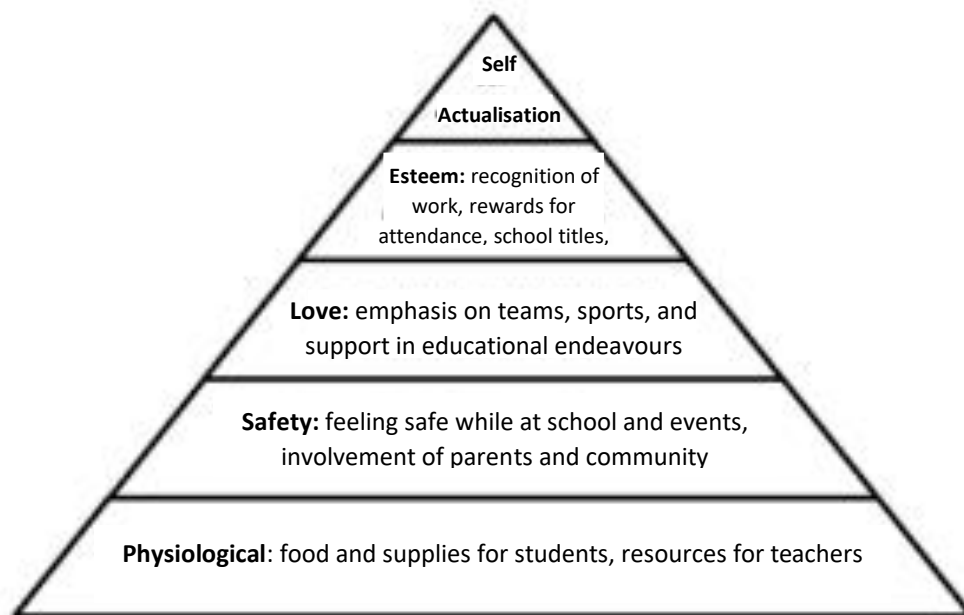
Fig 4. 'Maslow's hierarchy to support struggling schools (Fisher and Crawford 2020).

Fisher and Crawford (2020) have applied the dimensions of Maslow's hierarchy to have more relevance in an educational setting. Their conceptualisation of Safety, love and Esteem align with my own professional positionality through the questions 'Am I safe?', 'Am I Valued?' and 'Am I Happy?' which I have seen to lead to educational success when a child can answer positively.

Whilst Maslow's hierarchy of needs is useful lens through which to explore the aspects of life that can contribute to a person's wellbeing, various criticisms have been levelled at this theory, not least that it is too broad a theory of human development rather than a description of motivations leading to positive wellbeing (Arnolds and Boshoff 2002). Whilst the different dimensions related to my personal values, my professional experience has demonstrated that, for example, a child's feelings of love and belonging can be developed in a school setting, despite an unstable family environment (which relates to a lower dimension). I therefore questioned Maslow's assertion that needs must be met in order, beginning at the bottom of the model which led me to exploring variations of this model, particularly Alderfer's Existence, Relatedness and Growth (ERG) model which is explored in the next section.

2.3.3.2 Alderfer's ERG model

Alderfer (1969, cited in Pichere 2015) argued for a more succinct model, which he presented as the ERG model. In contrast to Maslow, Alderfer's model does not suggest a hierarchy of needs, rather humans can attempt to achieve needs on different levels at the same time (El-Desoky et al. 2023) allowing for a holistic theorisation of wellbeing. I preferred this model as it addressed the concerns I had with Maslow's model, that dimensions must be dealt with in order, and aligned more clearly professional experiences and observations of working with children and supporting their mental health and wellbeing. Figure 5 is my illustration of the relationship between Alderfer's model and Maslow's model.
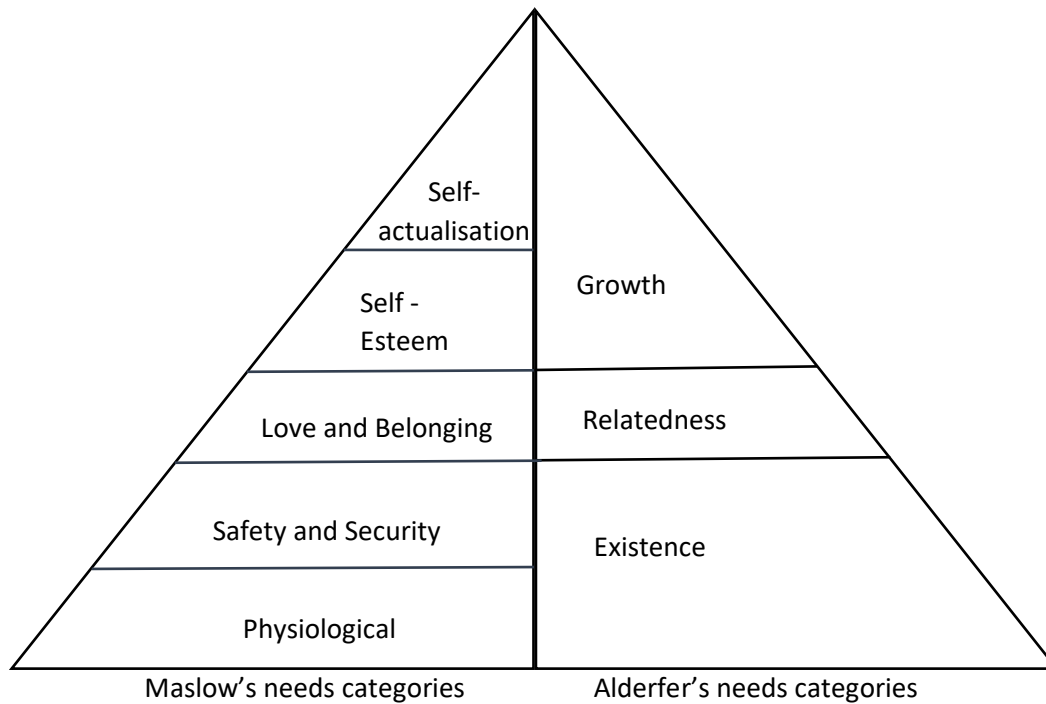
Fig. 5. The relationship between Maslow's and Alderfer's ERG model

When relating Maslow's, and by extension Alderfer's, model to the objective and subjective theories of wellbeing discussed earlier, an alignment can be drawn. Maslow clearly purports an objective list approach to his theory, arguing that each person meeting the needs they have can enjoy an improvement to their wellbeing. I argue that whilst these needs are objective, they can be met by subjective means, dependent on the attitudes and context of the individual. Maslow's belonging (Alderfer's relatedness) is objectively important, but not all individuals would have this need met with the same circumstances. For example, some young people may have this need met at home with their family (Biehal 2014), whereas others may have as part of their school community (Renick and Reich 2020), others from interactions online (Delahunty et al. 2013), or as part of a gaming community (O'Connor et al 2015) depending on their interests, circumstances and social competence.

2.4 - The child's perspective of wellbeing

The notion of children's wellbeing must be considered as distinct from that of adults. They are at very different points of physical, emotional and social development, generally have less agency over their lives, and social expectations mean adults make decision about and for them (Schapiro 1999). Adults and children have differing approaches to decision making (Prabhakar et al. 2018), task completion (Liquin and Gopnik 2022) and, of course, have different social contexts to navigate, particularly during the transition to secondary school, and to adolescence. The understanding of the

social positioning of children and a desire to afford them more agency has developed since 1989 (e.g. Devine and Cockburn 2018), but in order to gain valuable insights into the lives of children, it is important that they are considered distinct from adults so that research and intervention is fit for purpose.

2.4.1 Mental health and wellbeing at adolescence

Poor mental health in children has reached an all-time high (Martineau and Bakopoulou 2023), with adolescence cited as a period of particular concern (Caravajal-Velez et al. 2023). Whilst each child will reach adolescence at different times and respond individually, Shute and Slee (2015 p.14) argue that much developmental psychology 'concerns the search for general principles' and that sufficient similarities exist for this to be valid. Adolescence is the period bridging childhood and adulthood, generally accepted as the period between ten and twenty-four years of age (Crone and Fuligni 2020), with early adolescence aligning with the time of transition to secondary school. A time of changing hormones, social awareness, the brain and the mind (Blakemore 2019), adolescence is a challenging time as young people become more aware of their social positioning and establish their place in society. At a time when they are striving for parental independence and social acceptance in peer groups, adolescence can be a vulnerable time for a person's mental health and wellbeing, with Yoon et al. (2022) finding that young people are more likely to experience mental health problems and negative wellbeing as they transition through adolescence. Patalay and Fitzsimons (2018) underline this with their findings that wellbeing stability is weak between the ages of eleven and fourteen. Indeed, Thapar et al. (2012) note that levels of depression in childhood are negligible across the population but rise significantly in adolescence due partially to changes in the brain, with females more likely to suffer than males. The co-currence of transition to secondary school and the onset of puberty can contribute to risks of negative psychological functioning, with girls' risk higher due to the earlier onset of puberty (Gniewosz and Gniewosz 2019). Positive relationships with school staff and family have been evidenced to be protective factors to poor mental health and wellbeing during adolescence (Horner 2016), which is particularly relevant in the context of this study. As with other areas of this literature review, the adolescent voice appears to lack amplification in the research landscape, with researchers electing for use of questionnaires and large samples to investigate the notion of mental health and wellbeing in young people (e.g. Ciarrochi et al. 2017, Pigaiani et al. 2020, Redmond et al. 2018). This is explored further in the next section.

2.4.2 The child's perspective of wellbeing

Qualitative research is effective in facilitating the voice of the child in permeating the research landscape as part of a child-centred enquiry (Clark 2011), but there is an imbalance in the research community with researchers often choosing quantitative research and analysis approaches to observe trends in group data (Grover 2004). The literature reviewed in this chapter affirms this stance continues nearly two decades later, with many researchers and reviewers opting for large sample sizes to generate data that is analysed quantitatively. Lloyd and Emerson (2017) state that children's own experiences and voices are missing in research pertaining to their wellbeing. This notion was underlined in a 2020 systematic literature review of primary-secondary transition by Jindal-Snape et al. (2020 p.559), who found that 'there was a lack of studies collecting data from pupils and all other stakeholders' and that this should be a focus for future studies. It is widely acknowledged that children's experiences of life differ significantly from those of adults (e.g.Ceballos and Susinos 2022). Indeed, research with children must be carefully considered to be ethically responsible and respectful, but also purposeful and relevant, considering phases of development (McLeod 2008). In deference with this, I below explore the potential differences of objective and subjective wellbeing in adults compared with children.

Cormier and Rossi (2019) conducted a review of 'generalism' – the notion that children have the same wellbeing experience as adults. They noted that many authors ignore the potential difference completely, making no reference to any distinction between adult and child wellbeing. Following a review and dismissal of two arguments against generalism, the authors put forward their case in its favour. They argue against the suggestion that children's wellbeing is weighted more to hedonism, and adults to the 'higher level' capacities of objectivity. Their view on this seems to rely on the impression that a subjective and objective positioning of wellbeing cannot co-exist. We know, however, that this is contested by McMahan and Estes (2010) meaning that both should be considered as part of this research approach.

Cormier and Rossi argue in favour of generalism partly because they discredit the notion that the standards of a person's wellbeing change at a particular point. They allude to the binary presentation that for generalism to not be credible, we would need to be able to measure a distinct point where the hedonistic tendencies of a child switch to the objective positioning of an adult. As previously argued, I propose that each person's wellbeing is a culmination of subjective and objective factors that vary from person to person. My positioning advocates that there is not 'moment of change' and that the standards of a person's wellbeing shifts along a spectrum, leaning

more towards subjectivity in childhood, and more toward objectivity in adulthood with many variances in the exact make up for a person.

Despite Cormier and Rossi's claims, several studies allude to some differential of experience, such as Brummet and Reed (2019) treat both groups separately during their discussion and methods, acknowledging that children and adults can be affected differently by gentrification, with an emphasis on access to opportunities for children and improved wellbeing for adults. This is also true of Achterberg et al.'s (2021) study into the wellbeing of parents and children following COVID-19 lockdowns, which highlights different areas of challenge, and different perceptions of a shared experience, giving greater insight into the difference of wellbeing at different ages and providing greater visibility of children in research. This clear differentiation of treatment highlighted the importance of ensuring that my research design considered the wellbeing of children to be unique to their stage of development, ensuring it was child-centred to capture their heterogeneous perspective (see 3.3.2.8).

2.5 Policy context of Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing

The World Health Organisation (WHO 2022) released a global strategy for mental health, highlighting the links between poor mental health and access to, and ability to receive, a high-quality education. The report found interesting links not only between mental health and education but between education and mental health, suggesting that positive engagement with education can, in and of itself, can be beneficial in protecting against poor mental health. The phrase 'mental health' is used 2, 671 times in the 296-page document, the term 'wellbeing' is used three times in the body of the report and there is no presence of other synonyms explored in chapter 2.2. Here, too, there is an uncertainty around working definitions of 'mental health' and 'wellbeing', noticeable in the opening paragraph of chapter 2 of the document as terms are used interchangeably and there is an attempt to 'cover all bases' with a lack of clarity and specificity that is reflected in other publications that I have discussed:

Mental health is an integral part of our general health and well-being and a basic human right. Having good mental health means we are better able to connect, function, cope and thrive. Mental health exists on a complex continuum, with experience ranging from an optimal state of well-being to debilitating states of great suffering and emotional pain. People with mental health conditions are more likely to experience lower levels of mental well-being but this is not always or necessarily the case. (WHO 2022 p.xiv)

Brown and Carr (2019) discuss the policy response to the prevalence of mental ill health in young people of school age. Although governmental discourse surrounding mental health has seemingly sought to be proactive in highlighting those children within educational settings and enacting policy changes to include topics such as mental health within the curriculum, they argue that schools themselves, whilst an effective setting to identify and support students with poor mental health, are actually contributing to mental illness due to the stress and anxiety children experience when faced with test-taking and the impacts of test outcomes on self-esteem; the result of a government who sees improving mental health and wellbeing a means to the end of better academic attainment (DfE 2022b).

McLeod (2014) tell us that 'Students need to feel emotionally and physically safe and accepted within the classroom to progress and reach their full potential' but, despite these concerns, there seems to be little response from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), whose 2022-27 strategy has little mention of mental health or wellbeing (Ofsted 2022). Despite pledging that wellbeing would be at the heart of education policy (DfE 2021b), the Department for Education Plan for 2021-22, similarly offers no real insight into tangible support for the mental health and/or wellbeing of young people (DfE 2021), which highlights the lack of authentic focus or importance placed on these issues. The DfE Guidance document (2022b) *'Promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing in schools and colleges'* offers modest promise, mandating a Senior Mental Health Lead for each setting by 2025, inclusion of Mental Health education as part of Relationships,

Sex and Health Education (RSHE) and the introduction of 500 Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) to work across the 32,644 schools and colleges in England and Wales (DfE 2022). This casts doubt on the governmental response which would see each MHST responsible for over 65 schools with no firm commitment to funding of existing children's mental health services. The 2023 release of '*Summary of responsibilities where a mental health issue is affecting attendance'* (DfE 2023g) and the change of language from 'Emotionally based School *Refusal*' to *'Avoidance'* suggests that the DfE are, in reviewing the language around this debate, more carefully considering the mental health and wellbeing of school age children. However, the withdrawal of the government's ten-year strategy for mental health in 2023 might suggest otherwise (Iacobucci 2023).

Young Minds, a children's mental health charity who aim to support young people with mental health issues, demonstrates that one in six young people aged five to sixteen in the UK are identified as having a probable mental health deficit, with 90,789 young people being referred to a mental health service in March 2022 alone (Young Minds 2022). Zifkin at al. (2021) acknowledge that access to mental health services for young people remains a challenge, with most children who come in to contact with Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS) doing so after suffering symptoms of mental ill health for years before being referred (Hansen et al. 2021). As agencies are put under more pressure (Ludlow et al. 2020) to provide support for an ever-increasing number of young people (Children's Commissioner 2022), the threshold for support rises meaning young people are waiting longer before receiving specialist mental health support (Semovski et al. 2021). One of Gloucestershire's most relied on children's mental health charities, Teens in Crisis, receives no government funding to provide tier three counselling services to young people (Teens in Crisis 2020) as they wait for mental health intervention from CAMHS. Mental Health charities across the country are attempting to bridge the gap between the top and bottom of the NHS waiting lists. This adds importance to the need to research this more intently at a micro-level; the mental health and

wellbeing of young people will be a focus for some time. Waiting list times for TIC+ are around 6 months, for CAMHS 30 months, at the time of writing.

2.6 A working definition of wellbeing

There is an apparent tentativeness in policy writers around defining mental health and wellbeing as they struggle with what precisely it is (and is not). This could be related to a laissez-faire approach of government, a non-interference model where institutions do as they wish to solve issues (Rassa and Emeagwali 2020), and a reticence to set a specific requirements which would require additional resources. The challenge of reaching clear and concise definitions is an important one to explore if society aims to improve the mental health of its population in a purposeful and sustainable way, as suggested by the WHO (WHO 2020) and United Kingdom government (DfE 2022a), centered around a shared understanding of the concept.

The above literature highlights an increasing national and global mental health and wellbeing crisis that is challenging to analyse, not least due to the lack of agreement on, or consistent us of, terms and definitions. Many measures of mental health and wellbeing are based on the presence of diagnosed mental health disorders (e.g. Chase et al. 2016) or the large-scale quantitative measurement of symptoms of what is considered poor mental health and wellbeing (e.g. Bu et al. 2021) which is removed from generating the co-constructed voice of the individual (see 2.13). The governmental response continues to be focused on economic growth, seeing any improvement to wellbeing or mental health as means to an academic and economic end. Research completed on wellbeing and mental health tends to be quantitative in nature, measuring national changes in societal mental health as opposed to highlighting individual stories, meaning the explicit voices of children not amplified in the literature. There is a clear link between wellbeing and outcomes, both

academic and otherwise, which highlights the need for research into children's perspective of wellbeing during the transition from Primary to Secondary school. To set the parameters of children's wellbeing, as situated in this research, the following definition and model will be used:

Wellbeing – *Children's perception of their mood and emotions, and their level of skill to manage adversity.*

This definition aligns with a hedonistic positioning of wellbeing, one we know that children empathise with more readily. It also positions the child's voice at the centre of the subjective analysis of emotion and mood, offering agency. An objective list approach to wellbeing would not be appropriate for this research as I am interested in the child's perspective of their wellbeing. As has been explored, an all-encompassing definition of wellbeing eludes the research community and policymakers, therefore the working definition offered here is subject to the following caveats:

1) Wellbeing is a unique and personal notion and events affect different people in different ways, so their perspectives must be central.

2) Wellbeing can be influenced by a combination of objective and subjective factors. As discussed, it can be more helpful to explore children's wellbeing through a subjective lens.

3) Skills necessary to navigate adversity develop with age and experience.

2.7 Conceptualising wellbeing as a part of wider mental health

The literature so far considers wellbeing to be a part of mental health, so I wanted to explore how the two may interact, or how wellbeing can impact on mental health as a way of understanding it further. Poor mental health is a term used in this section to encapsulate diagnosable conditions, such as depression, suicidality or eating disorders, that require intervention from a professional for relief (Scott 2023).

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) have a significant effect on a person's mental health (McCutchen et al. 2022) and it is widely supported that these same experiences have a significant impact on Adult Mental Health (e.g. Ponting et al. 2023). ACEs are termed as such because a child experiencing these things are at a point of their development where these experiences may have a more significant impact than if they were older (Park et al. 2022). This is not to say that these same experiences would not have significant effects on the adult but emphasises that children and adults experience life events in different ways. Here I theorise that poor wellbeing, when left unmanaged, can lead to poor mental health as can, what I term, Adverse Human Experiences (AHEs). Stress (Ciuhan et al. 2022), poor sleep (Chow 2020 and Ahmad et al. 2020), disruption to routines (e.g. Woodford and Bussey 2021), emotional exhaustion (Lee et al. 2022) and poor emotional resilience (McKay et al. 2020 and, Zarobe and Bungay 2017) can all have a negative impact on a person's wellbeing which can have an impact on wider mental health (Agteren and Iasiello 2021 and Burns et al. 2022). I would like to offer a conceptualisation of this notion, illustrated in fig 6.
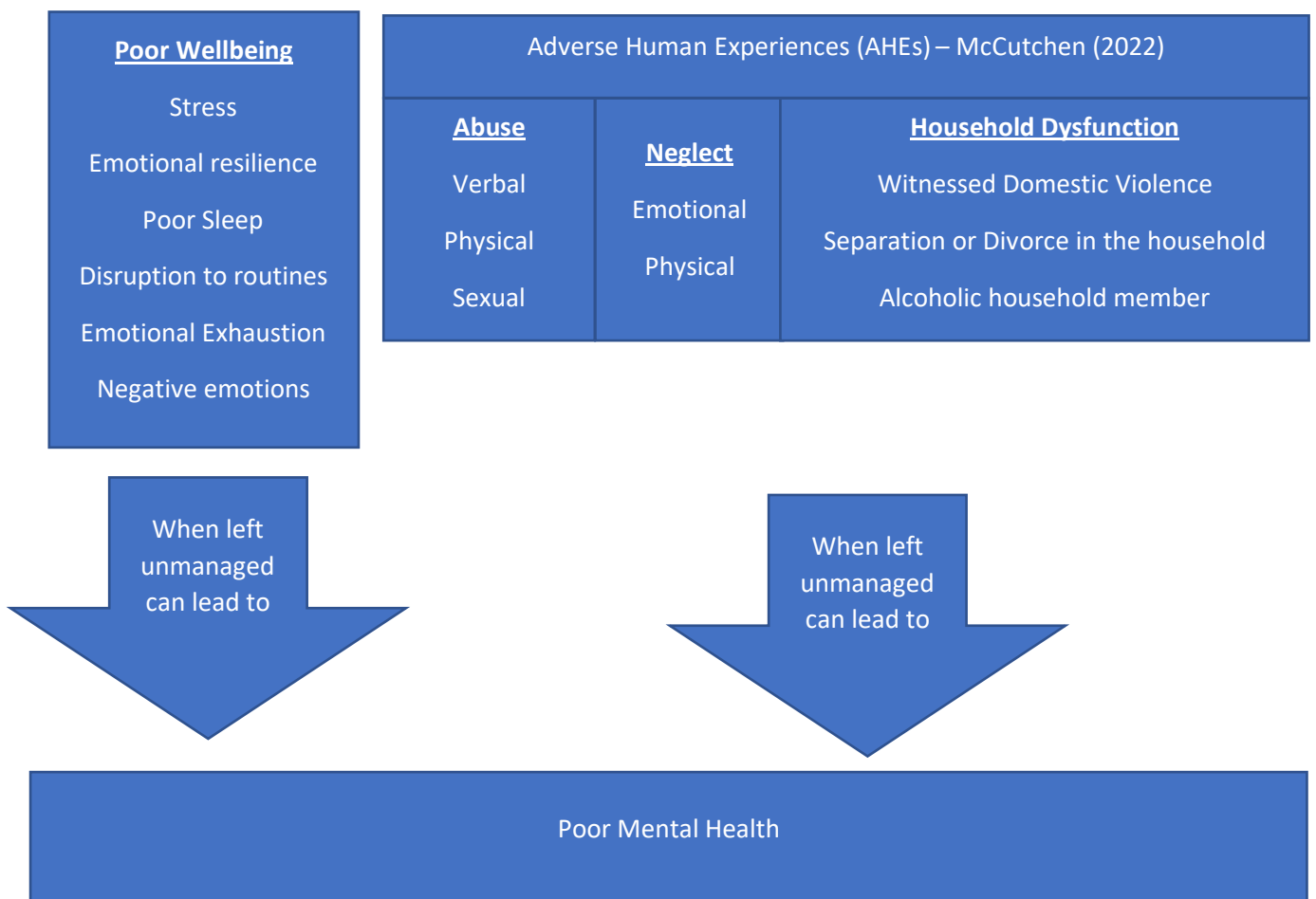
(Fig. 6 – My conceptualisation of contributory factors to poor mental health.)

I propose that negative experiences and emotions that are temporary and can be remedied and navigated (e.g. stress, poor sleep, periods of change etc.) come under the umbrella of poor wellbeing which, if left unmanaged, can have an impact on wider mental health. Vulnerabilities to poor mental health can be linked to sustained deficit of resilience (Bhugra and Till 2013) that affects a person's ability to cope with poor wellbeing and can be a stimulus for poor wellbeing in and of itself. Stress in the workplace, for example, is not uncommon and can have an impact on the wellbeing of the workforce (e.g. Lagrosen and Lagrosen 2022). Stress can be managed through exercise (Coulter et al. 2009), diet (Soltani et al. 2018) and mindfulness (Werdani 2017) but this can become more challenging when other aspects of a person's wellbeing become compromised. A stressed person who experiences poor sleep and who is emotionally exhausted is more likely to experience a deterioration in their overall mental health (Azza et al. 2020 and Dinsuhaimi et al. 2022). It can be considered, therefore, that stimuli for poor mental health can be grouped into AHEs and Poor Wellbeing. Poor mental health and childhood trauma, in turn, can affect a person's ability to be resilient to experiences of poor wellbeing later in life (Pasha-Zaidi et al. 2020). This is illustrated in figure 7:
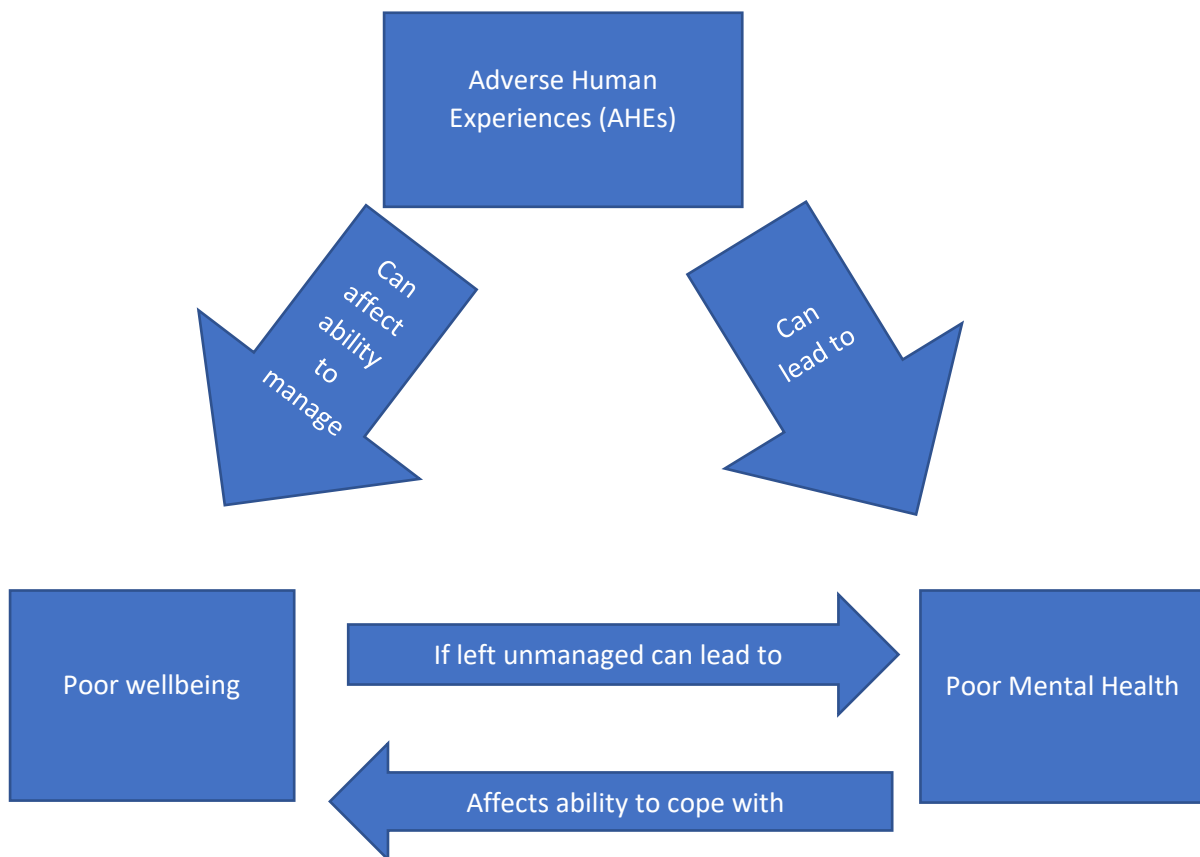
Fig 7. Interaction between Wellbeing, Mental Health and Adverse Human Experiences (AHEs)

It is therefore clear to see that wellbeing can have a direct impact on wider mental health, and that mental health can have an impact on wellbeing. This confirms the importance of examining and making recommendations for young people's wellbeing whilst transitioning from Primary to Secondary School to protect their wider mental health during this potentially vulnerable time.

2.8 Transition – Exploring terminology

Within the context of this research 'Transition' is assumed to mean the movement of young people from the Primary to Secondary phases of state schooling in England. These students are usually aged eleven when they make the transition at the end of Year Six from a primary school setting to a secondary school setting.

Most young people will make this transition, exceptions being those attending 'all-through' schools, schools offering an education from age 4-18 as part of one institution, and 'middle' schools, that bridge the gap between primary and secondary settings. This study takes neither all-through schools nor middle schools into account due to the low number of such settings across England and Wales (Crook 2008: National Middle Schools Forum 2022). The explicit parameters and boundaries of the transition period will be discussed as part of this section.

There is a debate with regards to the boundaries of transition, whether it refers to the single event of entering a secondary school or the ongoing periods where the effects may still be apparent. Brewin and Statham (2011) suggest that challenges in adjusting to the new expectations and environment of secondary school were 'soon resolved'. With Zeedyk et al. (2003), arguing that fears were abated by the end of the first term. Topping (2011), however, suggests that transition is an issue for all at first and agrees that *many* adjust after a term, however 40% still found the new environment challenging after a year which Topping (2011) suggests is the point when children's attainment ceases to suffer. Children are affected by transition academically and emotionally/socially, with Topping and Zeedyk et al. suggesting different end points for each element, illustrated in fig 9.

The parameters to the beginning and end of transition are not firmly set, with Edge et al. (2023) advocating for longitudinal research approaches to establish this. Each child is likely to experience

transition differently, with their own personal transition period inconsistent with those around them. It may also be argued that transition is not a set window, but a 'status passage' that all must traverse as part of adolescent development, shaping who they will become in adulthood (Symonds 2015). It is interesting that many narratives around the nature of transition and how long its effects are felt by children are firmly positioned from the first day of secondary school onwards by both researchers (e.g. Topping 2011; Zeedyk et al. 2003; Brewin and Statham 2011) and policymakers (e.g. Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008) whose recommendations for professionals concern supporting children to adjust *to* secondary school. Reference to transition beginning in primary school, and indeed the associated effects of the loss of primary school, are largely absent from transition literature. This notion will be interesting to explore as part of this research but may be best explored by way of a longitudinal study that establishes the timeframe in which transition sits as the beginning and end points are clearly challenging to ascertain.

For concise discussion in this research, I have conceptualised the terminology of transition as follows and created a pictural representation of the accepted boundaries (fig 8):

The point of transition – When children arrive at school on the first day of year seven.

The transition period – The period children are affected by transition, illustrated in fig. 9:
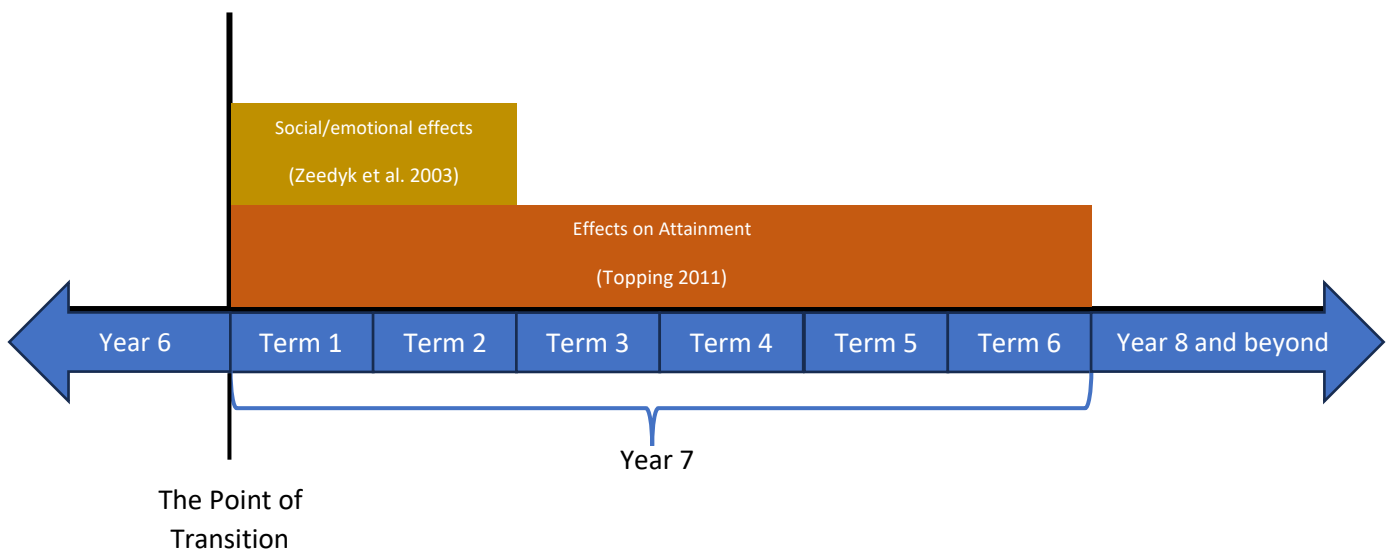
Fig. 8. Conceptualisation of 'The transition period' (Topping 2011; Zeedyk et al. 2003).

2.9 - Transition matters

There is a lack of clarity and agreement on the perceived significance of transitioning from primary to secondary school. The current literature can be broadly grouped into two schools of thought. The first considers transition as a difficult time in a child's school career that is known to negatively affect academic performance and emotional wellbeing (e.g. Lester and Cross 2015, Brewin & Statham 2011), with Topping (2011 p.221) claiming that 'secondary school is a problem for all children'. In contrast, Sirsch (2003) agrees that transition is a challenging period, but acknowledges that there can be a mixture of positive and negative aspects for young people. As Howe and Richards (2011) report, young people are often anxious about the new, usually much bigger, school site but might also be excited about the new opportunities secondary school holds leading to a conflict of strong internal feelings. The literature acknowledges that transition is an important life event that requires, and deserves, careful thought to ensure that those overseeing it are empowered to effectively manage it to facilitate the success of young people.

The point of transition coincides with adolescence and changes in children's cognitive capacity, emotional development and personal identity (Brewin & Statham 2011). This manifests in an increased desire for independence from familial support, and a greater reliance on the support of friends and peers (Lester and Cross 2015 and Brewin & Statham 2011). Transition is time when children's friendship numbers rise dramatically which causes the formation of new friendships but also the breakdown of long-standing existing friendships, which can be a cause of anxiety for those who cannot make friends easily or worry that they won't (Topping 2011). Social relationships dominate the transition experience (Lester and Cross 2015), which can be erratic during the social upheaval of transition (Topping 2011) with reliable friendships that continue from primary school to secondary school, acting as a 'stress buffer' (Topping 2011). When young people undergo transition, they find it less challenging when surrounded by friendships, which can lead to a more positive framing of transition (Sirsch 2003).

2.9.1 The effects of transition on wellbeing

Whilst positive wellbeing has been found to be associated with higher educational attainment (Clarke et al. 2011), stress and worry can lead to a pause or reversal in academic performance, attendance and self-image. Many children feel fearful or anxious before transition, with common sources of concern centering around challenging academic demands, getting lost, strict teachers, friendship issues and bullying (Brewin & Statham 2011, Zeedyk et al. 2003). Many of these concerns are linked to relationships and school context, which we have learnt are amongst the most important contributing factors to a child's wellbeing. Indeed, it is recognised that the transition period involves stress and anxiety for all children, even those who adjust well to secondary school (Van Pens et al. 2019). Topping (2011) suggests that these anxieties can be compounded for high achieving students, as they make their place in the more competitive learning environment of secondary school, whereas students with additional needs will find this transitioning potentially more challenging than their peers (Tso and Strnadova 2016). Transition is an experience that is likely to affect students in individual and personal ways, lending further credence to the relevance of a subjective wellbeing perspective as part of this study.

In 2020, The Office of National Statistics conducted research into children's wellbeing (ONS 2020). During focus groups of children aged 10-15, it was observed that the participants perceived primary schools as safer and more inviting than secondary schools. The Office of National Statistics report on children's experiences of loneliness (ONS 2018) also found that moving from Primary to Secondary school can trigger loneliness in children, which can have a serious impact on their wellbeing.

As students find themselves in a new setting, their ability to feel valued as part of this new community is instrumental to their wellbeing and, success at school (Prati et al. 2018). Young people that feel marginalised, undervalued, and not respected or welcome, can quickly find that school becomes a place where they no longer feel safe; a place where they do not want to be (Van Rens et al. 2019). My professional experience has suggested that this poor relationship with school often leads to increased absenteeism, poor engagement with learning and so, poorer educational outcomes, supported by Businaro et al.'s (2015) findings that school context and relationships are the two most important contributors to a young person's wellbeing.

One of the biggest challenges to children transitioning from primary to secondary school is that of social capital; the way in which young people value, and are shaped by, relationships and networks (Allan and Catts 2012 : Westphaln et al 2020). Christoforou and Davis (2014) describe social capital as:

> 'the degree to which and the different ways in which people exhibit distinctively social behaviours depend[ing] on how norms and networks elicit their values, reflect power relationships, and draw on their social identities. (Christoforou and Davis 2014 p.3)

Stable positive relationships and friendships, one aspect of social capital, are advantageous to children's wellbeing (Schwartz-Mette and Shankman 2020) and academic attainment (Ng-Knight et al. 2019). Though there is some evidence to suggest that attempting to maintain poor and moderate quality friendships can correlate with deteriorating wellbeing and can be risk factors for depressive disorders, both crucial when considering transition from primary to secondary school (Ng-Knight et al 2019) in order to protect the quality of wellbeing, and academic progress, of transitioning children. Stelfox and Catts (2022) found that spaces for relationship development are more transitory in secondary school as students move from one classroom to another, often mixing with different groups of peers from hour to hour. In the primary school setting, children spend their time with a consistent group of peers and a consistent teacher which more effectively facilitates the development of bonding between peers. Stelfox and Catts (2022) also found that whilst a member of staff often featured in primary pupil school friendship maps, the dynamics of relationships develop on transitioning to secondary school, with more social distance from adults in the school. When children transition from primary school to secondary school, they must navigate a changing social landscape as they do so.

The Scottish government in 2019 (Learning Directorate 2019), reviewed transition literature of the previous ten years and found that there was often a drop in the wellbeing of young people around the point of transition, largely triggered by the theme of relationships. Though this was challenged by some other studies within the review that criticised the deficit model used in transition research and that there were many positive stories that were being ignored (e.g. Fortuna 2014; Poorthuis et al. 2014). This is supported by Richter et al. (2022) who suggest that transition can be a positive experience full of new opportunities. The pervading literature that was drawn up in the discussion gathered their data using questionnaires and surveys, quantitative methods that do not prioritise the authentic voice of the child, as explored earlier in this chapter.

Transition can be a time of uncertainty with young people considering their friendships at risk as peers move to different schools or change their social circles as part of the transition. Young people must navigate the addition of a, typically, large number of new young people into their social environment, as part of the new school. Young people navigate a different relationship with many new adults, as they move from having one teacher to many – all with different personalities and approaches. Furthermore, young people adapt to a new school context and become a part of the social fabric of new classes and year groups. All of this leads the experience of transition to be one of potential uncertainty and instability which can impact on a young person's wellbeing. For some, it is suggested that transition can be a wholly positive experience, full of new opportunities. I do not expect the results of this study to be binary in its characterisation of the experiences of children, though a balanced, unbiased, approach is essential in elevating the voice of the child.

2.9.2 The effects of transition on academic progress

Zeedyk et al (2003) show that transition negatively affects social and academic progress, with children and parents more concerned with social issues and pastoral support from the school (Van Ren et al. 2019; Lester and Cross 2015; Sirsch 2003). But this is not reflected in practice, which is preoccupied with academic gaps as educational professionals focus on attainment, over wellbeing (Topping 2011), suggesting that the voices of children and their parents are not being listened to. A study by Hopwood et al (2016), emphasises a lack of consideration of social issues from teaching

staff, who cited curriculum continuity, adequate teacher support and communication between primary and secondary schools as the most important determiners of a successful transition. Topping (2011) suggests that there may not be a causal link between transition and social issues, arguing that lower attainment may lead to reduced self-esteem which can itself lead to lower attainment. There is a disconnect between the views and priorities of parents and carers, and that of practitioners, regarding the focus during transition. Schools are under pressure to ensure that academic progress is in line with local and national targets (e.g. Perryman et al. 2011; Meadows and Black 2018) and thus prioritise the access to teaching and a high-quality curriculum. Parents, on the other hand, prioritise the social progress of their children. What is missing from this literature, is the authentic voice of the child. Figure 9 illustrates how low attainment and low self-esteem are linked. Both can be stimulated by transition from primary to secondary school and can feed into one another.
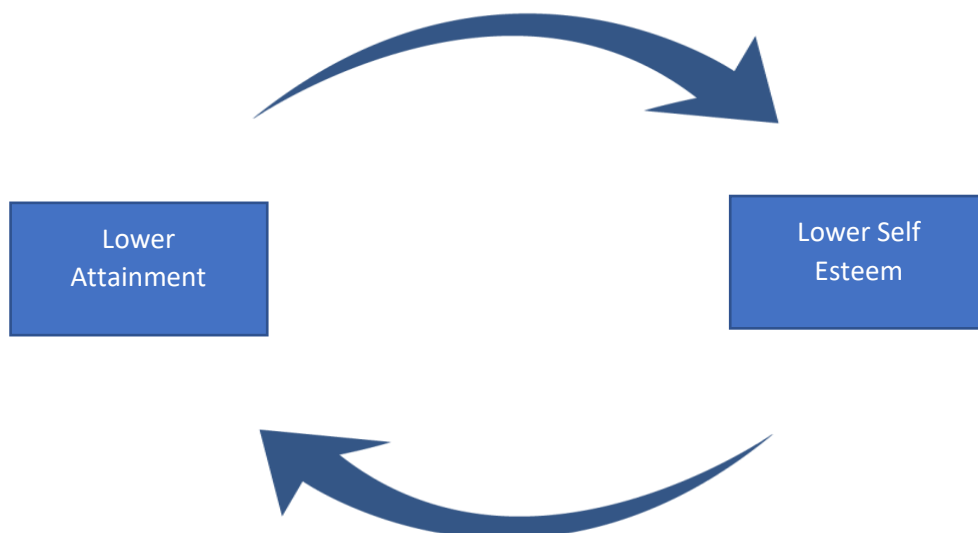
Fig.9 - Link between low attainment and low self esteem

2.10 Policy context of Transition

The focus of educational professionals on academic progress is perhaps more understandable when considering the policy releases from the government with reference to transition. In 2008, the Department for Children, Schools and Families published *'strengthening transfers and transitions, partnerships for progress'* (DCSF 2008) as part of the national strategies. This report explored underachievement during transition from one phase to another, including Key stage two-three

transitions. The key messages generated by the project work to that aim: increasing motivation and attainment, with a keen focus on the continuity of learning across phases. Parent and child anxiety is briefly mentioned, but firmly within the context of high levels of attainment. Of the eight schools who reported, only one sought the views of their students included them in the report. These children clearly highlighted friendships and anxieties around moving to secondary school and there is a recommendation that professionals should 'consult with staff, children and parents' (p.34), which the literature is still citing as a gap in the field.

'Key stage three: the wasted years?' (Ofsted 2015) was a survey of learning in key stage three across the country, following concerns that key stage three was not a priority for school leaders and that teaching was not of a good enough standard in this phase of education. As part of this report, Ofsted recommended that more emphasis was placed on pupils' academic needs when transitioning from key stage two to three, finding that schools were focussing too much on pastoral transition, a view that does not seem to be reflected in the academic community.

'Literacy and Numeracy Catch up strategies' (DfE 2018) was published in 2018 with a focus on driving attainment in Maths and English in secondary schools for those students who had performed poorly in Key Stage Two SATs at the end of primary school. There is no reference to wellbeing in this publication and the six elements of good practice suggested centring around continuity of curriculum and teaching and learning. There is one reference to 'social needs' of pupils and whilst very specific interventions are cited for developing student knowledge and skills in literacy and numeracy, none are given for the highlighted concern of 'social issues,' linking to the economic recovery political focus (see 2.2.7). This lack of meaningful policy in the field of transition is conceptualised in the next section.

2.10.1 - Policy silence

There is limited policy explicitly relating to transition, the most apposite is outlined above. Rizvi and Lingard (2010) advocate the need to look beyond what policy exists but to the significance of silence in policy and what this might tell us. Policy inaction can lead to 'non-decision making' (Freidrichs 2022), meaning that policymakers can remain silent on certain issues where action may conflict with other aims or foci. I would challenge the notion of 'non-decision making' in the context of transition as the pervading literature highlights transition as point of potential academic decline, a policy for

which would align with the DfE's education plan which aspires to drive improvements in educational outcomes, so there is a need to explore this further to understand the absence of policy on this important educational issue.

This characterisation of non-decision-making is what McConnell and Hart (2019) refer to as the calculated inaction typology of policy inaction, one of five typologies illustrated in table 2. McConnell and Hart's typologies are a conceptualisation of policy inaction and are interesting to consider when exploring why policy silence exists around transition.

Table 2: Typology of Policy inaction (McConnell and Hart 2019)

Category	Type I: Calculated inaction	Type II: Ideological inaction	Type III: Imposed inaction	Type IV: Reluctant inaction	Type V: Inadvertent inaction
Drivers	Inaction as product of conscious (strategic or tactical) decisions no to act, or not to act now	Inaction driven by convictions	Inaction as pragmatic acceptance that requisite support will not be obtained from powerful actors or pivotal institutions	Inaction through reluctant acceptance that appropriate tools and resources are not available	Inaction as a product of bounded rationality constraints and institutional blind spots
Plausible alternatives	Managed off the agenda	Ideologically out of bounds	Will not gain support to be approved	Not capable of being put into practice	Nowhere to be seen within frame of reference
Examples	Waiting for issue to 'ripen' until it can be addressed Doing nothing to avoid compromising other goals Costs of acting exceed perceived benefits	Not acknowledging moral, social or political imperatives to address a particular issue Relying on markets, community sector, or citizens' self-organisation to address the issues	De factor veto powers and agenda denial strategies exercised by political and/ or societal actors Policy paralysis through stalemates in formal decision-making bodies or among partners needed for a coordinated effort	Absolute or relative lack of financial resources to fund effective policies Lack of policy instruments that are demonstrably effective in ameliorating the problem at hand Bureaucratic 'red tape' a barrier to feasibility	Agency hierarchy watering down unpleasant realities for senior policymakers Failures of boundary scanning, horizon scanning and early warning routines

Policy inaction surrounding transition could be characterised under type II, IV or V of McConnell and Hart's (2019) typologies, depending on the lens through which is it viewed.

Type II characterisation – Ideological inaction

Ofsted and The Department for Education have consistently relied on individual schools to tackle some of the most challenging social issues, whilst simultaneously community resources deplete. For example, schools have been tasked with tackling the increase in knife crime (Ofsted 2019), despite the widespread closure of youth clubs and associations (Sky 2022), cited as a contributory factor in reducing community violence (Heimann and Fritzsche 2022). It may follow that policymakers consider the challenges around transition as one for schools to manage individually as part of their wider responsibilities to attainment and development, termed by Brown and Stark (2022) as the 'offloading of lessons', though one would hope this would be more apparent in policy.

<u>Type IV characterisation – Reluctant inaction</u>

The education system in England is experiencing significant financial pressures, with continued cuts to the education budget, particularly evident in analysis of per-pupil spending despite insistence from the UK government that funding has increased (Irwin-Rogers et al. 2020). This, alongside rapidly increasing energy and staffing costs (Adams 2022), mean that schools are increasingly finding it a challenge to provide adequate pastoral and mental health support to meet the needs of their pupils (Martin 2023 and Young Minds 2020). Teacher workload continues to rise (Spicksley 2022) as school staff juggle classroom teaching and providing support for children's mental health and wellbeing (Conboy 2021 and Maclean and Law 2022) despite increased government resources for mental health support in schools (DfE 2020). Although it is perhaps too early to establish the impact, recent changes in health policy promise to inject much needed mental health support capacity from school nursing teams (Glasper 2021).

It could follow that policymakers are of the view that resources across the education sector are already overextended to the point that there is no capacity to implement any meaningful work around transition, meaning policy action would be unavailing due to lack of resources. Indeed, resources in children's mental health have increased meaning, at least in theory, greater resources to support children transitioning to secondary school. However, this seems doubtful with recent policy announcements on school suspensions (DfE 2022c), Careers obligations (DFE 2023i) and developments in the national curriculum (DfE 2021a) suggesting that the Department for education are continuing the drive on education policy.

<u>Type V characterisation – Inadvertant inaction</u>

McConnell and Hart (2019) discuss the final typology as a policy inaction as a result of limited information and/or political 'blind spots', I.e. policymakers are unaware of an issue due to not being aware of the extent of the issue, or the issue at all, which leads to policy inaction. Brown and Stark (2022 p.12) challenge this, stating that '*The very existence of a large public inquiry or policy evaluation means that inaction cannot be inadvertently caused by a blind spot.*' putting forward instead that this type of policy inaction cannot be accepted as the result of veritable ignorance, but of a willing choice not to engage with the available information.

Due to the wealth of literature about transition, and historic government reports highlighting issues with it, there is a library of information available to policymakers and so it would be difficult to challenge Brown and Stark's position on this typology of policy inaction. This highlighted to me an issue with the phrasing *'inadvertent* inaction', which places the emphasis on policymakers *accidentally* not being aware of the issue at hand, which is challenged by Brown and Stark (2022). Perhaps '*priority* inaction' would be a more apposite term here to consider that policymakers take active decisions to not engage with certain information as there is a finite number of resources available, which are spent on issues of higher priority to the government.

When conceptualising policy silence around transition, it is challenging to ascribe to one of the typologies outlined above but there may be benefit in considering aspects of each to conceptualise policy inaction in the current context. Schools are increasingly expected to go beyond the realms of the classroom to intervene with many societal issues, using education as the tool. The DfE have allocated additional resources ringfenced for the intervention of children's mental health which, it could be argued, might be used to support children during transition as part of existing policy. In a time of financial challenge, the expectation of schools to meet the needs of children in different contexts, such as transition, are likely to rise and it may be that transition policy is simply not a priority of the government at this time.

Despite the lack of national policy, teachers and schools across the country are attempting to fill the policy gap with institution-level practice to support children during transition. Most secondary schools employ transition managers whose job it is to manage the transition to secondary school, often by delivery of a transition programme with the aim of alleviating anxieties. Children's mental health organisations have created transition resources to support schools, children and their families, and are in discourse around good practice (e.g. Young minds 2023). Additionally, there is a healthy source of transition information for parents and carers on websites and online forums such as *mumsnet* (e.g. Framptonrose 2022) that offer a space for parents and carers to share experiences, alongside some school specific guidance (e.g. Sir William Romney's School 2023) but it is disappointing that more official routes to support for parents and their children are not forthcoming.

2.11 Facilitating effective transition

There is evidence to suggest that early interaction of transitioning children with older students in their receiving secondary school can facilitate effective transition. Topping (2011) found that young people who were part of structured interactions with older students, at the point of transition, missed fewer days of school and got better grades.

The quality of relationships that young people have with teachers in primary school can predict positive transition (Lester and Cross 2015). When students arrive at secondary school, they are expected to adjust to different relationships with teachers. In primary school students are usually taught by one class teacher, now they must get used to one teacher per subject area. Van Ren et al. (2019), found that during transition, the point where students need more support from teachers, teachers expect more independence from their students. Children must come to terms with the loss of a consistent emotional support in their class teacher at a point in their development when they are more sensitive to stress stimuli due to the onset of puberty (Symonds 2015). An approach from teaching staff that is more mindful of the needs of children at the point of transition was deemed important for transition to be successful. Students must overcome the challenge of forming new relationships as part of their peer groups, but also with teachers in the new school. Their ability to do this, and how well this is facilitated, influences the psychological adjustment to the new setting (Learning Directorate 2019).

In my setting the Head of Year seven visits each child in their primary school and gathers academic and pastoral information about each child before inviting them to a three-day induction programme which aims to support familiarisation with the school site, the development of relationships with peers and staff, and an understanding of the school's values and ethos. Students are identified where they may have an additional barrier to successful transition, e.g. a Special Educational Need or Disability (SEND), significant anxiety about the move or from a vulnerable cohort (those who are in the care of the Local Authority or supported by a social worker) to engage with an enhanced transition programme which provides further opportunities. Enhanced transition programmes have been found to be particularly effective for those with Autism (Richter et al. 2022).

2.12 The Child's voice in research

Our societal structure assumes that adults, by virtue of being adults, know what is best for children (Frankel 2018). Indeed, children are the subsection of our population that have the most globally accepted lack of agency and advocacy. *'Children should be seen and not heard'* the 16th century adage insists, acknowledging the power imbalance that stifles children and their views.

The notion of the child's voice is a crucial step in child-centred research and policymaking (Race and Frost 2022) and is rooted in the rights of the child enshrined in the UNCRC (see 3.4.5). However, many researchers glorify the voice of the child in their research without necessarily considering the authenticity of this voice, with Nilsson et al. (2013) drawing the distinction between a child perspective (Adult opinion based) and a *child's* perspective (the true voice of the child), but argue there is an inescapable filter that the voice will pass through in research as the researcher necessarily interprets the communication from a child using their own point of view. Zhang (2015) conducted a systematic review of literature concerning the voice of the child in early childhood education research in Australia and New Zealand, which is relevant to this study due to the similar education systems and policies that exist. Zhang conceptualised a typology of the voice of the child that evolved from the review, citing the following as more accurate characterisations of the literature reviewed that claimed to present the child's voice:

- **pseudo voice** (engendered by assessing the child)
- **inferred voice** (engendered by inferring the child's perspective)
- **surveyed voice** (engendered by surveying the child)

    and

- **co-constructed voice** (engendered by co-constructing lived experience and understanding with the child)

When considering children's wellbeing during transition, studies largely utilise the surveyed voice of the child (e.g. Lester and Cross 2015; Carmen et al. 2011; Zeedyk et al. 2003), and some others relying on inferred voice (e.g. Holt et al. 2023), and pseudo voice (e.g. Dunlop 2021; Moore et al. 2020). The presence of co-constructed voice exists in the transition research (e.g. Longaretti 2020; Demkowicz 2023) but the child's voice is often not amplified. For example, Hennessey et al. (2022)

completed online focus groups with children to explore ways in schools can support their wellbeing but did not include any data extracts in the presentation of analysis and findings. The work completed by Bagnall (2020; 2021a; 2021b) often utilises a focus group methodology which would come under the surveyed voice typology. Focus groups are known to be limited as a method of eliciting the child's voice due to children not sharing their perspectives on sensitive issues leading to a partial account of their experiences (Morgan et al 2002), with Krol et al. (2013) advocating for individual research activities, such as interviews, as a way of ensuring that children feel able to discuss issues that are important to them without being influenced by the views of others.

This research prioritises the co-constructed voice above, and in review of the typologies put forwards by Zhang, the others would be characterised as a 'child perspective' when viewed through the lens of Nilsson et al. (2013), as opposed to the authentic child's voice. The above confirms a lack of agreement, and practice, in the research community of what constitutes the authentic voice of the child, with some researchers instead acting as a mouthpiece for what they consider the views of the child to be.

There is a marked difference in the focus of children and teachers during the transition process. Teachers are concerned with the attainment dip, whereas children are concerned with peer relations and bullying (Topping 2011). Despite this, only a limited number of studies of transition gain the perspective of the children, with most conclusions currently drawing from reports about children, rather than what children say about their own experiences (Van Rens et al 2019).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) sets out a child's right to express their own views and to be taken seriously (discussed further in 3.5.4.1). The involvement of children in decision making brings new perspectives that adults are not aware of and can improve feelings of self-esteem (Petersson et al. 2022). Despite this, there is a distinct absence of direct consultation with children during transition, and in other research areas, with existing studies largely reliant on research with parents, and where they do relying on quantitative research methods, such as questionnaires. Every child has a right to be heard in matters affecting their life, including wellbeing and experiences in the educational setting (Gillett-Swan and Sargeant 2017) and it is crucial their voices are present in research of one of the most challenging parts of their educational journey; transition.

2.13 Summary

Incidents of poor mental health, particularly in young people, are increasing across England with most issues developing in childhood and early adulthood. The literature reviewed above highlights a rising trend in wellbeing decline in young people in England, whilst also acknowledging the strains transition from primary to secondary school can have on these aspects of health. There is a link between poor wellbeing and academic outcomes, but more research is required to establish the current situation, whilst also exploring the impact of primary to secondary school transition on perceptions of wellbeing.

Maslow (1943 p.21). muses that 'if all of the needs are unsatisfied, and the organism is dominated by the physiological needs, all other needs may be pushed into the background'. Failing to meet the needs on any level leads to a focus on those needs and the ignorance of the other needs on other levels, meaning they become out of reach. It would then follow that a child undergoing transition, without their needs met, would then suffer a deficit to their academic progress due to a focus on social hurdles and potential decline in wellbeing. In turn, it is possible that this could lead to a further demise in wellbeing as they fall behind with their studies. When considering that poor mental health, in turn, leads to poor attainment and attendance in school (Mathias et al. 2018), a vicious cycle could well emerge that I have illustrated in fig.10. This indicates that the known deficit in attainment could be caused by a deficit of wellbeing as children transition to secondary school and face challenges with aspects of their hierarchal needs such as safety and security; love and belonging, and self-esteem. Hence, this is an important consideration for this study.
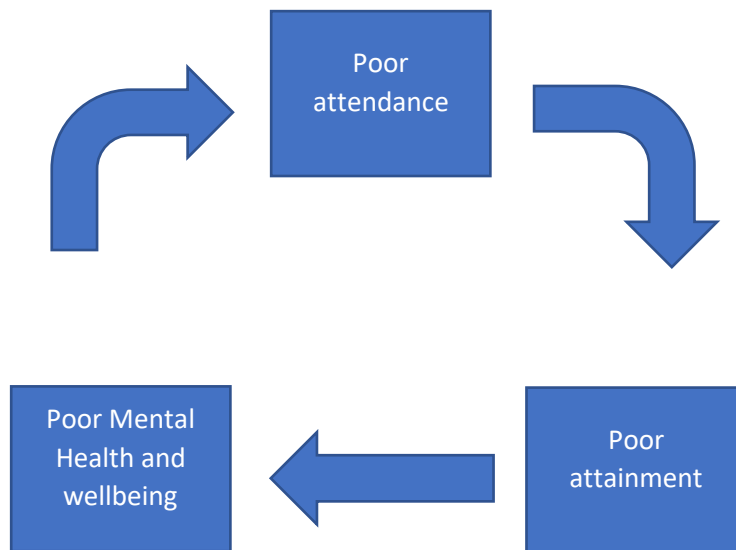
Fig.10 - Poor Attendance, Attainment and Wellbeing: a Vicious Cycle

Transition is potentially challenging time for all students and large-scale quantitative studies have revealed increases in stress and anxiety, largely stimulated by social concerns, although it is challenging to isolate transition as a causal factor for this increase due, not least, to the parallel issue of puberty which happens at the same time for many young people. Transition is bounded in the literature as beginning at the point of transition, with emotional and social concerns ending after the first term and the attainment dip resolving up to a year the point of transition. Transition is thought to have an impact on children's attainment and wellbeing but whilst there is an acknowledgement that children experience worry and anxiety pretransition, there is a lack of literature beyond this with regards to primary school children's experiences of their upcoming transition to secondary school and when they may perceive this to begin. There is an absence of explicit transition policy to instruct schools on how best to facilitate effect transition, and parents and carers on how best to support their children.

The right of children to have a say in matters that affect them is enshrined in the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child. Whilst the notion of the voice of the child is a contemporary issue, the effectiveness of research asserting the voice of the child is under question. Some studies present the views of adults as the child's voice, gained by assessing, surveying, or inferring the child's perspective without the apparent need to speak to them directly. There is a distinct lack of the authentic co-constructed child's voice in the field of transition and wellbeing research which has directly informed my methodological approach, discussed in chapter three.

Chapter Three - Methodology and Methods

Whilst many academic publications use the term methodology to refer to anything to do with research methods (6 and Bellamy 2012), this chapter is divided into three sections, research methodology, research methods and research ethics, consequently offering a more detailed account of the decisions and values that underpin this research. Without explicit methodological decisions, data collected in research cannot be meaningfully interpreted as the foundations for this interpretation are not defined (Swain 2017). The primary goal of this study was to answer the research questions relating to children's perception of wellbeing during transition, as stated in chapter 1. These are reproduced here for convenience:

1) How do young people perceive the impact of the transition period on their wellbeing, and why?

2) How do young people's perceptions of their wellbeing related to the transition period change over time, and why?

3) What do children tell us about their experience of transition and how we should manage the process?

I begin by explaining the research paradigm that governs this study, outlining my philosophical approach to this methodology by outlining my epistemology and ontology and how this influenced my methodological approach. Following this I explain my interpretivist positioning and evaluate the potential of an ethnographic approach before exploring phenomenology and social constructionism as potential methodological positionings. Finally, I justify constructivism as my chosen methodology.

In the next section I explore the notion of case study and the methods that are utilised to answer my research questions. I outline the method I used to select participants before setting out my use of research conversations and group conversations that led to the first round of thematic analysis governed by guidance from Braun and Clarke (2021). Following this, I explore the conceptualisation of subsequent multi-literacy research conversations and critique of ethnographic observations following pilot observations under Spradley's model (1980).

The final section reflects on the considerations and actions taken to ensure an ethical research project. It begins with procedural ethics, like those stipulated by university ethics committees, before moving on to the more nuanced aspects of situational and relational ethics.

3.1 Ontological and Epistemological positioning

Within this section I aim to outline the research paradigm that underpins my approach by exploring my research philosophy and how this informs my methodology as part of the overarching research paradigm using the model outlined in figure 11.
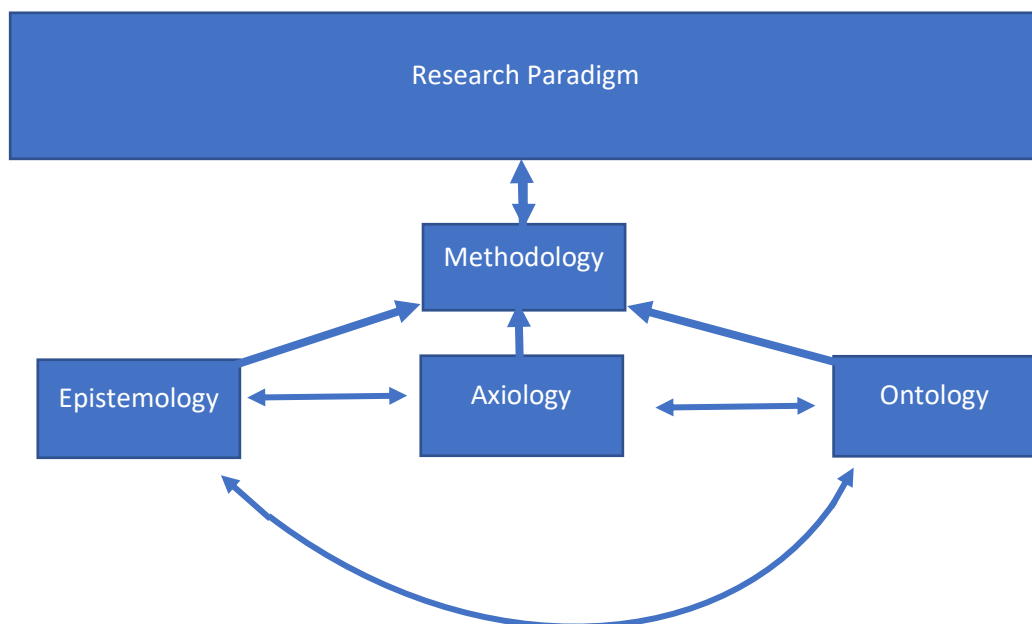
Fig.11. The approach to my Research Paradigm

3.1.1 Ontological positioning

Ontology concerns the Theory of Reality and the concept of being (Jacquette 2002; Smith 2012), outlining how humans experience the world around them. The debate can be broadly organised into two schools of thought; realism and subjectivism. A Realist ontological perspective argues that reality is objective, consistent and exists outside of human perception (Greener 2011). Subjectivism argues that reality is conceptualised by humans as they experience it; we all bring our own perspectives which shapes our experience of reality (Munn and Smith 2008). My relativist ontology, a subjectivist positioning, assumes that there are multiple realities, and each is distorted through the consciousness, projections and interpretation of individual people (Hu 2020) informed by their lived experiences. I reject the objectivist ontologies that state that there is one total and accurate reality that, if studied, reveals itself in the same way to different people (Butzer 2021). This scientific, clearly bound sense of reality does not align with my own understanding that the world is not separate from our thoughts: the kaleidoscopic lens through which we subjectively experience it.

My ontological positioning informs my approach to my professional practice and researcher identity, in that both prioritise the notion that young people's experiences of reality are unique and must be kept at the centre of research and professional practice. My approach is mindful of the individual lived experiences of people that I work with as part of trauma informed practice, coordinating a kind, gentle and individualised approach to work with children (Paccione-Dyszlewski 2016).

3.1.2 Epistemological positioning

Epistemology concerns the philosophy of knowledge and how it is generated (Carter and Littlejohn 2021; Hetherington 2019). Subjective epistemological positionings are rooted in classical Empiricism, arguing that knowledge is constructed relative to the experiences of a person constructing this knowledge, which conflicts with the objective school of thought that knowledge is 'knowable' only when it can be observed, measured and validated (Williams 2000). The world is always changing and is hard to observe (Hu 2020) and if we accept that there are multiple lenses of reality through which to experience the world, as outlined above, it follows that our observations of the world are influenced by our cultural and social conditioning. The values and experiences we bring to knowledge generation,

are key in facilitating, not only a contribution to new knowledge, but the empowerment of practitioners to apply this knowledge. My interpretivist epistemological positioning places individual, subjective experiences at the centre of my research, highlighting that similar events can have differing meanings, each with its own value and place (Gillani 2021). I reject the notion of objectivist epistemological positioning, that reality and knowledge is ultimately and consistently knowable, due to the importance I place on the lived experiences of people and how this shapes their understanding of the world around them. An objectivist perspective purports that the 'knower' of knowledge does not add anything to the data generated in research (Williams 2008) and is positioned outside of the knowledge generation, which conflicts with the close relationship between disciplinary knowledge and professional knowledge in a professional doctorate (Scott et al. 2004).

My epistemological and ontological stance has affected how my research design is shaped. My acknowledgement of the nature of knowledge generation through individual lived experiences, and perception of reality, emphasises the importance of the voice of the child in the approach to my research. Accepting that my participants have unique lived experiences led to me to make choices around methods (e.g. designing the multi-literacy research conversation (discussed in 3.3.6)) to encourage the young people involved with my research to communicate these unique experiences in their own terms.

3.2 Research Methodology

The literature pertinent to methodology is alive with debate, with authors blurring the lines between methodological approaches to research and the research instruments used to gather data (Bellamy 2012). This section is an explicit exploration of the reasoning and logic that lay the foundation of the research design (Singh 2022), informed by the research philosophy that has been previously discussed. Our epistemological positioning of how knowledge can be generated informs our beliefs about how knowledge may be gained (Al-Ababneh 2020). In this section, my qualitative methodological positioning is explored, informed by my interpretivist epistemology.

A considered research methodology allows me, as the researcher, to galvanise my understanding of the research process and gives the research clear direction within a clear framework (Hojgaard and Hansen 2020).

3.2.1 An Interpretivist approach

This study seeks to capture the experiences of young people as they transition from Primary to Secondary school. Therefore, an interpretative methodological approach is most appropriate to allow the participants' voice to permeate the research and engage with the research on their terms (McLeod 2008). A positivist approach would place a greater importance on objective fact (Park et al 2020) which is contrary to the nature of unique perceptions and experiences of wellbeing and the philosophical underpinnings of this study. As explored in the literature review, most of the existing research of transition is rooted in positivism which has not prioritised the voice of the child through their individual stories. An interpretivist approach considers more qualitative data and subjective, personal interpretations of reality which encourages individual perspectives to come to the fore (Gillani 2021), which was important if the research questions were to be answered as part of a child-centred, rights

respecting research design. Whilst positivist data could be included, focussing on perceptions of mental health and wellbeing needed to take primarily qualitative data into account.

3.2.2 An ethnographic approach

Whilst definitions of ethnography, literally 'writing the people' as a methodology are highly debated (e.g. Jerolmack and Khan 2014; Trundle and Phillips 2023), most literature agrees the general principles involve the researcher playing a role within the research setting to fully immerse themselves; observing and collecting data in a 'natural' setting – one not specifically set up for research purposes (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson 2019; Walford 2018; Coffey 2018). Working with and living amongst informants to create knowledge through observing and joining the everyday exchanges and dialogues of social life (Mills and Morton 2013) prioritises the lived experiences of research participants and allows their story to come to the forefront of the research. Due to the differences of the roles and positioning of me and my conversants, joining in authentically with everyday exchanges and dialogues, as Mills and Morton (2013) suggest, raised some concerns. Ethnography with children is best completed when the child relates to the researcher in a way that removes any privilege or imbalance of authority (Martin 2019). This seemed unachievable in a school setting when an undeniable power difference exists between me and my students (Gill et al. 2012) and where I would continue to undertake my professional Head of Year responsibilities, adding further complexity for me and the participants. Knoblauch (2005) offers *focused ethnography* as a way of conducting ethnography in a setting, and with participants, that the researcher has an existing, intimate familiarity. Focused ethnography capitalises on the prior knowledge of a setting by conducting short-term field visits and intensive data capturing, supplemented by video and audio recordings, with the researcher positioned as an external observer. This differs from classical ethnography, where data is collected over longer periods of time and recorded by use of field notes (Brewer 2000).

Largely qualitative data is generated through ethnography, often analysing what is said and alluding to what is not said (Matera and Biscaldi 2021) as part of day-day interactions in a social arena. Whilst Carr and Kemmis (1986) suggest that ethnography can lack a direct link to practice, I have professional responsibility for the participants involved and my research aims and questions were orientated to inform future transition which encouraged the research to be practice-focused, leading to professional recommendations at its completion. Ethnography, from a nonparticipant perspective (Baker 2006), felt an appropriate approach to explore as it acknowledged the insider-researcher aspect of my positionality (explored in chapter 1.2.2) and seemed to offer a fully immersive lens through which to view pupil's experiences of transition. This aligned with my positioning of acknowledging the importance of individual narratives and their influence on a person's understanding of their experiences as part of knowledge generation (Burr 2015).

An ethnographic perspective called for a dual approach of research methods that focused on observation and interview processes (Whitehead 2005). 'Grand Tour' observations come first, with the researcher descriptively observing generally within the setting (i.e. transition as a whole) before moving to 'Mini Tour' observations that focus on specific aspects e.g. friendships or bullying. Spradley's (1980) model seemed to allow a way to frame the complexity of social interactions I would encounter (Table 3). It allowed for my 'moderate' participatory role within the social situation and outlined the interesting notion of the roles of 'teacher' and 'student' being reversed as I learn from those whom I normally teach and guide.

Space	The Physical Layout
Actors	The People involved
Activity	Related activities that occur
Objects	Physical things
Acts	Single Actions undertaken
Events	Activities that people carry out
Time	Sequencing of events
Goals	Things that people try to accomplish
Feelings	Emotions felt/expressed.

Table 3 - Spradley's nine observational dimensions and their descriptors (Spradley 1980)

I completed a series of pilot observations in July 2021 using Spradley's (1980) dimensions as an observation framework. These observations were conducted in primary schools, whilst I was working with students as part of their transition programme. Whilst I appreciated the descriptive nature of Spradley's (1980) model, I felt that it did not prioritise the voice of the child and, in fact, encouraged the adult observer to make judgements and assumptions of the experiences of the children, without necessarily engaging directly with them. Of the nine dimensions, only one concerns 'feelings'. Spradley explains this to be 'emotions felt/expressed' – I felt this was a huge area to include as just one of the dimensions. There is also an assumption, by indication of the '/', that emotions that are expressed should be considered an infallible guide to emotions that are felt. Indeed, on further reading, Spradley's approach has been described as 'dangerously misleading' and criticised for its lack of emphasis on talking to participants to gain their perspectives (Tannenbaum 1980). This cast doubt on the appropriateness of ethnography, and particularly Spradley's model of observation, for my research and its usefulness in gaining children's perspectives on wellbeing.

I explored other frameworks that are used by researchers to understand the lived experience of their participants. The technology heavy *POEMS* approach used by Whitney and Kumar (2003) uses five dimensions (*People, Objects, Environments, Messages, Services*) to record their observations and compare the experiences of those they were observing. This was an interesting lens to consider; comparing the experiences of different children to learn about their perspectives of transition. Alongside the fact that this framework did not seem to allow or acknowledge feelings, emotions or wellbeing in its design, there was a significant challenge to overcome with regards to the technological resources that it required and were not available to me. Rothstein's (2002) *A(x4)* framework has a similar design, albeit with different dimensional foci: *Actors, Activities, Artifacts* and *atmosphere.* These are used to not only describe what is happening, but to preconceive what might come later for a participant. Following an initial stage of observation, the data is then filtered into *snapshots*, where data is represented through textual and visual mediums, before being *visualised*; speculating about future experiences. I piloted Rothstein's (2002) representation of A(x4) in a local park and found that it seemed to position observations as a means to a predictive end and, like the previous models discuss, relied heavily on observer interpretation and provided limited scope for wellbeing.

Like Spradley's (1980) model, whilst there were aspects that were useful to make sense of participant behaviour, I again questioned how wellbeing could be *observed*; these models emphasised the role of the researcher as a filter through which observations of behaviour must pass. In summary, there are aspects of an ethnographic approach that initially felt appropriate however, on balance, ethnography did not align with my research ethos, particularly its reliance on objective social observation. As such, following the pilot observations and subsequent literature engagement, ethnography was rejected as a methodological positioning for this research.

3.2.3 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a useful standpoint from which to explore lived experiences, perception and emotions (Zahavi 2018), and is a way of considering how individuals make sense of reality (Matthews and Ross 2010) which seemed to align with my philosophical positioning and research aims. These musings led me to consider phenomenology as a potential methodological lens through which to explore the perceptions of wellbeing of children during transition. Heidegger's (McConnell-Henry et al. 2009) interpretative Hermeneutic manifestation of phenomenology, the evocation and prioritisation of lived experience, spoke to me more than that of the empirical approach of the founder Husserl (Finlay 2011), which seemed to favour an approach based on, what he termed, 'scientific life-philosophy' (Staiti 2014 p.291), underpinned by metaphysics (Trizio 2021); the pursuit of a final, or ultimate reality (Can Inwagen 2018). This positivist positioning did not align with my philosophical positionings (see 3.1). Heidegger's social ontological principles seemed to ascribe to the aims of my research in that there is a focus on the social interactions of others and how that might impact on individuals, with a recognition of the importance of a 'shared world' (Knudsen 2023 p.259). Social interactions and the notion of a shared experience are undoubtedly of importance when researching children's perspectives during the transition from primary to secondary school.

A phenomenological approach requires the researcher to 'bracket' their lived experiences and past knowledge before engaging with the phenomenon (Wojnar and Swanson 2007). Smith (2020) rejects this as an appropriate approach in this context, arguing that a professional doctorate is best completed when unique professional experience and knowledge is not rejected but embraced as part of the research approach, which I valued. This, along with the aim of reaching an objective, universal scientific truth, placed phenomenology in opposition to my philosophical positioning.

Whilst a phenomenological approach had some alignment with my research aims, I did not consider it the most appropriate perspective through which to position my research due to the conflict with

my axiology, ontology and professional experience working in education. I bring a valuable contextual knowledge to this research which will inform my approach.

3.2.4 Through social constructionism, to constructivism

Crotty (1998) argues that meaning is constructed by humans as they experience the world that they are interpreting. Burr (2015) agrees and describes Social Constructionism as an approach that gives weight to the accounts of participants, acknowledging them as experts within their social arena. Valuing these constructed meanings and considering the generation of knowledge as a co-creation between researcher and participant aligns with my rights-respecting research approach (see 3.4.5) and relativist ontological viewpoint. Social constructionism recognises the impact that research can have on developing a fairer society (McNamee et al. 2020) by acknowledging the knowledge is value laden and its construction changes across different social and cultural contexts (Dragonas 2020) meaning social constructionism accepts that the experiences of people can affect knowledge generation. Individual stories and experiences build the individual sense of reality and subsequent knowledge making, which aligns with my personal ethos and research axiology.

Whilst exploring the concept of social constructionism, I became aware of another term that was used without deference to a clear distinction; constructivism (e.g. Hansson 2020; Gillani 2021). This led me to an exploration of constructivism as an epistemological approach, and the debate around the definitions and idiosyncrasies of both approaches (e.g Hyde 2015; Rob and Rob 2018), with Ginter (2019) drawing a clear distinction between the two approaches. He defines social construction as a reality constructed linguistically and socially (i.e. as part of a community) and constructivism theory as an individually constructed reality, emphasising the uniqueness of cognition and how this influences subjective constructions of reality. As a key separation from the community-led production of knowledge of Social Constructionism, Constructivism embodies a more idiomatic form of subjective

epistemology which comports with my own philosophical standpoint and research aims. I am interested in the individual lived experiences of my participants as they navigate transition from primary to secondary school, as such a constructivist influenced research strategy seemed apposite.

3.2.5 Constructivism

A Constructivist positioning emphasises the experiences of the individual and how one's cognitive functioning can influence the generation of an individual sense of reality, aligning with the research aims of this study. Piaget (1955, and cited in Karmiloff-Smith 2017) hypothesises in more detail how knowledge is constructed in this way through the 'Accommodation' and 'Assimilation' processes of Constructivism. Accommodation establishes the process where a person's previous experiences frame and provide the basis for their cognitive approach to new ones; when experiencing something for the first time, we try to make sense of this through experiences we *have* had. This is followed by the Assimilation Stage, where a new experience is built into the mental framework consolidating a new experience, or knowledge (Adom et al 2016). This will be an interesting concept to explore when considering how children's prior knowledge of transition might influence their experiences of it. A constructivist approach highlights, and places value on, the individual experiences of children and is considered an effective methodological choice to these ends (Sudarsan et. al 2022). Fig 12. Illustrates the Accommodation and Assimilation stages of knowledge generation.

Figure 12. Overview of Accommodation and Assimilation under a constructivist paradigm (Adom et al. 2016).

Stage 1: Accommodation   Stage 2: Assimilation
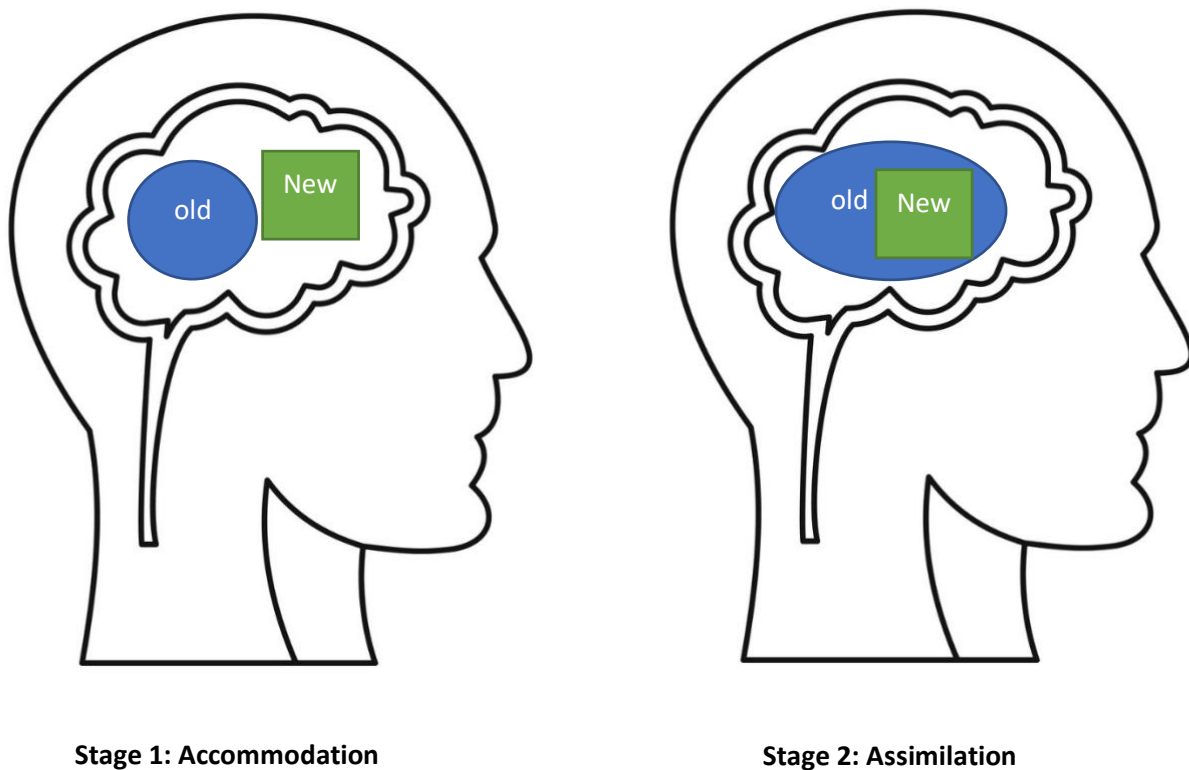
A constructivist lens is appropriate for this study as most children who transition to secondary school do so from another educational setting, unless electively home educated. It follows that it is likely that their perceptions of secondary school will be informed by their prior education and social experiences and that they will use these experiences to make sense of new and unfamiliar phenomena. The complexity of the social landscape of secondary school emphasises the notion that transition, whilst perhaps presenting similar challenges, will be experienced uniquely by all children.

3.2.6 Case Study

In examining the perspectives and experiences of a specific group of children in an individual setting, I explored the notion of case study as a framework in which to position this research. Yin (2009 p.17) calls upon Schramm (1971) to begin his illustration of what is meant by case study, in that it

'tries to illuminate a *decision* or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result'. Yin goes on to assert that, as well as decisions, cases could include individuals, organisations, and even events. Case study, then, is an approach that seeks to illuminate a phenomenon and the circumstances that surround its occurrence. Case Study is recognised as an effective approach to exploring social phenomena (Solfanelli et al. 2021) and allowed me to explore the experiences of young people undergoing the transition from Primary school to Secondary school at significant depth and facilitated prioritisation of their voice.

Previous studies of transition have prioritised breadth over depth, with many examples of large sample sizes engaging with questionnaires noted in systematic literature reviews (e.g. Bharara 2020). Previously, the School Transition and Adjustment Research Study (STARS) undertaken by University College London and Cardiff University (Neal et al. 2016), did include some more targeted research activities using semi structured interviews, but the children's voices were not amplified in the results. Indeed, the inclusion of children's experiences and voice are the subject of recommendations. I felt a case study approach would facilitate a research study that would contribute to the literature in these areas of deficit by facilitating an in depth examination of my specific setting.

Gerring (2006 p.20) emphasises the specific focus when providing a definition for what he understands as a case study; 'A case study may be understood as the intensive study of a single case where the purpose of that study is – at least in part - to shed light on a large class of cases (a population)'. He alludes to generalisability and/or universality as part of case study research citing the notion that the outcomes of a case study can illuminate other similar cases. This is a highly contested stance, with many arguing that generalisations in the social sciences can be largely useless and that the case study researcher should be cautious about any claim of generalisability due to the idiographic and qualitative element of the approach (Thomas 2021; Meqdadi et al. 2020; Eybe and Schmidt cited in Taber 2000).

Bassey (2001) explores the notion of generalisability in the social sciences arguing that the scientific

standards of generalisability in positivist research, in that outcomes can be replicated by others, are

not fit for purpose in educational case study research. Researchers in this context 'cannot identify,

define and measure all of the variables that affect the events that they study' (Bassey 2001 p.7)

meaning that scientific generalisability is not achievable. Bassey further reasons that education

research should aim to produce 'fuzzy' generalisations which allow threads to be drawn through

research that *may* be generalisable to other, similar, circumstances. Whilst this may limit the

confidence given to such generalisations, in that they do not claim to apply to every other case

(Hammersley 2001), fuzzy generalisations can allow subsequent researchers to add clarity by

developing fuzzy generalisations through further research.

Hammersley (2001), whilst acknowledging Bassey's (2001) paper as a vehicle for further debate,

challenges his characterisation of fuzzy generalisation as a distinct form of generalisability. He

maintains that all generalisations, including scientific, should have a degree of tentativeness, to

reflect the notion that readers should 'draw on knowledge of the context, and on their practical

experience, in order to decide wisely about whether to act on the basis of those predictions'

(Hammersley 2001 p. 223). This is an aspect underlined by Pratt (2003) who contends that

practitioners should not merely acquiesce to calls for changes in practice, but should be active in

considering whether the change in practice is appropriate in their context:

> *The research outcome needs to say to the reader 'this is what happened in this case,*
> *these are what appeared to be the significant aspects of it, now you could consider*
> *how they might (note, the uncertainty remains) apply to your situation in order to*
> *help you make change happen'. (Pratt 2003 p.30)*

This debate highlights that our considerations of generalisability need to go beyond the scientific dichotomy, and instead embrace the view that the outcomes of qualitative research may have relevance for practice in other settings. Whilst this study does not, and cannot claim to hold scientific generalisability, it is for the practitioner to consider their own context in light of the findings of this research as a way of reflecting on their practice with the aim of improving outcomes for young people transitioning from primary school to secondary school.

3.2.6.1 Conceptualising 'the case'

Mills et al. (2010) raise concern that the term case study is often used without a clear conceptualisation of what constitutes the case, or its boundaries. This is important, they argue, as a clearly bounded case can provide focus for the research project. Russell et al. (2015) challenge this, arguing that case studies often examine complex and multi-facetted contexts that cannot be 'neatly bounded' and that there is value at times in having an evolving understanding of what constitutes the case. Despite this ideological positioning, they ultimately accept that the clear framework of the case is pragmatically important, particularly when working towards a change in policy or practice.

Whilst what constitutes a 'case' is disputed (Schwandt and Gates 2018), Ragin and Becker (1992), despite advising against a definitive answer at the outset of the research, explores conceptualisations of 'the case' from two distinct standpoints (Table 4).

Table 4 – Conceptualisation of the case (Ragin and Becker 1992), with researcher additions			
Understanding of Cases	Case Concepts		Epistemological alignment *Researcher/Author addition*
	Specific	General	
As empirical units	Cases are found	Cases are objects	Objectivist
As Theoretical Construct	Cases are made	Cases are conventions	Subjectivist

Ragin and Becker's conceptual map illustrates different philosophical schools of thought applied to the identification of what constitutes a case. The empirical units understanding aligns with an objectivist perspective belief that cases already exist and lie in wait for discovery by the researcher. The more subjective position views cases as theoretical constructs i.e. it is for the researcher to construct the case, drawing the boundaries for the benefit of the research (Denzin and Lincoln 2018). Dyson and Genishi (2005) draw on the theoretical constructs of a case, discussing the case as a construction, binding a social unit where a phenomenon takes place. Yin (2018) advises that cases can be first identified from initial research questions as they can point to different types of case, each with its own research strategy, and this can evolve as the research progresses. Thomas (2021) has a different conceptualisation of what constitutes an effective case from a multi-faceted perspective (Figure 13) which I have developed in table 5 to support the exploration in the context of my research
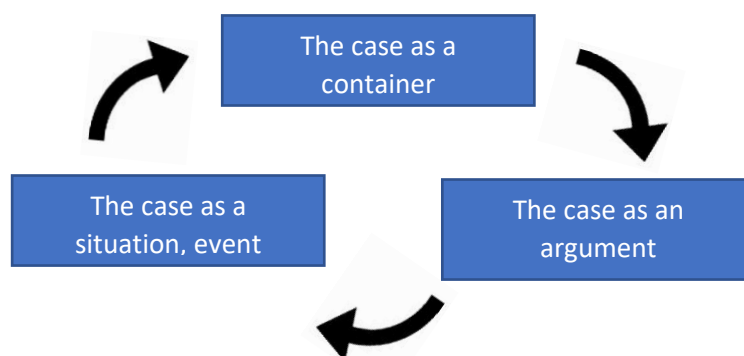
Fig 13. Conceptualisation of a case (Adapted from Thomas 2021)

Table 5. Conceptualisation of a case – (Adapted from Thomas 2021)		
Perspective of the Case	**Conceptualisation**	**Questions to support exploration*** **researcher addition**
Container	The boundaries of what comprises the case	What is being studied?
Situation/Event	The circumstances that surround the case that support its description.	Where did this happen? When did this happen? What happened before? Who was there? How did this impact on other things?
Argument	The justification of the conclusions a researcher makes the arguments made to connect the different aspects of what is observed.	What did you observe? What does this mean? How do you know this?

Table 5: Exploration of conceptualisation (adapted from Thomas 2021) with researcher addition.

Wieviorka (1992) argues that for a case to be valid, it must meet two pieces of criteria; it must be 1) unique, which Wieviorka labels the 'practical/historic unity' and 2) reproducible; 'Theoretical, scientific basis', giving the example of an unwell patient. (Figure 14)

Unique			**Reproducible**		
Practical/historical unity	**+**		Theoretical, scientific basis	**=**	**CASE**
e.g. Patient			e.g. Illness		
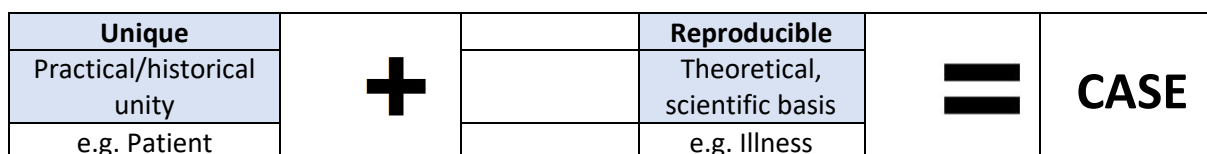
Fig 14 –what makes a valid case? – adapted from Wieviorka (1992)

Aligning with my subjectivist positioning, I concur with Ragin and Becker's (1992) theoretical positioning of the case, in that they are constructed by the researcher to frame a social unit where a phenomenon is taking place rather than preexisting, waiting to be 'found'. Thomas' (2021) conceptualisation is helpful in examining the validity of the chosen case from different perspectives

and I have applied this to the case as positioned in this research in fig.15. I have also included signposting to Wieviorka's model of the unique and reproducible elements of an authentic case.

Children's perspective of wellbeing during transition from Primary to Secondary School		
Subjective positioning under theoretical construct		
	Unique	Reproducible
Container	Children	Perspectives of wellbeing
Situation	July 2021 – May 2022	Primary school – secondary school transition

Fig. 15 positioning of this case

3.2.6.2 The case: Children's Perspectives of Their Wellbeing During the Transition from Primary to Secondary School

I see this work as a case study in that it takes place within a bounded setting, a comprehensive secondary school in Gloucestershire, over a bounded period of time – the transition from primary to secondary school between July 2021 and May 2022. Specifically, a local knowledge, instrumental case study as I am approaching the case from a position of knowledge and professional experience with the aim of gaining a deep understanding of a specific aspect and implementing positive change (Thomas 2021; Stake 1995). Yin (2013) discusses case study as a research method that can utilise many research instruments, as opposed to a prescriptive and inflexible framework that can employ many research tools and methods in its execution. Case study in this context is considered an approach to research that facilitates a focus on a phenomenon, looked at in depth and from specific perspectives to gain a balanced, rich and more rounded picture of transition, based on Foucault's Polyhedron of Intelligibility (Foucault, cited in Thomas 2021), where a knowledge of a concept is enriched by viewing it from different perspectives (Bourke and Lidstone 2015). The aim of case study is not to claim or infer generalisability, but to look at one case in detail and learn what we can about that snapshot in time (Thomas 2021).

Thomas (2021) suggests a typology of case study that can be used to clearly signpost the construction of the study. Below I use this explain this typology, and use it as a basis to explicitly define this case (fig 16):

Aspects of typology	Application to this research
Subject What is the case? Why have you identified this?	The case is Children transitioning from primary to secondary school. This has been identified by the professional experience and knowledge I have of this transition (Thomas terms this as a local knowledge case) alongside gaps in the literature. I am interested in having greater knowledge of the experiences children have of their wellbeing as they make this transition.
Object what is the **theoretical topic** at the heart of your question that the subject of your study is allowing you to explore in detail?	The theoretical topic at the heart of the question is children's wellbeing during transition from primary to secondary school and how to authentically elicit the child's voice in this regard.
Purpose why are you doing it?	This is an instrumental case study in that it is being undertaken to gain a broader understanding of children's perspectives of their wellbeing during transition in order to make professional recommendations for practice. The majority of pervading transition research is quantitative and focusses on the academic transition of young people.
Approach Testing a theory? Developing a new theory	Testing the theory that transition is a challenging time for young people - 'the most challenging part of their educational journey' (Hopwood 2016) – and developing a theoretical model of wellbeing support for transition.
Methods How will you collect data? How will you analyse the data?	Research conversations Multi-literacy research conversations Analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis
Process Will it be a single or multiple study, and will you look at the case during one particular moment in time, or over a longer period?	Single snapshot case study. Bound from July 2021 to May 2022.

Fig. 16. Typology of the case (Thomas 2021), applied to this study.

3.2.7 Evaluative Approach

I have taken an evaluative *approach* to this research (as discrete from Evaluation as a distinct form of inquiry) as a method of analysing the effectiveness of our current transition programme. Russell et al. (2015 p.43) advocates 'the study of individual behaviour in its total social setting, and the comparison of cases leading to a formulation of hypotheses' as a central part of an evaluative approach.

Programme evaluation has been established as an apposite tool for systematically evaluating a social intervention to assess its effectiveness (Rossi et al. 2019). A formative evaluative approach is an effective way of analysing the quality of the program with the aim of informing an improved offer (Vella et al. 2019) as opposed to a more summative approach intended to pass judgement (Jacobs et al. 2008).

An evaluative approach to case study should be effective in establishing the perceptions of children's wellbeing as they transfer, the effectiveness of the transition programme, and in recommending changes in practice to improve the pastoral and academic outcomes of young people, whilst diminishing the institutional, personal and professional risk associated (Discussed further 3.4.2.4). This is reflected in the commitment I had for this research to be conducted in a rights-respecting way (see 3.4.5.) Figure 17 illustrates the final research paradigm for this study.

Figure 17. Research Paradigm for this study
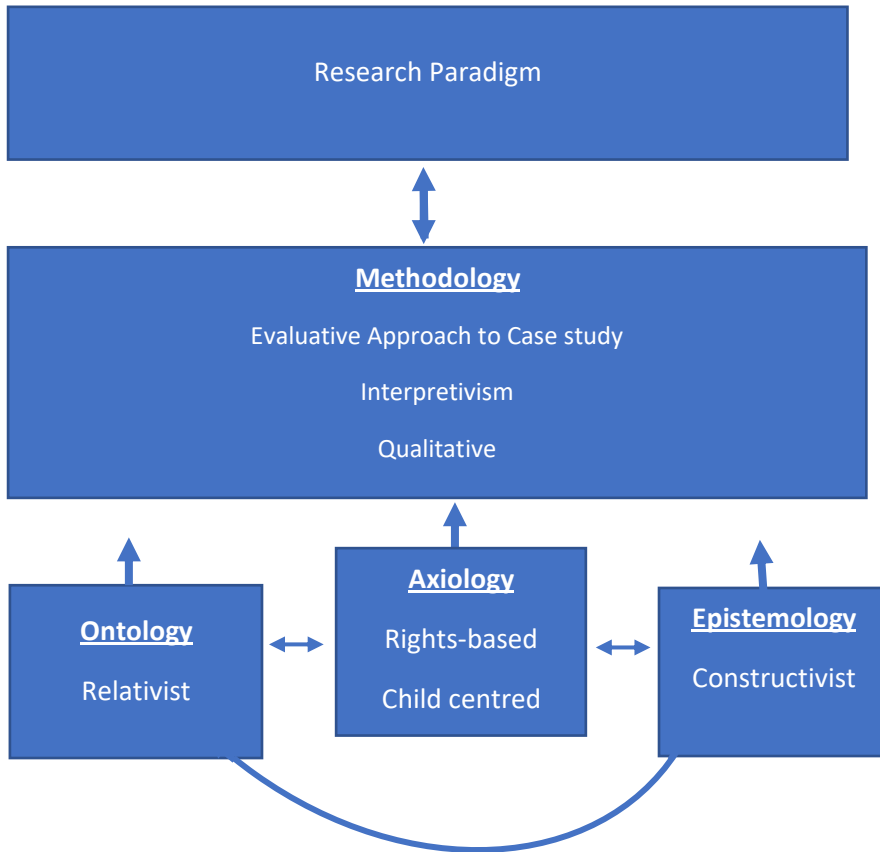
3.3 Research Methods

Each piece of research is different and research methods must be carefully considered and selected to ensure they lead to reliable and valid data that contributes to answering the research questions (Mukherji and Albon 2022). This piece of research aimed to gain children's perspective of their wellbeing during the transition period and qualitative research tools have been selected that reflect my philosophical positioning, research methodology and aims, and in line with calls for more qualitative studies in children's mental health and wellbeing (e.g. O'Reilly and Parker 2017; Wilson and Cariola 2020). These qualitative research tools were chosen with the aim of facilitating a more

equal research relationship (Barker and Weller 2003) and an accessible framework for the authentic voice of the child to permeate the research.

3.3.1 Sampling

To secure a high quality sample (DeLuca 2023), I initially intended to include up to 20 students in the core sample, alongside up to 8 staff. I had initially chosen to include the voices of staff members involved with transition but reflected on the literature and questioned how this would help me secure the voice of the child. The voice of adults is present in literature on transition (e.g Hopwood et al. 2016) and children's wellbeing (e.g. Dudovitz et al. 2022) and I decided that this was not in line with the ethos and aims of this study so ultimately chose not to pursue this. I knew there may be many variables, including living locations, ability levels, gender, Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) and Pupil Premium (PP) – students who are considered disadvantaged by the government - which was too many variables to claim to be fully representative, considering my sample size. I had no preconceptions that these variables would make a difference, but I aimed to allow for this possibility by using a sample that that was typical of the cohort being studied in my setting, whilst being manageable. The initial intention for sampling is outlined in table 6.

Table 6 – Initial Sample overview and proposed research activities		
Sample	Size	Research Activity
Target group i	Up to 20 Students	Group interview Semi-structured interviews
Target group ii	Up to 8 Staff	Semi-structured interviews

During the design of the research, I originally intended to select target group i. using systematic random sampling. The results of a population survey would be ranked and organised into quartiles; the sample would then be selected randomly from these quartiles. No participants were approached who were known to have limited capacity to take part or consent, or whose carers or parents would have limited capacity to be fully informed. My line manager acted an independent gatekeeper, as required by BERA (2024), to compile a list of students that were particularly vulnerable (Appendix 6). Children were added to this list where their lived experiences might make them emotionally vulnerable meaning it would be appropriate that they be removed from the sample field on ethical grounds, as participation could negatively affect them due to potential triggers. Aldridge (2015 p.14) advises caution when researching emotional topics as participating in the research may have the potential for 'creating or enhancing (existing) vulnerability among research participants' (Aldridge 2015 p14). For example, O'Reilly et al. (2013) suggest that children who have experienced a recent bereavement should not be included in research activities as this is likely to be an unwanted intrusion. For these reasons, children on the list were not to be included in the sample field.

When I began recruitment for this research, the whole year group (except those identified as above) was approached for consent but the response rate was typically low compared to other research (Tinkler et al. 2017) with seven participants from target group i giving consent. On reflection, I questioned the relevance of target group ii in capturing and prioritising the voice of the child and decided that this element of the sample held little practicality to the research aims. I therefore moved forwards with a convenience sample of those who consented from target group i.

Fig.18 outlines the initial overview of methods that was refined during the research journey. The individual research activities and evolution of approach is discussed in this section.
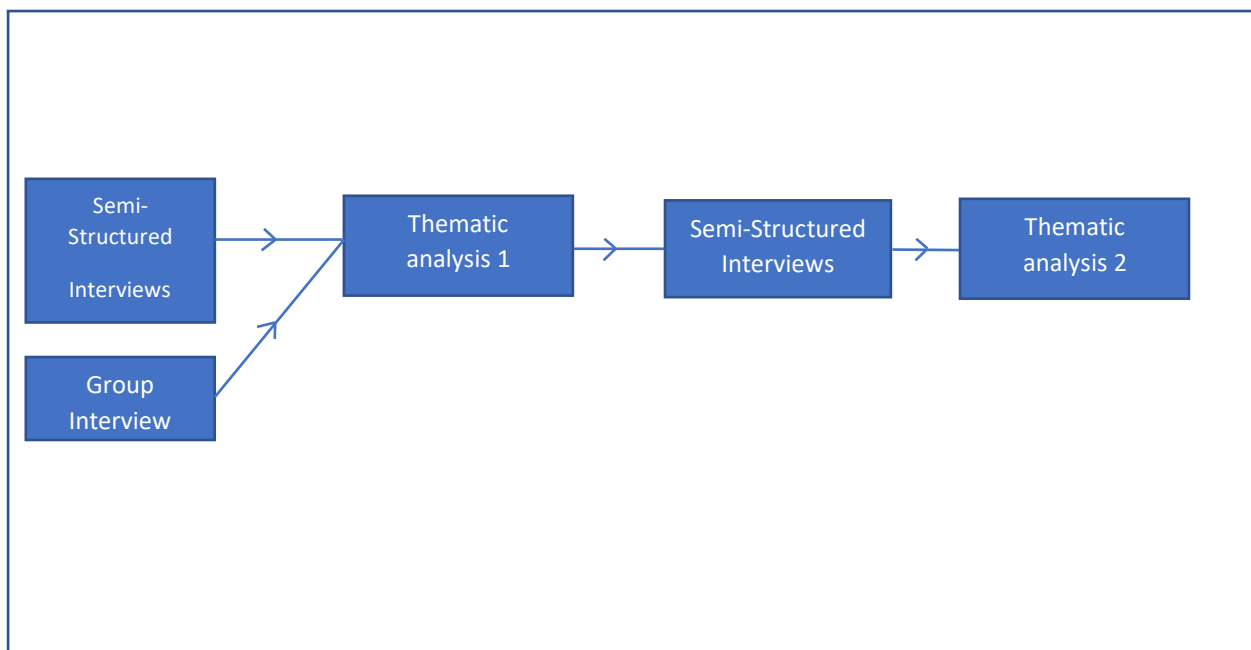
Fig.18. Initial Overview of the Research Approach

3.3.2 - Semi-structured interviews - Conversational Interviews - Research Conversations

The semi-structured interview is hailed as a flexible and versatile research tool to gather rich qualitative data and allow emerging themes to be explored (Kallio et al. 2016; Edwards and Holland 2013), with Galletta (2013) boasting that they even leave some space for participants to add their own ideas to a study. Whilst initially I felt semi-structured interviews would be advantageous, the researcher led approach to data gathering did not seem to align with the child-centred positioning of the study. Entering interviews with a prepared list of questions seemed to place the position of narrative power with me as the researcher, not the child. This was an especially important consideration when considering my positionality as a trauma-informed insider-outsider researcher. It was important from an ethical perspective that children did not see the research as 'schoolwork', or felt they had to say what they thought I wanted to hear (explored more in 3.4). A more structured style of interview may have positioned the interviews as a test, where a list of questions is asked of participants. I was determined that the style of data gathering was relaxed, allowing the young people

to authentically contribute their thoughts and perspectives and avoiding a perceived interrogation that an interview can present to children (O'Reilly and Dogra 2017).

Reeves et al. (2008), suggest beginning with conversational interviews allows researchers to ask questions in a naturalistic manner, without the potentially intimidating environment of a formal interview. This encourages participants to feel comfortable and therefore more candid with their contributions by collaboratively building an agenda with the researcher and allowing the participant to drive the narrative of the interview in a conversational manner (Burgess-Limerick and Burgess-Limerick 1998). I felt this approach was preferable to semi-structured interviews when researching with children, particularly at a time of potential vulnerability, as it prioritised the voice of the child in a comfortable setting. I did, however, still feel that I would like the method to be more respondent led and, whilst conversational interviews were a step in this direction, they still left much to be desired in this respect.

Butcher (2018) reframes interviews with children as *conversations*, and participants as *conversants*, prioritising the rights of the child to have their voices heard, respected and given due weight, as enshrined in Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC (UN 1989). This reframing was congruent with my exploration and development from semi-structured interview through conversational interviews. Butcher's research conversations seemed to allow for a shift in power, from the interrogatory nature of a semi-structured interview to the more nuanced method of providing a framework from which respondents' stories can emerge on their terms, in keeping with my rights-based approach. This exploration led to a revised research approach, illustrated in figure 19, and a reframing of participants as conversants.

Fig.19. Revision 1- Research Approach
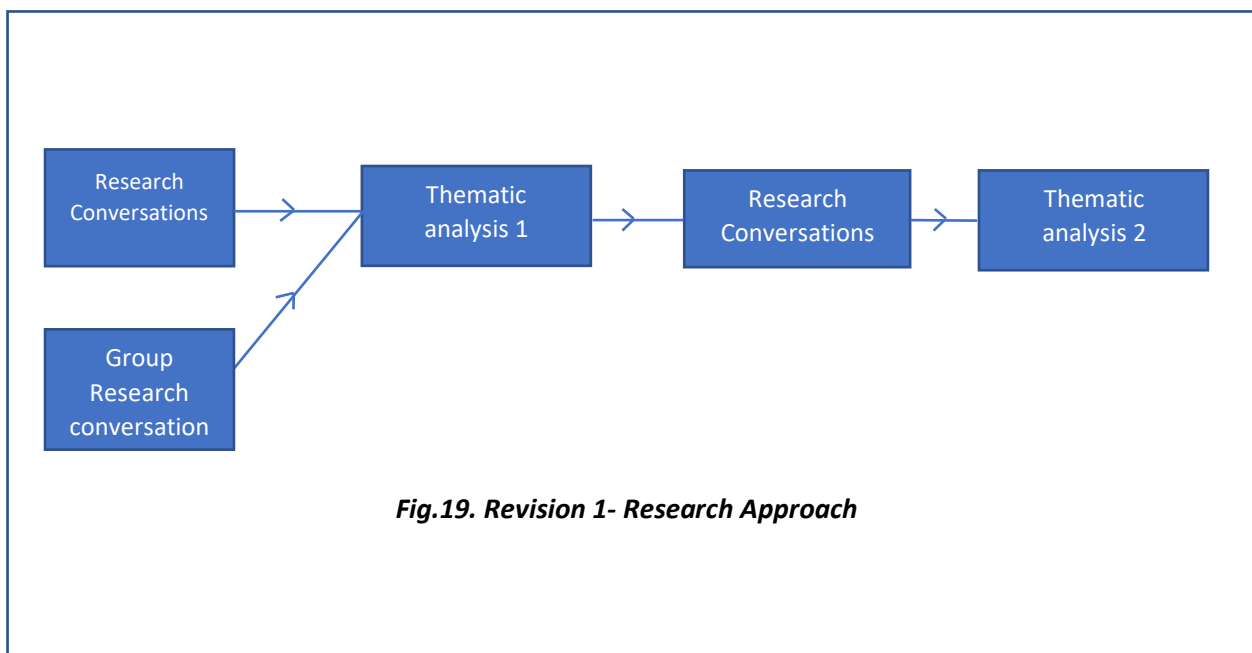
3.3.3 Group research conversation

I felt a group research conversation would be useful to include during the initial stages as the format can allow respondents to give confidence to one another in contributing, can generate more ideas and can support the sharing of sensitive information (Kruger et al. 2019) and therefore might elicit more open and thus stronger, more reliable data. It was also important to set out the landscape of the research for the participants as a relaxed environment conducive to honest contributions so I chose to conduct the first research activity as a group conversation, as different from a focus group. I chose not to utilise the focus group method, as a focus group may not tap into emotions and relies on participants interacting and discussing issues together whilst the moderator observes (Krueger and Casey 2009, Liamputtong 2011). Whilst proponents of focus groups celebrate the giving of voice to vulnerable groups of people (Penaherrera-Velez et al. 2023), there is concern amongst researchers that they may not be an effective way to gather the authentic voice of participants due to bias that exists in adolescent focus groups due to social pressure (Adler et al. 2019) , and it is

challenging to distinguish between the individual and the group during analysis due to high levels of interactions between participants (Morgan 1995; Finch and Lewis 2003). There is also concern that focus groups may not allow space for those for additional needs to contribute fairly in a complex group dynamic (Kaehne and O'Connell 2010). Whilst the emphasis is on inter-participant interactions in a focus group, the emphasis of interaction during the group *interview,* reframed here as a group conversation, is between the interviewer and interviewees, each taking turn to respond and engage with the interviewer which can help to mitigate these challenges (Parker and Tritter 2007). I used the group interview model for this reason and to ensure key questions were answered in an efficient and robust way, whilst opening ideas from conversants to inform subsequent aspects of the research design. Whilst focus group and group interviews both post challenges around group moderation and management, I felt that my professional experience in managing groups of young people, along with the more structured framework of a group research conversation would manage these concerns. The group conversation was trialled at the outset of the project and contained all conversants involved in the research. When conducting the group conversation, I had concerns about the authenticity of the contributions of conversants and how comfortable they may feel in discussing their potential emotional vulnerabilities in front of their peers. This meant that I was less willing to ask follow up questions about conversants experiences as these felt personal and doing so would not align with my trauma-informed practice. I was also uneasy as I felt this approach mimicked the dynamics of a classroom environment and it was possible that conversants found it difficult to not consider this a part of their schoolwork (see 3.3.6), and so feel compelled to engage in a certain way. The group research conversation emphasised the power asymmetry and strongly positioned me as the authoritarian researcher and them the researched. I therefore did not repeat any group interview activities, electing for research conversations as discussed in (3.3.2 and 3.3.6).

3.3.4 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The data generated by the above research activities was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), following the principles set out by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). Once qualitative data had been collected and transcribed codes were developed (e.g. friendships, literacy, anxiety) to enable me to analyse the data. RTA codes qualitative data and conceptualises into themes, which allowed me to effectively identify patterns of experiences and perceptions of wellbeing across the data set (Given 2008). Thematic coding allowed me, as an analyst, to identify patterns and lines of enquiry that may not be apparent otherwise, whilst prioritising the voice of the child by following a data-driven, as opposed to theory-driven, approach (Boyatzis 1998). This considers the syntax and words of the raw data, giving consistency, greater appreciation of the information and allows previously unheard voices to permeate the research. I wanted to use a data-driven inductive approach to the analysis, with a more semantic tendency to coding, which can be considered to draw more explicitly expressed, overt meaning from the participants, whilst still considering implied, underlying meaning. (Braun & Clarke 2021). The first two phases, outlined below, were used following early data generation from use of the initial research conversations, to shape the subsequent research design.

Thematic Analysis 1

Phase 1 – familiarisation

I familiarised myself with the data set by personally completing transcriptions of the initial research conversations. Listening to the audio recordings and creating a verbatim written account of each one (Bailey 2008) is an excellent way of familiarising oneself with the data set during phase one of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021). I then listened again to the recordings alongside the transcriptions ensuring there were no errors. This phase allowed me to become immersed in the data set and to form some initial ideas for coding before progressing to Phase 2.

Phase 2 – Generating initial codes

Once I finished transcribing the interviews, I worked systematically through the text to collate

interesting aspects that I felt might form the basis of repeated patterns, or themes. This gave me

lines of enquiry for follow up with further research conversations. Whilst Braun and Clarke (2022)

advocate a six-phase approach to thematic analysis, they are insistent on the importance and value

of the flexibility of thematic analysis. As the purpose of 'Thematic Analysis 1' was to generate lines of

enquiry to inform subsequent research activities, it felt superfluous to complete the remaining

phases on the data set at this point; particularly as the data would be included in 'Thematic Analysis

2' – which would be a full, six phase analysis of all data.

3.3.5 Multi-literacy research conversations

Following research conversations and phase one of the Braun and Clarke (2008) Thematic analysis

approach, I began to reflect on the quality and richness of responses I had received from the

children. Whilst some conversants had managed to competently articulate their experiences and

thoughts, others had been less forthcoming with their contributions and provided fewer illuminating

answers. This concerned me as the aim of this research was to gain the perspective and voices of all

participants, not just those who were most confident or articulate. Whiting (2015) suggests that this

may be due to the cognitive development of language skills of children of this age range, meaning

they are less able to articulate their experiences. This led me to reflect on my own research practice

and how effective this was in illuminating the child's voice, which was a central aspect of this study. I

realised my best practice was when working with conversants who were more confident and

forthcoming in their contributions to the conversation. In these cases, the child's voice was naturally

more emphasised, and my voice retreated into the background. The conversants held more of the

power in the conversation, demonstrated by the fact that they were able to lead the direction of

travel and topics as relevant to them, placing importance and emphasis where they liked. When

reflecting on my work with respondents that had less vocal or assertive contributions, I noticed that I was more likely to 'fill the silence', or ask additional, rephrased questions, which is one of the risks when researching with children (Poole 2016). There were also early examples of me asking mildly leading questions, all of which shifted the power and agency away from the child. This was particularly poignant in Jen's initial research conversation where I was not particularly effective in drawing out Jen's authentic voice as there became an emphasis on 'getting an answer' and driving the conversation forwards rather than facilitating a framework from which Jen's authentic views could emerge in her own time. Below is an extract from Jen's research conversation that illustrates this reflection:

> *R: When you got to the end of Year 6, you were starting to think about moving to secondary school?*
> *C: Yeah.*
> *R: How did that feel?*
> *C: hmmm……scary.*
> *R: Ok. Why was it scary to you?*
> *C: I was worried about coming to secondary school.*
> *R: Mhmm… anything in particular?*
> *C: …..*
> *R: Just generally the whole thing was a bit 'ahhhhhhhh! This is far too much'?*
> *C: Yeah.*
> *R: Right, ok. So, did you know anyone else who was going to join?*
> *C: No.*
> *R: I suppose that was quite scary as well, was it?*
> *C: Yeah.*

In this exchange, my voice is more prevalent than Jen's, in both quantity of words spoken but also with regards to the power held. When Jen is asked about what she was worried about when moving to secondary school, she paused. Rather than allowing her the time she needed to think, I took the opportunity from her by asking a closed leading question, essentially giving her a suggested answer that she could agree with. This was obviously not authentically gaining her voice and views, and likely led to bias when faced with the increased pressure this inevitably brought (Cairns-Lee 2022). I was also concerned that Jen may have found this an awkward, possibly stressful, experience so I was

keen to find ways to improve this experience for her. As a result of this reflection, I returned to literature around eliciting the child's voice and redesigned my subsequent data gathering approach, culminating in my development of a new approach, that I named 'multi-literacy research conversations'. The following sections outline my exploration of different elicitation techniques that informed multi-literacy research conversations.

3.3.5.1 Photo elicitation

Parker (2009 p.1125) suggests the use of visual elicitation techniques to support communication of experiences, and 'offers a voice to underrepresented and silenced groups' whilst allowing a researcher closer proximity to an experience. Visual elicitation can also go some way to address the power differential between child and researcher, allowing equitable conditions for young people to engage with research (Carter et al. 2014) in a relatable and accessible way. Thille et al (2021) discuss memory as a multi-sensory phenomenon and that exploring different, often visual, methods to elicit data during research activities can be a fruitful exercise and result in richer dialogue. This is particularly true with children, who can find it challenging to rely purely on words to share their experiences (Ford et al. 2017; Kirk 2007).

Photo elicitation, the use of photographs and video in interviews to stimulate dialogue, can support young people in communicating their thoughts, feelings and emotions (Whiting 2015) with Pyle (2013) arguing that there is a distinct hierarchy of the quality of media used, depending on how involved children are in their production.

Fig. 20 - Hierarchy of media used in photoeliciation (Pyle 2013) – adapted		
Photographs/videos taken by children		Highest quality
Researcher provided – respondent is the subject		
Researcher provided – of other children	*subjects are known to the respondent**	
	subjects are not known to the respondent*	

*Researcher addition to the model

I felt a refining of Pyle's model appropriate as, through my professional experience, I know that young people are often animated when viewing photographs and videos of other children that they know, more so than unknown subjects (figure 20).

3.3.5.2 Metaphor Sort Technique

Clark (2004;2010) argues that established research activities, including verbal interrogation, is unlikely to facilitate authentic and rich contributions in child centred research. Visual metaphor has been used to elicit experiences of mental health and wellbeing that are difficult for young people to articulate (Woodgate et al. 2021). Clark (2004) advocates the Metaphor Sort Technique (MST) as a method of eliciting talk through engaging with metaphor, referencing a study when images of 25 places (e.g. a dark cave, a park on a sunny day, a large, dense crowd of people assembled in a city park) were presented to respondents. Respondents then assessed the emotions or feelings conveyed by the images and decided whether they could relate them to the illness with which they were suffering. A conversation was held around the decision making and results, generating data.

Briggs (1986) discusses the advantages of engaging with respondents in the way they are most accustomed to communicating. The respondents in this study have never been known the absence of the internet and engage readily with their peers online in a variety of emerging ways (Boyd 2014), with adolescents and young people now spending more time interacting digitally than face to face (Boutet et al. 2021). This was reflected in data gathered in the preliminary research conversations as

participants discussed the representation of secondary school on social media, and in films and on television which I further explored in subsequent multi-literacy research conversations. Fane et al (2018) capitalise on the online literacy of their young respondents by including emoji as a visual research method for eliciting experiences of wellbeing, advocating this as part of a 'multi-literacy' approach to interview; a blend of written, read and spoken literacy, alongside engagement with images and symbols. Emojis are a metaphor for feelings and emotions and have been used to support young people in talking about anxiety (Setty et al. 2019) and assessment of pain (Donovan 2016). When comparing photographs of human faces, drawings of human faces, Brechet (2017) found that drawings were more recognisable than photographs of real faces. This research was built upon to produce a new set of emojis that were consistently more successful than emoticons, drawings and photographs (Cherbonnier and Michinov 2021).

As a way of refining the practice of Cherbonnier and Michinov (2021), I decided to use these new emojis as the images for a metaphor sort technique section of the multi-literacy research conversation to provide a scaffold for the young people to contribute their perspectives, if they found it difficult to do so, and to enhance the contribution of others. There was, however, no option of a 'neutral' expression, nor an 'excited', the addition of which I felt might add to the quality of responses. I, therefore, added these emojis from Fane et al. (2018) to refine Cherbonnier and Michinov's model. The complete set of emojis used in this research are appended (appendix 3). This contributed to the development of a new variant of elicitation; a three phase multi-literacy interview design intended to maximise the elicitation of data from my respondents, outlined in figure 21 overleaf:

Fig. 21 - Multi-literacy Research Conversation Structure		
	Research tool	**Description**
Phase 1	Photo & Video Elicitation	1) Share a video of the conversants and their peers walking into the main hall on their first day, for the first time and discuss with conversant. 2) Share photographs of conversants during their first day and discuss.
Phase 2	Metaphor Sort Technique	Present children with two boxes and 8 cards, each displaying an emoji. Ask conversants to assess the feeling, mood or emotion they associate with each card and sort into either box 1 – relevant to transition, or box 2 – not relevant to transition. Discussion of decisions made.
Phase 3	Follow up questions	1)Tell me about any stories that you saw on social media about secondary school before you started. 2) Tell me about any stories you saw on films or on TV about Secondary school before you started. 3) What are the biggest differences between being in primary school and being in secondary school? 4) Did you think that the work would be different? How so? How did this make you feel? 5) How have you changed since you were in primary school? 6) a. How did you feel about older students in school? b. How do you feel now? 7) Would a buddy system have been good, as you started? 8)How do you feel about secondary school now? 9) What would you tell a current year 6 about moving to secondary school? 10) Is there anything else you'd like to say or tell me?

The addition of multi-literacy research conversations is reflected in the final revision of my research approach (fig.22).

Fig.22- Final Research Approach
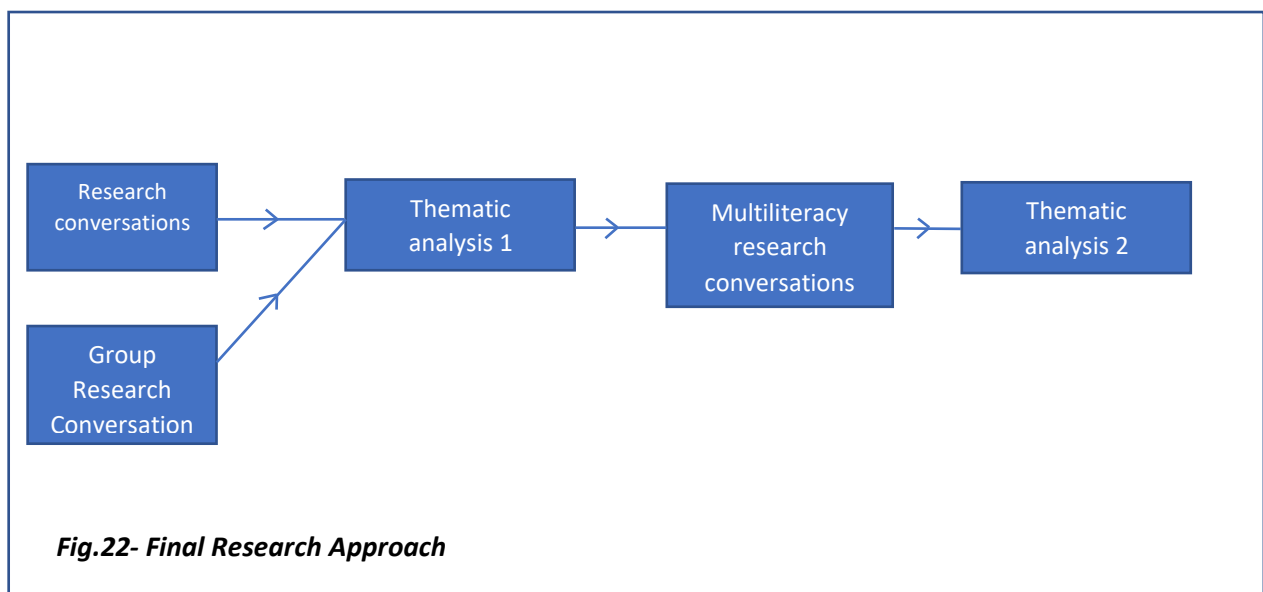
3.4 Research Ethics

Within this section, I outline my ethical, professional and personal positioning which inform this research. This study was given ethical approval according to the scrutiny processes of the University of the West of England, and I followed UWE-BERA guidance on ethical working, informed by this and my wider reading.

3.4.1 Ethical Dimensions

The requirement of this research to be approved by the University ethics committee prior to the research commencing facilitated consideration of potential ethical challenges. Head (2018) advises caution, insisting that ensuring an ethical approach to research is more than a 'one point review', but an evolving and reflexive undertaking that requires a researcher to carry the thread of ethics through the entirety of the research, considering ethical issues as they arise and acknowledging that ethical decisions need to be made 'in the field'. Alminde and Warming (2020) argue that procedural ethics, such as those governed by ethics committees, should be considered alongside relational ethics; 'acting from our hearts and minds' and 'taking responsibility for actions and their consequences' (Alminde and Warming (2020p. 439). Ellis (2007) also draws the distinction between procedural ethics, relational ethics and, additionally, situational ethics – unpredictable, often subtle, moments that come up in the field – that might include discomfort with the research process. This perspective offered a more rigorous approach to ethical research that I felt important to ascribe to. These dimensions are discussed in more detail below.

3.4.2 Procedural Ethics

Fletcher (2021) considers procedural ethics to be the principles that inform the ethical codes of institutions. Researcher facing, this is usually evidenced in the form of an application to the ethics committee as part of rules-based research compliance (Head 2018). Positioned in the Kantian ethical and moral school of thought; aiming for a supreme principle of morality (De Vera 2019), Shaw (2019) argues that procedural ethics is a positivist approach to ethics requiring researchers to obtain ethical approval for projects by highlighting likely ethical dilemmas and tensions that may arise in the research. I agree that this is important to safeguard participants and researchers but is a snapshot review of ethics, done before research commences and other issues have had opportunity to emerge. Procedural ethics, then, offer an essential ethical foundation but is not a stand-alone process that 'deals' with ethics. What follows are the procedural ethical foundations of this research.

UWE ethical guidance (UWE 2017) follows the practice and code of the British Educational Research Association (as updated in BERA 2018) and has three principles that underpin work with children and young people: 'The rights of the child should be respected', 'The agency of the child should be maintained' and 'The safety of the child should be secured'. These principles align with my axiology as expressed in Chapter Four. Along with my own professional safeguarding qualifications and experience, and institutional policies, this laid the foundation for my safeguarding and child protection responsibilities as part of the research and provided a useful reference in ethical decision making. Sikes and Potts (2008) advise that researchers ask, 'how they would feel if they or their children, family, friends or acquaintances were 'researched' by them', supporting Christians' (2005, cited in Kennedy 2006) view that ethical considerations are evolving, giving us an additional strategy to use in the case of unexpected issues arising.

3.4.2.1 Informed Consent

The UWE approach to ethical research follows the practice and code of the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2018) involving fully informed, voluntary consent of participants before research commences. McRae et al. (2011) question whether this is even achievable, acknowledging that consent should be secured 'where possible', with Grooten-Wiegers et al. (2015) arguing that many children are unable to give fully-informed consent due to the complexities of some areas of research. BERA (2018) note that some professional bodies, including the British Medical Association (BMA), advocate for the enrolment of children in research even where no direct participant benefit occurs. This goes against my axiology which prioritises the empowerment of children and ensuring that they have their rights respected. It was important to me that all participants were empowered to make a fully informed decision in line with Articles twelve and thirteen of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN 1989) and my own axiology.

Conversants were only included in my research once I had I receive fully informed, written consent from them and a parent/carer in line with UWE and BERA guidelines, and my own ethical and axiological positioning. Conversants were presented with an accessible overview of the research and the ethical restraints surrounding it, in the form of a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and Research Consent Form (RCF), which explained how questions could be asked of the researcher, and consent be withdrawn. As the conversants are considered vulnerable and under the age of consent, I insisted on consent from both the participant and their parents or carers for them to be included in the research. The language used on the participant information sheet was kept simple and parents were asked to read through the information with their child and discuss it ahead of them giving consent. The language used in the PIS and RCF was checked with a Primary School Headteacher and Year Six teacher to ensure its age-appropriateness and accessibility. Both documents are appended (appendix 1 and 2).

Teacher-led research in schools can be seen as 'schoolwork', i.e. non-negotiable, by participants due to the expectations of school and the power relations that exist between students and teachers (Denscombe and Aubrook 1992). This raised an ethical dilemma as it is important that students not only felt able to consent, but also to *not* consent. To secure fully informed and voluntary consent in this context, it was even more crucial that I was explicit that participation was voluntary, data would be anonymised, and gave information about the research and how contributions would be used. Participants were sent the PIS and RCF to their homes where they were away from the institutional pressures of school and so more likely to feel able to genuinely consent or refuse, as they wished. I felt this would encourage participants who were positively engaged in the study, rather than reluctant acquiescence – or worse lack of refusal, promoting the rights of the child and rigorous data.

A deadline for withdrawal pre-anonymisation of data was be given approximately six months after consent was obtained. Following this date, due to anonymisation and destruction of original recordings, identifying and withdrawing data was likely to be impossible. Schaefer and Wertheimer (2010 p.21) note that privacy concerns are 'relatively minimal when data is 'de-identified'', with Cornock (2018 p.1) agreeing that 'the right to be forgotten' does not mean that data gained need be completely erased if it was obtained lawfully and is still necessary for the research, under General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) legislation. This respects the legislation that requires data holders to ensure that data is kept securely and erased when it is no longer needed (European Union 2018 article 5.1.e). Conversants were notified as to the nature of data collected about them and how it would be stored and used on the PIS. All data was digitised and stored on the UWE One Drive securely and with password protection. Pseudonyms were given at the point of transcription, after which audio recordings were deleted.

3.4.2.2 Personal Positionality

Researching students that I teach meant my positionality as their teacher, with regards to ethical research, needed to be scrutinised so that participants were able to take part in an authentic way, as 'people's willingness to talk to you, and what people say to you, is influenced by who they think you are.' (Drever cited in Mercer 2007 p.10); the relationship I hold with respondents could have impacted on the candour of their contributions. The complexities of my insider-outsider researcher positioning are discussed in Chapter One, and as I am part of the school community and have a role within it, students may have potentially felt obliged to consent, and present their contributions in a favourable light (Costley et al 2010). Shah (2004. cited in Mercer 2007) agrees that students may not share certain information with an insider researcher for fear of reprisal or less favourable future treatment, which has consequences for the research, suggesting respondents may not be as open as with an outsider researcher. I pride myself on developing and maintaining positive relationships rooted in mutual respect with students under my care and my role involves regular conversations about sensitive topics with them. This lends weight to the view that more positive power relationships are often ignored (McLeod 2008), and whilst students may have felt obliged to respond in a disingenuous way to me as their Head of Year, it is possible that students felt safe and comfortable enough to discuss their true feelings with me, as a result of our positive relationship.

As I work at the school where the research took place, Costley et al (2010) point there are certain personal and institutional risks that may apply, including:

1) Possible criticism of transition actions within the school might have offended the professionals/school concerned, and could have affected both institutional reputation and my professional working relationships or standing;

2) My knowledge of the politics, relationships and procedures of the school, as well as access to secondary data, could have affected my analysis and evaluation of the project so I needed to be alert to this risk.

3) My professional reputation could have been damaged as a result of me conducting the research, if it was not conducted in an ethically rigorous manner, or if it interfered with my work

4) The relationships between myself and students and their parents/carers could have been damaged

5) My position and role within the school could have been called into question

In response to the above I utilised elements of appreciative enquiry and formative evaluative approach, ensuring that the positives of existing programmes were highlighted in addition to areas that would benefit from development (Hammond 2013), helping to preserve my professional relationships. The school supports my research as part of my professional development and, as the strategic lead of transition in my setting, any recommendations are primarily directed at my role. This research was conducted in line with my own professional integrity, with a detailed knowledge of the school and local community dynamics.

It was important that I continually employed reflexivity and was aware of how my positioning might affect the research (Holland 1999, D'Cruz et al. 2019), with the aim of conducting an ethically rigorous research project. Merriam et al. (2001) suggest that having both insider and outsider researchers on the research team can help to minimise some of the risks of insider-research. As a doctoral student my research supervisors had invaluable perspectives as outsiders, encouraging my own reflexivity.

3.4.2.3 Data management

The research complied with UWE research rules, the Data Protection Act (1998), and GDPR legislation (EU 2018). Whilst approaches such as fictionalising and pseudonyms can, and were, used to avoid identifying participants, Christians (2005, cited in Kennedy 2006) contends that full confidentiality is impossible as, even with the use of anonymising practices, these are often recognised by insiders. To conduct this research ethically, it was not enough to interpret ethical guidelines as 'black and white' and omniscient. It was my ethical and moral responsibility to abide by the ethical guidelines and to gain a pragmatic knowledge of ethical issues pertinent to the research, such as confidentiality and anonymity, so issues could be genuinely resolved. I used pseudonyms for all conversants and institutions, and fictionalisation when sharing personal accounts to avoid identification, which are acknowledged in the thesis. Conversants and institutions were informed as to the level of confidentiality and anonymity that could be afforded, for them to make a fully informed decision to be involved, or not.

Physical data was stored in a Locked filing cabinet to which only I had keys. This was used to store the recording device and audio files pending the transcription, their anonymisation and the deletion of files. The locked filing cabinet was used as a temporary step. All ICT based materials were stored in the UWE OneDrive secure system. I, as the principal researcher, had sole access to the data, which was password protected as supported by the research governance process at the University of the West of England. Audio recordings of interviews were deleted once they were transcribed and checked.

3.4.2.4 Risks to Researcher

There was a risk that participants could share perspectives that made them emotionally vulnerable, this in turn could have affected me as the researcher. I am trained and experienced in supporting students with emotional vulnerabilities and had safeguards in place if this occurred. Conversants would be referred through the school pastoral system for support. As Designated Safeguarding Lead for the school, I have responsibility for safeguarding and child protection and have extensive knowledge of local safeguarding procedures and experience of working with external agencies. All safeguarding concerns would be processed in line with school and Local Authority procedures.

There is concern that doctoral students are less likely to consider the effects their research can have on their wellbeing (Velardo and Elliott 2018). It was conceivable that a participant may give an emotional account, particularly as the study is exploring perceptions of wellbeing, and that this may have affected my own wellbeing. I am an experienced Senior Leader, Head of Year and am trained and proficient in dealing with children having difficulties and the school support network would be tapped into if the child experienced stress because of the research, or if they made a disclosure. I hold an enhanced disclosure under the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS), as do my doctoral supervisors, am the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) and have qualification and experience in supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing and have professional responsibility to protect them from harm and promote their welfare.

3.4.2.5 – Photography and video consent

Informed consent was secured from all participants before they were included in any research activities. It is important, however, to note that other members of the student body featured in stimulus photographs and videos used during multi-literacy research conversations.

During the school admission process, all students and their families sign a consent form that outlines, in conjunction with the privacy policy, how data, including videos, photographs and CCTV

footage, are stored and used by the school. This document outlines that personal data for students on roll may be used to 'look after student wellbeing' and to 'keep track of how well we're performing and assess the quality of our services'. The policy also explicitly states that information may be used for research purposes. My line manager, a member of the senior leadership team, acted as an independent gatekeeper and authorised the videos and photographs for use in this research (Appendix 6). My Director of Studies has viewed the unredacted version of this document.

The videos and images shown to conversants as part of the multi-literacy research conversations were collected as a part of normal practice by the head of year team and would ordinarily be shown to students during assemblies and celebration evenings, as was the case with these resources. This, alongside gaining consent from all families, minimised any ethical risk of using these photographs and videos as part of this project.

I entered sections of the consent document into internet search engines which quickly identified the study school, and photographs and videos of students in their school uniform would do the same. So, whilst it is appreciated that appending these documents, alongside examples of the videos and photographs used, might give useful context to the reader, due to commitments of anonymity and confidentiality outlined to participants, I do not consider it ethical to do so. Additionally, I would like this research to have impact on professional policy and practice and including pictures of children would mean the thesis would not be publicly available and, therefore, limit its impact. My supervisory team have acted as gatekeepers by viewing physical copies of the above-mentioned documents and resources in full. They have confirmed that they are happy that the use of them is ethical.

3.4.3 Situational Ethics

After ethical approval has been granted, there are further, unanticipated, ethical dilemmas that may arise during the research; situational ethics (Reid et al. 2018). Weis (2019) argues in favour of situational ethics as an alternative to procedural ethics which, she notes, offers empowering

research that can address existing disadvantaging power relations, like that in the case of teacher-student. I disagree and feel that procedural ethics are crucial, for the reasons outlined above, but also due to the ethical planning that it prompts. Before research began, I highlighted, and considered how I could minimise, risks to my conversants, myself or my institutions. A solely situational approach would mean beginning the research without these considerations. I consider procedural ethics to be imperative basic standard that all research projects must meet, whilst acknowledging the merits of using a situational and relational approaches to ethics as the research progresses.

The conversants in this research were children under the age of 18. This research concerns their perspectives on their own and others' wellbeing and support given to them. My experience and current responsibilities allow me to manage any disclosures which would require further action; and to deal confidently and sensitively should any distress become evident. I used the school's pastoral system and policies to access post-interview support for conversants where necessary.

As an Assistant Headteacher and DSL, I am experienced in managing quickly developing, challenging situations and finding a resolution that prioritises the welfare, safety and voice of the child. It is this, alongside the procedural ethical considerations, that informed my approach to issues arising 'in the field'.

3.4.4 Relational Ethics

Qualitative research has the potential to do emotional and reputation harm to researchers and participants (Shaw 2019) as discussed earlier in this chapter. Beyond the ethical approval form, and the acknowledgement of situational ethics, sits the inherent way a researcher approaches their research, acting from a place of humanity and considering the consequences to their actions as part of their own moral and ethical positioning. My positioning within relational ethics is rooted in my axiology, explored in Chapter one.

Meloni et al. (2015) reflects on the changing status of children in the field of research, from objects of research to experts in their social worlds who have valuable and important stories to tell. Whilst children are seen as dependents in society, Carnevale et al. (2017 p.274) argue for a framework that positions children as simultaneously 'agential and dependent', arguing against the concept of a person making decisions for a child. Meaning that although there is a social responsibility of adults to protect and look after children, this should not mean that a binary relationship exists between children and adults, where adults make decisions for children, but instead a consideration of a child's moral positioning to ensure a sense of moral experience – the extent to which a child feels their values are being respected. The practice implications for this research are in the execution of research tools that have been designed to centre the conversants in the research, in the semantic-led coding of research conversations (discussed in 4.1) and in the rights respecting approach discussed hereafter.

3.4.5 A child centred, rights respecting approach

The positioning of children at the centre of this research, and the prioritisation of their voices was of great importance to me. As an Assistant Headteacher, Designated Safeguarding Lead and ex-Head of Year, I have spent much of my professional life speaking with students and believe that their voices and views should be taken seriously, and without condescension. This positioning aligns with Articles twelve and thirteen of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) which, despite being ratified by the United Kingdom in 1991, does not have the presence it deserves in comprehensive education (Butcher 2018) despite Article 42 legislating that 'Governments must actively work to make sure children and adults know about the Convention'. One of the four key areas of impact identified by UNICEF is wellbeing (Fairhall et al. 2021), which this study aims to promote. Rights respecting research acknowledges that the research participants are children, and therefore vulnerable, and the research design should reflect this to ensure they hold autonomy,

particularly in this case where the research activities take place in a place of asymmetric power; their school (Stapf et al. 2023). Alderson (2012) argues that researchers wishing to conduct rights-respecting research must have an understanding of children's rights and how the views of children are idiosyncratic, and care should be taken to ensure their views are represented faithfully.

As part of my professional practice in safeguarding and child protection, the agency of the child is prioritised and their voices must be heard, and I work to ensure this is the case. This can manifest in children having agency over the decisions made about their care arrangements, taken seriously when making disclosures or requiring referrals that meet their articulated needs. This involves working in a trauma informed way to ensure children feel safe, have choices and a sense of control in a situation and are empowered (Record-Lemon and Buchanan 2017). Data was gathered in a way that supported children to feel physically and emotionally safe. This was executed by ensuring that all conversants were actively involved in the consent process (see 3.4.2.1) and were given choices over research spaces where research conversations took place, with a researcher that had a well-developed knowledge of trauma (Ayre and Krishnamoorthy 2020). They had the option to pick familiar places where they felt most comfortable and were positioned near the exit in rooms, so they did not feel trapped. I explained explicitly to participants the principles that underlie this research; that conversants were considered experts in their field, and those that have a right to be heard and to contribute to decisions made about the transition process. The chosen research methods allowed children a sense of control, choice and empowerment in that they could guide the conversation to areas that may be important to them and have input over the improvement of future provision.

The Children Act (DfE 1989) outlines the importance of gaining children's views on important decisions that affect them and the need to have regard for their emotional needs. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) was ratified in 1990 and children's rights to express their views on matters that concern them, and for those views to be given due weight, enshrined in

Articles 12 and 13 (UN 1989). The United Kingdom ratified the UNCRC in 1991, enshrining the rights within law. As such, I do not consider a child-centred approach merely something to consider, more an obligation to uphold as part of my axiology and professional duties.

Articles twelve and thirteen of the UNCRC are perhaps the most apposite and referred to in research with children and outline that:

Article 12 (respect for the views of the child) Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. This right applies at all times, for example during immigration proceedings, housing decisions or the child's day-to-day home life.

And;

Article 13 (freedom of expression) Every child must be free to express their thoughts and opinions and to access all kinds of information, as long as it is within the law.

Respect for the above articles is reflected in this research by way of a commitment to the facilitation of the authentic voice of the child by carefully considering, and refining, ways of eliciting this voice (outlined in 3.3.2 and 3.3.6). The largely semantic approach to reflexive thematic analysis also ensures that analysis begins with the words of the child; exploring meaning at surface level of the data and prioritising overt meaning. This emphasises a co-constructed voice (see 2.13) and reduced the risk of dilution of the voice of the child by the researcher inferring the perspective of the child (Zhang 2015) as a secondary consideration. This is also reflected ethically in the process that was undertaken to gain fully informed consent from conversants, including pupil-friendly explanations of the research process, use of age-appropriate language and encouraging parents and carers to take time to discuss this with their children separately (see 3.4.2.1) to ensure that the consent process was accessible to children and respected their rights, as encouraged by Maguire et al. (2018).

Chapter Four - Findings and Analysis

This chapter is a presentation of the findings and analysis of this research and uses the guidelines for Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as laid out by Braun and Clarke (2021) and as explained in Chapter three. As distinct from some formats that present the findings and analysis of research in separate, I have chosen to present them together in one chapter that weaves both data extracts and, analysis and interpretation.

After I had transcribed research conversations, multi-literacy research conversations and group interviews (appendix 4 and 5 show examples), I developed codes following a period of familiarisation. Codes were then grouped into themes based on patterns and shared meaning, which are discussed below. Extracts of the data set are used to illustrate aspects of each theme with 'C' referring to the research conversant, and 'R' referring to the researcher in transcriptions.

In this chapter I first explain how I applied the principles of Braun and Clarke's (2021) guidance to the data corpus. I then give an overview of the analysis to the reader by presenting a thematic map. Then, each theme is presented in detail alongside illustrative examples from the data, followed by analysis and discussion with the wider literature. I also explore the impact of multi-literacy research conversations, outlined in 3.3.6, as a method of eliciting talk from some of the conversants. Alderfer's model of wellbeing, discussed in chapter 2 (2.3.3.2), is developed through the lens of the findings to develop a transition focussed model of wellbeing.

4.1 Procedures of analysis

I began the analysis of data by listening to the recordings of my research conversations and transcribed them as part of the familiarisation phase of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). As I completed all research activities and analysis myself, I was immersed in the data throughout the research which allowed a high level of familiarity and understanding of some nuances that may be lost during transcription which ensured greater validity and reliability of transcription (Brinkmann

and Kvale 2018). Recordings of research conversations were deleted following transcription. Whilst technology and third-party companies exist to complete transcription for researchers, I felt it important to complete all transcriptions myself without the use of transcription software or outsourcing. This was primarily as it supported me in the familiarisation phase of thematic analysis (King et al 2019) whilst ensuring that I complied with GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations) legislation, BERA and university research governance by not sharing participant data. The purpose of the familiarisation phase of RTA is to be immersed in the data and researcher transcription can be invaluable in facilitating a deep understanding so that patterns may be more readily identified (Byrne 2021). I listened to each recording several times and created a transcription format on Microsoft Word to type up the conversations. I selected pseudonyms for all respondents, place names and the names of schools and teachers as part of my commitment to anonymity and confidentiality. *'St Peter's Primary School'* and *'Dillon Road Secondary School'* are the pseudonyms used for references to specific primary and secondary schools. Examples of these transcripts are appended (Appendix 4 and 5). Once I had completed the set of transcriptions, I read them whilst listening to the recordings once more and made any corrections, to ensure greater accuracy and reliability.

I then progressed onto the coding phase of RTA, beginning by reading the transcriptions twice, once at home and once in the university library. Changing the physical space in which analysis takes place is cited as a way of ensuring rigour as a different perspective can be gleaned (Braun and Clarke 2021). Whilst reading I highlighted interesting data extracts and annotated codes in the margins next to them. I paid equal attention to all the data during this phase, highlighting anything that I considered meaningful. I employed an inductive, as opposed to deductive, approach to coding; it was important that conversants articulations of their experiences where the starting point of coding development rather than existing theory and concepts (Braun and Clarke 2021). Whilst I wanted to

lead with an inductive approach, Braun and Clarke (2021) argue that it is impossible to work *purely* inductively as all researchers will bring their professional and personal experiences to the data which will influence any analysis (explored further in 4.1.1). In my case I will have viewed the data as an educator through the lens of significant professional experience of working with children and managing transition which undoubtedly influenced my analysis despite my efforts for this not to be the case. Within this acknowledgment, my approach was inductively based, beginning with the raw data to gather the authentic perspectives of the participants, rather than a theory-led deductive approach.

A large portion of the coding was semantic and took the words spoken by respondents on face value to construct meaning, rather than what I thought they *meant*. Braun and Clarke (2021) argue that a semantic approach explores meaning at the surface level of the data; considering the explicit words that were said by the conversants. In this way semantic coding is largely descriptive and prioritises the child's voice and overt meaning in the analytical process. By using a latent approach to coding, researchers examine the underlying ideas or assumptions that might be informing the semantic data, the interpretation of which may benefit from the professional experience I bring (Braun and Clarke 2006). Reflexive Thematic Analysis encourages the researcher to step away from a binary 'inductive *or* deductive' and 'semantic *or* latent' approach to analysis, instead encouraging an incorporation of both positions in the process of analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019). Consequently, whilst it was appropriate that I prioritised the voice of the child through a semantic approach, it was sensible to remain alert to latent meaning when coding which would allow me to be open to deeper meaning within the data.

Following the coding phase I turned my attention to phase three - the generation of initial themes; ways of organising the codes into groups based on shared concepts and ideas to develop a narrative of analysis. Themes do not emerge in RTA but are constructed by the analyst as a way of organising data to create meaning (Braun and Clarke 2021). To explore my initial thoughts about patterns and

links across codes, I wrote each code on a piece of paper and placed them on a worktop. I began to explore initial themes by moving the slips of paper around, grouping the codes in different ways, as example of which is illustrated in fig. 23.

Fig. 23. A example of initial thematic development

Despite a number of different groupings and evolutions, this initial thematic exploration felt clumsy, contrived and without clarity or sense of shared meaning, so I retreated from the data and returned to the literature. Braun and Clarke (2021) are clear that themes should not simply provide an overall topic summary, e.g. worries about transition, they should group together data with a shared idea or meaning and draw on patterns across the dataset. I returned to the data and began phase four, developing and reviewing themes and moved the slips of paper around with this focus to come up with new themes that framed shared meaning across the dataset. This meant discarding some initial themes, refining some and developing others. I found it helpful to return to the raw data at this point to ensure that themes were appropriate conceptualisations of the individual stories told by my participants, as it was important to me that they did not get lost in the analytic process. Whilst each participant had a unique perspective on their experiences of transition, there were naturally shared ideas and views across the data set that the themes seemed to capture. The next section reports on the refined four final themes outlined in fig 25.

Theme	Characteristics
'An emotional journey': Changing emotions during transition	Relating to the feelings and emotions of participants and how these change over time.
'Perception is reality': conceptualising secondary school.	Relating to participants' perceptions of secondary school and what informs these perceptions, before starting.
'A New normal': The experiences of secondary school.	Relating to participants' experiences once they begin secondary school
'A Helping hand': Supporting transition.	Relates to support during transition

Fig.24. Theme summary

Braun and Clarke (2021) advise thematic analysts to generate a thematic map as a tool to support in developing patterns of meaning and connections by examining different relationships across the data set. The thematic map for this data set is presented in figure 25 overleaf. I felt this was a useful part of the analysis process as it allowed me to see patterns across the whole data set and reflect upon ways in which the themes also had links to other themes, despite having individual characteristics. This had implications for the data interpretation, and presentation of the findings as some codes were relevant to more than one theme, underlining the notion that themes can talk to each other (Braun and Clarke 2021) and can present similar topics but through different lenses.

Overview of Analysis
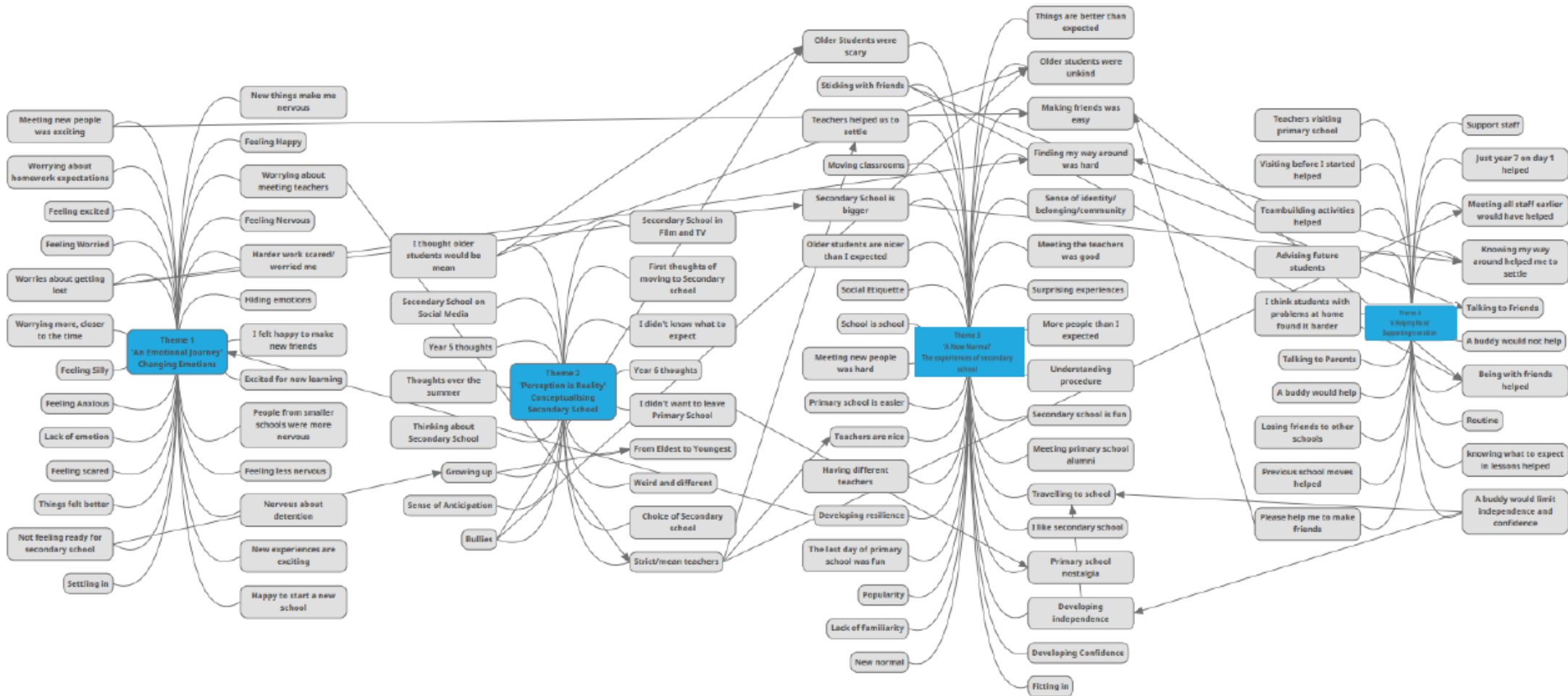
Figure 25 – Thematic Map

4.1.1 Subjectivity as a resource

This study aimed to capture the authentic voice of children who had transitioned from primary to secondary school to understand their experiences. I was careful, as has been discussed (e.g. 3.3.6 and 3.4.5), to be reflexive in the design and application of my research tools. This was to facilitate accessible interactions where the child had agency over the direction of discussion and the power asymmetry was, whilst inevitably still present, managed to an extent. The same was important to me when it came to the analysis of data. I was very aware that as the analyst I would have to make decisions about data that would ultimately influence the analysis, which would be subjective, coloured by my personal and professional experiences. I was concerned that this may lead to the voice of the child being 'one step removed' in the presentation of the findings, and so diluting the authenticity and rigour of the research. My decision to favour inductive and semantic leanings to the coding process were made as an attempt to avoid this but, whilst this may be a protective factor, does not completely mitigate the risk.

Braun and Clark (2021) assert that although subjectivity is traditionally viewed as a disruptive force or flaw, researcher subjectivity is a key resource to successful reflexive thematic analysis. Researcher subjectivity shapes the generation of knowledge and an acknowledgement of this emphasises the importance of a reflexive approach, where the researcher challenges their own perception and choices in research design and execution. In this way the subjectivity of the researcher is considered a resource, adding richness and depth to the interpretation of the data. In my analysis, I was careful to ensure that I returned to the raw data regularly and reflected on my interpretations to ensure that they remained faithful to the authentic voice of the child.

In the next section, each theme is presented and illustrated with extracts from the raw data, before being linked to the wider literature as part of the interpretation. Data extracts used in thematic analysis are often the subject of criticism as there is potential for the context of the wider conversation to be lost if extracts are too short (e.g. Kiger and Varpio 2020). I have tried to include parts of the conversation that led to a notable contribution to provide a faithful reflection of the context of individual contributions where this was possible within the word count. Braun and Clarke (2021) loosely suggest a 50:50 ratio of data extract and narrative but express at least 50% narrative analysis must be present for good practice RTA. I have used this as guidance during the analysis.

Fourteen research conversations were conducted with young people who transitioned from primary to secondary school in 2021, of which seven were multi-literacy research conversations. Research conversations lasted between nine and twenty-three minutes and were conducted face to face. During 2021, the normal transition programme was cancelled due to concerns around Covid-19. This

meant that most students had not visited their secondary school, met many teachers and had not seen the school operating on a normal day prior to arriving on the first day. This was reflected in the aspects of the data, where conversants underlined the benefits of such a programme and the noticeable effects of its absence.

4.1.2 - The lens of analysis

This analysis was completed through the lens of the research questions which are stated again here and returned to on p.189:

1) How do young people perceive the impact of the transition period on their wellbeing, and why?

2) How do young people's perceptions of their wellbeing related to the transition period change over time, and why?

3) What do children tell us about their experience of transition and how we should manage the process?

The findings of this research have been analysed through by using the Existence, Relatedness and Growth dimensions' put forward by Alderfer (1969, cited in Pichere 2015), previously discussed in chapter two. Reflections through this lens have been signposted through the text of the analysis, before being drawn together at the end of the presentation of each theme using the template overleaf (fig. 26) to demonstrate how each theme can be understood through this lens. This leads to a refinement of Alderfer's ERG model from the perspective of positive transition to secondary school, including links to recommendations generated by this research presented in chapter five. I have added three questions to the model which the data shows us are relevant to children's wellbeing during the transition period: *Am I safe? Am I valued? Am I happy?* Questions which, if answered in the affirmative by a child, provide the foundations to make a successful transition to secondary school.

Alderfer's model of motivation (ERG)	Conceptual questions	Key Findings	Recommendations for practice
Existence Needs *(Food, water, shelter, clothing, security)*	**Am I Safe?**		
Relatedness needs *(Friendship, family, intimacy, sense of connection to other individuals)*	**Am I Valued?**		
Growth needs *(Confidence, achievement, respect of others, the need to be a unique individual)*	**Am I happy?**		

Fig. 26 – Theoretical model template

In the presentation of the four themes below, language is used to give an indication of the prevalence of particular viewpoints. When I use the term 'some', this refers to the viewpoint being represented in two-four conversant accounts and 'most' refers to five or more. 'All' refers to every conversant. Where an idea was expressed by one conversant, this is explicitly indicated. This is not an attempt to *count* the instances of a perspective but give some indication of the extent of its ubiquity. Braun and Clarke (2021 and 2022) state that frequency counts should be avoided in Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) due to the complexity of this. They argue that counting responses is not in line with the principles of RTA and is not indicative of the analytical importance of the response. The frequency of codes and themes is not the intended outcome of thematic analysis (Neuendorf 2018), indeed thematic analysis focusses on describing semantic and latent meaning (Guest et al. 2012) leaving the frequency of an idea across a data set more challenging to accurately state. In keeping with the principles of Reflexive Thematic Analysis, I have elected to give an indication of the presence of viewpoints across the data set, as qualified above.

4.2 Theme 1: 'An Emotional Journey' – Changing emotions during transition

Theme one explores the different emotions expressed by participants *(e.g. feeling anxious, feeling excited)* as well as specific stimuli for these emotional responses *(e.g. worrying about meeting teachers, worries about getting lost, happy to start a new school/excited for new learning)* and barriers to emotional expression *(e.g. hiding emotions, lack of emotion).*

This theme also explores more conceptual data relating to participants' reflections on the prospect of transition *(e.g. Not feeling ready for secondary school)* and how emotions and feelings change over *time (e.g. settling in, worrying more as the point of transition approaches).*

4.2.1.1 Anxiety, anticipation and mixed feelings

<u>Anxiety</u>

As explored in the literature review (e.g. Brewin & Statham 2011, Zeedyk et al. 2003), feelings of nervousness and excitement are common during the period of transition. This was evident in this study, with all conversants sharing their emotional responses to, and reflections of, transition. However, whilst existing transition literature highlights anxiety relating to secondary school, the majority of conversants in this study discussed a level of apprehension around leaving the safety and familiarity of their primary school for the unknown of the secondary school. For example:

> *C: Erm…. Well…. I did NOT want to come. I wanted to stay at primary school forever. I wanted to live there.*
> *R: Why was that, do you think?*
> *C: It was because I got used to everything and I knew my way around it so well.*
> **[Lynne]**

> *C: So, it was really exciting, but I really thought it was gonna be WAY worse than this... Because, whilst I was there, I did not want to leave primary school.*
> *R: Really? OK, that's really interesting.*
> *C: Yeah, just like. I dunno why. I just felt really nervous because St Peter's isn't exactly the biggest school, it's not small but it's not exactly …. But this felt like way bigger.*
> *R: Ok*
> *C: I thought it was going to be great and then I just, like, in the six-week holidays building up to it, I thought it was going to be atrocious.*
> **[Mark]**

Both Lynne and Mark share that their overarching preconceptions of their secondary school experience were negative. Lynne was clear that she was worried about secondary school to the extent that she would rather avoid it by staying at primary school. Mark felt that he would prefer to stay with the familiarity of primary school, but this changed once he had left. It is clear from these quotations that both children had strong emotional connections to their primary school, both physically and because of the relationships they had developed with staff and students. Indeed, all conversants talked very positively about primary school and used it as a point of comparison to secondary school. Many of the narratives around 'not wanting to come to secondary school', once elaborated upon, were more accurately feelings of 'not wanting to leave primary school', recognising a distinct sense of connection and subsequent loss thereof for my participants, as illustrated by Lynne's contribution above. Celik et al (2023) found that, consistent with this research, the relationship between primary school students and their teachers is particularly strong, even more so than the relationships between friends, which produced a high level of attachment to the primary school for children in this study. Positive attachment to primary school has been found to have a positive impact on wellbeing and to be a moderating force for other stresses in life for young people (Kwok and Fang 2022) which may have supported my participants during their transition. Alderfer (1969) cites a sense of connectedness as an important aspect of the relatedness dimension of the ERG model. This is interesting to consider as children sever the strong connections they have developed at, and with, primary school which could, according to this model, put their wellbeing at risk.

Conversants in this study felt that transition was a challenging time in their lives, underlining previous research (e.g. Lester and Cross 2015; Brewin & Statham 2011). In the quotations above, Lynne and Mark both felt that their primary school was smaller than their secondary school, and this was a source of anxiety. This aligns with research completed by Jindal-Snape and Cantali (2019) who

asserted that feelings of anxiety can correlate with problems adjusting to secondary school and navigating challenges. Therefore, conversants like Lynne and Mark may have found transition more challenging, as feelings of anxiety can negatively influence the ability to approach a challenge with confidence, and the ability to overcome that challenge (Pijper et al. 2010). Miller and Daniel (2007) establish that levels of resilience are linked to levels of self-esteem, which lends credence to the position that levels of anxiety in my conversants may have affected their ability to cope with the move which may have had a lasting impact on their wellbeing.

Whilst the feelings of stress and anxiety shared by conversants are consistent with existing transition literature, this data presents a contrasting perspective. It illustrates that for some of my conversants the source of this stress was more influenced by severing a powerful emotional attachment to primary school, as distinct from arriving at secondary school, than has previously been understood. The word 'transition' implies moving from one thing to another, in this case from primary school to secondary school. However, the aspect of transition that permeates existing literature is that of moving *to* secondary school, rendering literature on leaving primary school limited in UK research. Indeed, teacher-focussed research on transition typically concentrates on secondary school staff and the interventions they can execute to avoid pauses or regressions in learning (e.g. Plotner et al. 2016 and Rodriques et al. 2018).

Some conversants cited the navigation of a bigger school site as a stimulus for worry, confirming Topping's (2011) finding that a bigger school can be the source of pre-transition anxiety:

C: Like one of the things is just how massive it is compared to St Peter's. In St Peter's, I would always be just used to staying in one classroom… or like moving about for maths and then going back to the same classroom. And it would feel decently normal… like back in St Peter's, I used to get like a bit caught up when I was going to a new year group, moving to a new class. And having to move to a new class every single time sort of would feel a bit different. And maybe a bit scary. **[Francis]**

Francis shares that he felt fear when navigating the bigger site of secondary school, and having to move classrooms with different teachers for each lesson. The fear of 'getting lost' was a significant source of anxiety for conversants. Francis referenced the safety and security of the routines he had at primary school and his feelings of being unsettled when these are disrupted. Francis alludes to the fact that the transition to secondary school means a loss of all aspects of primary school routine, from how children travel to school, to a new school site to navigate. 'Getting lost' is recognised as a universal fear amongst children, linked to a fear of danger, being alone and separation (Lahikainen et al. 2007). A sense of safety and security is central to the existence dimension of Alderfer's ERG model of wellbeing, and this data finds that when my participants entered the unknown environment of secondary school, this was put at risk. Feelings of connection or belonging to a place (place attachment) formed in childhood are stronger than those formed in later life (Morgan 2010) with connections to new places often shaped by children's past place experiences, but this takes time (Martz et al. 2022). This suggests links between my conversants' relationships and attachments with secondary school and those they had at primary school.

Due to their age, the participants in this research may have been more sensitive to stress than older and younger members of the population (Burkitt et al. 2019). There is literature that indicates that their perception of this stress may have had an impact on their behaviour and wellbeing (Achterberg et al. 2021), suggesting that conversants who experienced anxiety whilst undergoing transition might have been additionally vulnerable, due to their stage of development.

<u>Anticipation</u>

Whilst most conversants evoked the notion of being anxious regarding transition to secondary

school, others had prevalent feelings of excitement, particularly as they looked to new opportunities

as part of a richer, broader curriculum:

R: So what were you excited for, particularly?
C: Erm…. Er… the new things that we didn't do in primary school, like DT, RE… we did a bit of RE in my
school, but not much…erm….yeah just new lessons and new things.
[Donald]

C: I was quite excited because then I could do different lessons and stuff. Erm… but… I wasn't really
that worried either […] … Like being able to do like…. Going to different classrooms for different
things… and like… moving around…. And bringing your own things in… like your own pencil case and
stuff. **[Alice]**

C: Hmmm…..I was a lot more worried.
R: Why do you think that was?
C: Coz we were closer to coming.
R: And what were you worried about?
C: The same things.
R: Like what?
C: Everything.
R: Everything. The whole thing?
C: Yeah.
R: Was there anything you were looking forward to?
C: Art. That's it.
[Jen]

Despite acknowledging some feelings of nervousness, Donald and Alice were clear that their

prominent feelings were those of positivity and excitement due to the new opportunities that

secondary school might bring suggesting that they had outgrown the opportunities that primary

school presents. Alice was also looking forward to the increased independence of secondary school:

bringing in her own equipment and navigating the school site independently. Even though she was

feeling worried about 'everything', Jen was able to share that she was looking forward to parts of

the curriculum, particularly art showing that even the most anxious may still be able to find a

positive experience to focus on. This sense of personal development and new opportunities links to

the growth dimension of Alderfer's model, as these new opportunities brought with them chances for new achievements and the ability to further develop a sense of individual self.

The primary school national curriculum sets out the broad curriculum that primary schools are expected to follow (DfE 2013). However, it is acknowledged that the pressure of preparing for Key Stage Two Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) can significantly narrow, or even erode, the curriculum in areas outside of core subjects (e.g. Ward 2011 and 2019) which, along with this data, suggests that some of my participants positively anticipated the chance to once more study a broad range of subjects without the pressure of formal examination. This was further evident in this study by Francis' reflections on the differences in learning across the two settings:

C: Well… you get kind of excited because when you're in primary, after like the first key stage and then another year or something, you start to realise that most of the stuff you are learning is a lot, like, the same … so after another two years you start to get bored. But then, when you go to your new school, you …you get a bit more relived because you get to learn some more new things like every two, or so, weeks you would learn a new category or something. Like, for example, this time it's pie charts and about two weeks ago we were learning about algebraic fractions and stuff like that.
C: Because you would. Say you … You would learn about something like times tables, … and then next week you'll be learning stuff like adding and subtracting. It's kind of different, but not fully different. Let's say you learn that in year 3, in year 4 you would learn that again but just a little bit more complicated. Instead of learning like your 5s, 10s, 6s and 4s, you try learning the rest of them and the next year up of that, you would start trying to learn … you make them go faster and faster
[Francis]

Francis articulates his perception of a repetitive curriculum model at primary school which led to feelings of boredom and disengagement with his education. This meant he was excited at the prospect of more varied learning across a broader range of subjects and topics at secondary school. From an academic perspective, despite his anxieties regarding social and physical changes, Francis felt ready for the challenge of secondary school. Ogier (2022) acknowledges that the primary school curricular landscape is too often overshadowed by the constraints of high-stakes testing and knowledge acquisition, advocating instead for a holistic approach to education in the primary school, one that acknowledges the importance of children being equipped with skills that support them to navigate challenging life events, such as transition. There is literature on low teacher confidence

levels in primary schools when it comes to 'non-specialist' teaching (e.g. Biasutti et al. 2015 and Smith 2014), meaning teaching outside of a subject specialism, which could contribute to this anticipation of specialist teachers and facilities that Francis, Donald, Jen and Alice felt. Additionally, there is a disconnect between the curriculars of primary and secondary school which can contribute to greater instability, as consistency of the core aspects of learning can support children in transitioning more smoothly (Mahmud 2022).

Mixed feelings

Whilst all conversants experienced strong feelings of either apprehension or anticipation, the vast majority had at least some experience of both. This was most evident when conversants took part in the metaphor sort technique section of multi-literacy research conversations:

C: I was feeling quite excited because it's a new school, new people. Erm…. Yeah… erm….Slightly nervous but not too nervous. **[Donald]**

C: This one (Emoji 1)
R: What's that one?
C: I think it's like a smiley face
R: Ok.
C: it was a happy but sad time **[Peter]**

Emoji 1

C: So I walked in… it was like.. I wouldn't say I was shakey, I was just nervous, excited … quite a lot of emotions in fact **[Francis]**

Donald had prominent feelings of excitement at the prospect of moving to secondary school, though he acknowledged some feelings of nervousness. His positioning and awareness seem to align with the majority of transition literature, in that his focus was on secondary school and the experiences he would enjoy. Peter, whilst similarly having positive feelings, also had feelings of sadness. It is

interesting that he cites sadness, as opposed to worry or anxiety, as the emotion he was experiencing here perhaps suggesting that some of his awareness was concerned with leaving behind the familiar environment of primary school, and friends with whom he no longer attends school (see 4.2.2). Francis seems to be saying that he was overwhelmed by the emotions he was feeling. He acknowledges he was experiencing nervousness and excitement but alludes to other emotions that he was unable to articulate. (Ferracioli 2019 p.111) discusses mixed emotions in childhood, i.e. positive and negative emotional reactions experienced simultaneously, and explored the interplay between these two emotional responses, concluding that the dominant response will minimise the submissive. i.e. a child with mixed feelings about a situation will be most influenced by the strongest feeling, purporting that 'a childhood full of stress and anxiety is necessarily impoverished even if it is full of other valuable properties'. It is difficult to assess which emotion was strongest in conversants who were experiencing mixed emotions, though this could be the focus of future research as new methods of emotional measurement in children become available (e.g. Vanhamme and Chiu 2019).

4.2.2 Losing old friends and meeting new people

Losing old friends

> *C: and then I was… erm… some of my ... like good friends went to Pryor High so that was… emotional.* **[Peter]**

Peter articulated a story about friends who went to other secondary schools leading to a change, and in some cases the ending, of a friendship. Peter says this was 'emotional', acknowledging that navigating friendship loss was something difficult for him to manage, and something that may have affected his wellbeing under the relatedness dimension of Alferder's model. This was replicated in the contributions of other conversants. The ending of a friendship is considered the loss of a shared

life that has been lived together and children can be vulnerable from the damage of friendships ending (Healy 2015). Young people typically spend seven years at primary school, usually with the same learning group throughout, and so develop strong peer relationships which have a significant impact on their socio-emotional development (Flannery and Smith 2017). The emotional instability of losing friends and navigating a more complex social arena in which to build and maintain new ones clearly contribute to Peter's stress and anxiety around transition to secondary school. This has implications for Peter's wellbeing under the relatedness needs dimension of Alderfer's ERG model, which cites friendships and connection to other individuals as important aspects of a person's wellbeing. Peter's experience of losing a friend negatively impacted his wellbeing under this model.

Meeting new people

When asked about how they were feeling about coming to secondary school, conversants regularly cited the notion of meeting new people, as the source of their anxiety. This was reflected by the majority of conversants, who alluded to feelings of pre-transition nervousness as a result of these social stressors:

> *C: I was just like…. meeting new people…kind of…you never know. You could have some…bad eggs.* **[Peter]**

> *C: Meeting new people is hard for me*. **[Lynne]**

> *R: Ok. Were there like certain things you were nervous about?*
> *C: Yeah*
> *R: Like what?*
> *C: meeting all the teachers*
> *R: In what way?*
> *C: Because I was used to having one teacher* **[Peter]**

The quotations from Lynne and Peter above highlight the anxiety that they had at the prospect of meeting new people at secondary school, due to the social skills needed and in case the interactions

were not positive; an experience shared by all conversants. The relatedness dimension of Alderfer's ERG model concerns a sense of connection to other individuals. Peter and Lynne's anxiety around this may have led to a deficit in their wellbeing under the model. At a time when children are striving to be more independent from their parents and more reliant on peer relationships (Topping 2011), it does not come as a surprise that children are concerned about social hurdles as they transition. Van Rens et al. (2019) found that most children realise they have underestimated the social and emotional aspect of transition once they join their new school. Many of my conversants shared an apprehension around meeting new peers, older students and staff (Discussed further 4.4.4) reflected in research highlighting that children are more concerned with social transition than they are with academic challenges when moving to secondary school (e.g. Topping 2011 and Zeedyk 2003). Cowie (2013) provides a foundation for this from a child development perspective, stating that:

> *from around 11-13 years of age, both boys and girls express strong anxiety about their friendships, with a great deal of worry about the possibility of being rejected by peers (Cowie 2013 p75).*

It follows that when young people navigate the transition from primary to secondary school and enter a new, usually bigger and more diverse, social arena, acceptance from their peers is prominent in their minds and can cause a significant amount of anxiety.

The development of positive relationships and networks is one of the signs of positive transition and promotes a sense of belonging to the new setting, contributing to positive mental health and wellbeing (Mowat 2019). All respondents who were concerned about relationships pre-transition had more positive opinions of their peers post-transition than expected and felt that making these connections had positively impacted on their wellbeing:

R: How long was it, do you think, before you felt less worried?
C: Hmmm… I felt a bit less worried when I made a friend **[Jen]**

C: you also… you do… you do actually get to meet people that are older than you and a lot of them are quite nice. **{Francis]**

C: I was a bit scared… because there was lots of big people. Erm… but… that was fine. They said 'Hi' and stuff. **[Peter]**

The above contributions from Jen, Francis and Peter confirm that the development of friendships, and realising that older students were not a threat led to a reduction in feelings of anxiety for them, and a development of positive wellbeing under the relatedness dimension of Alderfer's ERG model. Secure relationships between teachers and pupils have been shown to have a significant impact on the development of social, academic and emotional security at school (Split and Koomen 2022) and was a significant concern for the above conversants. Children who perceive their teachers to be kind and caring are more likely to become socially involved in the life of the school, and thus achieve more academically and socially as a result of a greater sense of school belonging (see. 4.2.3) meaning that the positive development of student-teacher relationships is of great importance. The quality of relationships children have with secondary school teachers is founded on the quality of relationships children had with their primary school teachers (Wanders et al. 2019). As previously noted, all conversants spoke very positively about primary school and experienced some level of loss at leaving, with many talking very positively about their primary school teachers. The quotation from Lynne, below, illustrates this:

C: Well, I wanted Mr B, but then when I got to know Mr A,, I was like right, they are a legend! **[Lynne]**

The language Lynne uses to describe her primary school teachers is very positive and emphasises the importance that she placed on the positive relationships with teachers in primary school, which could account for some of the instances of mixed feelings conversants shared. They navigated the

ending of relationships with primary school teachers and friendships with peers which evoked a sense of loss and a deficit under the relatedness dimension of Alderfer's model. The children worried about how successful they would be in making friends in secondary school, how older students might treat them and whether their teachers would be kind. Conversants shared that their sense of anxiety increased up to the point of transition, before improving after this climax as they made friends and had developed positive relationships with teachers and older students which meant their needs under the relatedness dimension were met once more.

Whilst forming and maintaining friendships is a concern for all children transitioning from primary to secondary school, it is likely to have more tangible effects on the significant proportion of the transitioning population who suffer from social anxiety. Social anxiety reportedly affects 13% of the population (Halldorsson and Cresswell 2017) leading to sufferers interpreting existing and new social situations as threatening, contributing to greater difficulties in forming and maintaining secure peer relationships. It is important to note that the quoted 13% was measured pre-pandemic and numerous studies have highlighted the significant increase in anxiety and general mental health concerns in children post-pandemic (e.g. Samji et al. 2021) which this cohort experienced, and which may have led to an increase in social anxiety. Nowland and Qualter (2020) showed that children who are socially anxious may articulate more worries and concerns about transitioning to secondary school which, in turn, impact on a child's ability to socially adjust to the new setting. Erath et al. (2007) agree with this notion, finding that social anxiety in young people increased the likelihood of not being accepted by peers, and even led to peer victimisation.

4.2.3 A sense of Belonging

Lester et al. (2013) found that there is a strong correlation between a child's sense of connection to a receiving school, rooted in the quality of social relationships, and positive mental health and academic success (O'Brennan 2010). Interpersonal relationships at school contribute significantly towards promoting feelings of belonging, which positively impact on wellbeing and school engagement, as underlined by Longaretti (2020) and thoughtfully articulated by Francis when reflecting on his first two terms, and Lynne when reflecting on her first day:

C: I know a lot of the teachers. I've been on the courts, I've been on the field and made a lot of new friends and it feels that you… sort of… belong here a bit more than you did at the start.

R: That's good. …. What makes you feel like you belong here? What's important?

C: So like, cause you're like older… and when you see a lot of people in year 6 you notice that your attitude compared to their attitude is a lot different … or.. the size comparison. it's just like you realise that as you go up a year, you don't stay the same .. it's hard to notice but you do get... partly different… and when you're a secondary school student, after a couple of terms you just start to realise that you are a lot different to how you were in primary school.

C: Yeah you sort of like more personal with a lot more people… teachers and things…. And that means your attitude is coming a little bit more friendly to a lot more… so like strangers… you would greet them and find it a lot more better than you would in primary. You'd be less shy, basically.

[Francis]

C: Well I think I felt, on my first day, that I was going to be pulled out of class and sent back to primary school, but that never happened.
R: Why did you think that?
C: I don't know but I'm still waiting for that...
R: Why would we send you back to primary school?
C: I don't know, it felt really strange and I didn't really like it. And it was very hard to get around and everything. **[Lynne]**

Both Francis and Lynne discuss their different perspectives on feeling as though they 'belong' at their new school. Lynne immediately felt that she was an 'imposter' in secondary school and lacked the skills and maturity to manage life there so much so that she thought she would be 'discovered' and sent back to primary school. Francis similarly felt initial feelings of not belonging but was able to

reflect on aspects of school life that, once successfully navigated, meant he felt more secure and a part of the school community.

A sense of belonging is considered central to our sense of value and wellbeing (see 2.3.3.1) and it is clear that conversants in this study placed weight on the development, and ending, of interpersonal relationships across the two settings. A sense of school belonging is rooted in positive relationships, school culture and wider engagement with the school (Allen et al. 2016), with Crouch et al. (2014) finding that when students experience more positive and fewer negative social interactions with staff, their sense of school belonging increases. Lynne spoke of feeling like she would be 'sent back' to primary school on her first day, suggesting that she initially did not feel a sense of belonging and considered herself an imposter at secondary school based on her feelings of incompetence in navigating the school site. This suggests a correlation between familiarity and school attachment, and Lynne's sense of belonging to her secondary school. Francis, on the other hand, considered the development of relationships and completion of new experiences important in his sense of school belonging. Francis made a link between his sense of personal development, growth and confidence leading to him identifying less as a primary school student and more as a secondary school student. This sense of belonging links to Alderfer's model in a number of ways. Francis and Lynne's sense of safety and security was low initially as they felt they were in an environment in which they did not belong, which threatened their feelings of wellbeing under the existence dimension. Francis' navigation of social hurdles at school link to the relatedness dimension as he initially felt disconnected to other individuals in the school, and the social expectations of him. As they started secondary school, their needs under these dimensions were in deficit, which could account for a reduction in feelings of wellbeing. Once navigated successfully, these needs were more securely met which encouraged positive feelings of wellbeing under this model.

Ambiguous situations such as transition, where there is a lack of information to make sense of a particular situation, can have emotional consequences (Shou et al. 2022). This cohort of transitioning

children had access to less information than normal due to the absence of a transition programme. Children, particularly those who have anxiety disorders or are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), are particularly vulnerable to the ill effects of the unknown (Williams et al 2014; Hodgson et al. 2017).

Many of the participants reported feelings of nervousness and anxiety about secondary school, mentioning the fact that they had never been there before and had limited information about it:

> *C: Back then I didn't really know about as much about what you would do in that school. Because I didn't know… I thought it was going to be just the same subjects at this school ... And as well I thought it would basically be … the fields that I know, I didn't know that it was quite as big as it was, I thought it was just the bit near the leisure centre, I didn't know there was another massive bit of field. And I didn't know that the tarmac courts were there.* **[Francis]**

Francis shares above that when starting secondary school, he felt unprepared and without the knowledge necessary to form a clear impression of the physical makeup of his new school and the organisation of the curriculum. This meant he started secondary school with a series of 'unknowns' which likely make him feel less secure and more anxious, under the existence dimension of Alderfer's model. This ambiguity may have been tempered by the delivery of an effective transition programme which may have removed some of the 'unknown' aspects of secondary school for Francis by providing information and experiences that may have positively impacted on his preconceptions.

Traditional transition programmes focus on familiarising prospective students with the physical make-up of the school site, navigation of the school day and initiating relationships with teaching staff: aimed at reducing acknowledged fears that children experience pre-transition (e.g. Howe and Richards 2011, Brewin & Statham 2011, Zeedyk et al. 2003). The prevalence of Covid-19 meant that

visits to the school during Year Six was not possible for Francis and the vast majority of his classmates.

4.2.4 Expression suppression and Emotional literacy

Transition is an emotional time that young people must navigate, but some children mask their emotional vulnerability during this period (Bagnall et al. 2020), as supported by the data collected as part of this research. One conversant, Francis, explicitly shared this perspective as he spoke of suppressing his pre-transition anxieties during his first day:

'I was… I was sm… I did smile about it, even though I was quite worried' **[Francis]**

Francis raises an interesting perspective here as although he has feelings of anxiety, he chose to smile and demonstrate that he was more confident than he was. Expression suppression occurs when a person moderates the behavioural aspect of an emotional response to a situation (Lonigro et al. 2023) which is highlighted as an ineffective method of emotional regulation as the negative emotion continues. Gross and Cassidy (2019) argue that whilst this may be true, there are contexts where it can serve cultural, social, or self-protective functions. As discussed in 4.2.2, appearing nervous or socially anxious can affect a person's ability to build and maintain friendships, which is liable to raise the levels of stress and anxiety at transition, which may explain aspects of Francis' behaviour here.

During the initial research conversations, it became apparent that some participants were less able, or willing, to articulate their emotions than others. One participant, Jen, found this particularly difficult:

R: What was the thing that was the most difficult? Or that you didn't enjoy as much?
C: …….. hmm…. Not sure. **[Jen]**

and

R: If you were talking to a year 6 now, who was in your shoes last year, who is thinking about moving to *Secondary School name* next year, what would you say to them?
C: Hmmm……..Not sure. **[Jen]**

In the above extracts, Jen's contributions demonstrate that she initially found it challenging to answer questions with a level of detail, preferring instead to not provide an opinion by saying that she wasn't sure. Chok et al. (2023) found that young people sometimes find it difficult to talk about their emotions for various reasons including a fear of causing concern, a reticence due to the intimate nature of discussing emotions or not wanting to appear weak. In our exchange, I felt that Jen did not seem to have the emotional language explain how she was feeling, as opposed to the reasons found by Chok et al. I did, however, consider that she may not feel comfortable discussing her emotions which led me to my development of multi-literacy research conversations (see 3.3.4). Secure levels of emotional literacy are an important part of the development of greater self-awareness, self-control, and enriched relationships (Richfield 2014) and facilitating children to recognise and talk about their emotions is crucial to their development (Murray and Tostevin 2023) and a central part of this research. It was, therefore, important to me that I sought ways to empower conversants to engage with an accessible research design that prioritised their authentic voice, resulting in my development of multi-literacy research conversations (see 3.3.6).

As a result of the multi-literacy research conversations, Jen was able to use tools and scaffolding, in the way of emoji cards, and video and photograph prompts, to contribute more fully to the data set:

*C: *picks up 3**
R: What's that one?
C: like… worried
R: mhmm… when were you feeling worried?
C: … er…. First day
*C: *Picks up 1**
R: what's that one?
C: Like happy
R: So, you weren't feeling happy at any point?
C: I did a tiny bit just not much
R: When?
C: I don't know… like.. when I made friends
[Jen]

Emoji 1   Emoji 3

Jen was able to use the emoji cards to discuss the importance of making friends, which made her feel less worried and positively contributed to her wellbeing under the relatedness dimension of the ERG model. She also was able to use the emoji cards to communicate feelings that she was unable to verbally articulate due to gaps in her emotional literacy, like in this exchange:

*C: *picks up 7**
R: What's that one?
C: er… I don't know… it just looks right
R: That looks how you were feeling?
*C: *nods**
[Jen]

Emoji 7

This approach allowed Jen to more fully communicate her authentic voice as she was given tools to navigate the gaps in her emotional literacy, like when discussing emoji 7, but also a framework that structured the conversation and allowing it to centre on her emotional experiences and wellbeing. Multi-literacy research conversations were used with all conversants in the second round of research conversations, which had advantages further than eliciting talk in quieter conversants. The contributions of conversants who had been more expressive during the initial research conversations were also enhanced by this approach, as they used the emojis to fill the gaps in their

emotional literacy, such as Donald discussing a 'starting a new school face' when presented with emoji six which allowed him to communicate his emotional experiences more fully:

Emoji 6

C: You've got this one here
R: What's that one? (6)
C: It's starting a new school face, seeing lots of different stuff and all that… **[Donald]**

Donald was able to talk more openly about his emotions in the initial research conversation, but despite this the use of emoji cards highlighted that there were aspects of his emotions that he was unable to articulate but did communicate through this medium, as in the exchange above. The use of multi-literacy research conversations enriched the way in which conversants talked about their emotions and experiences, leading to a more child-centred research approach. For some conversants who found articulating their emotions challenging, it gave them tools to allow their voice to permeate and helped to make sense of overwhelming emotions. For others who found the research conversations more accessible, the use of multi-literacy research conversations enhanced their contributions and gave a distinct perspective by generating richer conversations explicitly about their emotions, by providing scaffolds and prompts to fill in gaps in their emotional literacy. This research demonstrates that whilst research conversations are effective when working with some children, the voices of others can struggle to permeate this format.

4.2.5 Summary of Theme One

The data in Theme One reveals that participants had strong feelings about transition which posed issues for their wellbeing. Most conversants reported strong negative feelings of anxiety and worry pre-transition and therefore were more likely to experience poorer wellbeing and a stall in academic and social progress. This was generally stimulated by social stressors, such as not knowing teachers and fearing peer victimisation from older students. Those with predominantly positive emotions relating to the transition process were less likely to experience these outcomes. Children who had positive feelings about moving to secondary school were looking forward to a broader curriculum (following their perception of a narrower primary school curriculum) increased social interactions and more opportunities outside of the classroom. They seemed to manage the transition period more effectively than their more anxious peers. Some conversants had simultaneously positive and negative feelings about transition and the literature shows us they were most affected by their strongest feelings. Conversants cited worries about a bigger school, unkind teachers and being the victims of bullying. Elements that contributed to these preconceptions are explored in Theme Two. Where conversants had negative feelings about moving to secondary school, these were predominantly experienced before the move to the new school, and quickly dissipated when they could find their way around the school and had met teachers and new friends. Their perception of what secondary school would be like was more negative than their actual experience, a perception which may have affected their ability to engage with the challenge of transition and certainly impacted their wellbeing. Some students found it challenging to articulate their emotions at certain points and they (and to some extent all conversants) benefitted from engaging with multi-literacy research conversations, as this gave them tools to communicate their feelings and emotions more effectively, which resulted in richer contributions to the data.

Theme One challenges current transition research, which is generally orientated from the point of transition onwards: the challenges that secondary school may bring and how to apply protective or

intervention measures. The voice of the child as part of Theme One highlights the strong relationship that children have with their primary school, both physically and through interpersonal relationships that exist there, and their sense of loss and grief at leaving. This may be connected to a lack of school belonging when conversants arrived at secondary school, which is linked to a deficit in wellbeing, though this resolved when social and logistical hurdles had been overcome.

The figure overleaf draws together the analysis of theme one through the lens of Alderfer's ERG model, illustrating the key findings and how they relate to recommendations for practice (fig. 27). Recommendations for practice are further elaborated upon in Chapter 5 using the same numbering system.

Alderfer's model of motivation	Conceptual questions	Key Findings	Recommendations for practice
Existence Needs	**Am I Safe?**	- Experiences of Primary School loss - Anxieties r.e. the unknown of Secondary School - Losing friends - Bigger site/getting lost at Secondary School - Navigating social hurdles with new staff and students - Losing and developing relationships with peers and staff - Sense of belonging/familiarity with the new school - Navigating 'unknowns' of new site, community, curricular - Deficits of emotional literacy - Emotional repression - Fearing bullying at new school - Fearing strict teachers at new school	1. Transition programmes should focus on social transition 2. Facilitate familiarisation with the new school site 5. Consider a sense of primary school loss 6. Provide safe spaces in school 10. Support children to develop their social skills 11. Support students to navigate new expectations 15. Reduce the social unknown of Secondary School 16. Enhanced transition programmes 17. Curriculum collaboration
Relatedness needs	**Am I Valued?**	- Fearing bullying at new school - Fearing strict teachers at new school - Navigating social hurdles with new staff and students - Losing and developing relationships with peers and staff - Sense of belonging/familiarity with the new school - Deficits of emotional literacy/Emotional repression - Forming new friendships - Feeling as though I belong	1. Transition programmes should focus on social transition 2. Facilitate familiarisation with the new school site 7. Provide a framework for meaningful student voice work 10. Support children to develop their social skills 11. Support students to navigate new expectations 15. Reduce the social unknown of Secondary School 16. Enhanced Transition programmes
Growth needs	**Am I happy?**	- Personal Growth and development - Things were better than I had hoped - New opportunities/broader curriculum were exciting - Fearing bullying at new school - Fearing strict teachers at new school - Navigating social hurdles with new staff and students - Boring/repetitive curriculum at Primary School	5. Consider a sense of Primary School loss 10. Support children to develop their social skills 11. Support students to navigate new expectations 15. Reduce the social unknown of Secondary School 16. Enhanced transition programmes

Fig. 27 – Theme one refinement of Alderfer's ERG model (1969) in the context of facilitating successful transition.

4.3 Theme Two: 'Perception is Reality' – Conceptualising Secondary School

Theme Two explores the range of features that contributed to the conversants' perceptions of secondary school prior to starting. It became apparent that conversants' engagement with film, television and social media had informed their views of secondary school *(e.g. Secondary School on social media, Secondary school in Film and TV, bullies)* and that they saw transition as a developmental milestone in their lives *(e.g. growing up, from eldest to youngest).*

Participants discussed their preconceptions of secondary school, how this was constructed and how this made them feel. Conversants joined secondary school with little understanding of what would happen, not least due to the lack of a transition programme, which gave them little evidence with which to challenge other sources of information with which they engaged.

4.3.1 Representations of Secondary School on social media

Conversants shared that they had viewed various pieces of online content that depicted secondary school in a negative way, and that this had increased their levels of anxiety. For example:

> **C:** *Well, I saw ... probably a story on Snapchat... there was this school... these year 7s who went to school before me*
> **R:** *Mhmm*
> **C:** *I was watching I… and I saw loads of kids crying and looking really upset and I then saw loads of people laughing... and I'm like 'oh no! it's going to be hell!'*
> **R:** *Oh wow! That's interesting! Did that change how you felt about secondary school?*
> **C:** *erm… yeah! Made me feel a lot more nervous!*
> **[Lynne]**

> **C:** *Ummmm…. like…. On social media there's a lot of things … like... when littler people... like year 7s go into secondary school... they get like teased by year 11s and older ones. So there's a lot of that*
> **R:** *On what social media platform do you see that?*
> **C:** *Erm… sometimes on YouTube… if you're into YouTube shorts.*
> **[Mark]**

Along with other conversants, Mark and Lynne shared that they had viewed content on social media that depicted stressful experiences for those transitioning to secondary school, particularly with regards to experiences of being accepted by the school community which would leave them upset and the target of teasing. This undoubtedly left them feeling less safe about the prospect of beginning their secondary school careers, threatening their Existence needs. With 89% of children reporting that they access online content every day (ONS 2021), it is perhaps unsurprising that conversants shared that they had seen representations of secondary school on social media, film and TV pre-transition which informed their perception of how it might be. Due to the lack of a normal transition programme for this cohort due to Covid-19, including pre-transition school visits, their perception of secondary school was influenced more by what they saw on social media as they had less evidence with which to challenge these representations and spent more time online due to the impacts of the pandemic (Kolaszewska and Kacprzak 2022). The Existence and Relatedness dimensions of Alderfer's model of motivation govern safety and connections to other individuals. The content that Mark and Lynne saw aligns with universal pre-transition social fears, such as being bullied, and so was likely to be believable to them and to have a significant impact on their wellbeing under the model. Engagement with, and access to, the internet and social media is a source of focus and concern for parents and professionals working with children (Goodyear and Armour 2021) with literature in many fields highlighting issues with unmonitored access (e.g. Hurley-Wallace et al. 2021; Jiang 2014) and the negative impact this can have on a young person's mental health and wellbeing (Betton and Woollard 2018). As a transition programme was not offered, due to the global pandemic, conversants including Mark and Lynne had limited alternative viewpoints to the negative representations they saw on social media. This was exacerbated by the absence of the normal three-day induction period, where students spend three trial days at secondary school during the closing weeks of year six, highlighting the importance of this as part of a strong and robust transition programme. This study finds that negative representation of secondary school exists on social media and when children view this it can negatively impact their wellbeing during the transition period. The

data in this study suggests that conversants' perception of secondary school was more susceptible to influence by stories on social media due to the lack of a transition programme and this had a significant impact on how some conversants felt about their transition to secondary school, with negative representation typically stimulating anxiety and worry. The Existence and Relatedness dimensions of Alderfer's model of motivation govern a sense of safety and social connections, which were threatened by the negative representations conversants saw on social media that portrayed secondary school as an unsafe place where other social actors posed a threat.

Whilst the majority of conversants found negative representations of secondary school on social media, some found the representation of secondary school on social media more positive which they cited as helpful for their wellbeing, offering a different perspective:

C: but they weren't anything bad, they were just normal… like… I'm going to secondary school and stuff.
R: So, did it change how you felt about coming to secondary school?
C: Yeah, it made me feel like… calmer... because they'd like gone through it … so… yeah
[Peter]

For Peter, social media seems to have taken the place of the transition programme provided typically by the secondary school, offering some familiarity and a window into the experiences of children who had previously completed this transition. Engaging with positive online transition content seemed to take away some of the 'unknown' aspects of secondary school for Peter, which led to anxiety in other children, providing him with more clarity and security as to what was to come, with reassurance that others had successfully completed transition. This seemed to bolster feelings of positive wellbeing for Peter. Whilst many secondary schools created some online content during the pandemic to support with transition, including the study school, this evidence highlights the importance of engaging with young people in their own social landscape, acknowledging that 73% of adolescents are using social media daily (Lutfeali et al. 2020). The Office of Communications (Ofcom)

Media Use and Attitudes report (Ofcom 2022 p.23) found that 81% of children watch television content on a device other than a TV, which 'demonstrates the prevalence of independent, rather than shared, viewing among children', meaning less access to an adult to discuss things they are watching to process or challenge the content of any negative viewing.

 The study school created several YouTube videos which were publicised through the school Facebook page and via emails to parents, depicting various aspects of secondary school, with the aim of supporting students to feel more familiar with the school site and allowing them to meet new teachers. Whilst YouTube is the social media platform most used by young people (Ofcom 2022), (despite an age recommendation of thirteen plus), the evidence is that use of Facebook is declining in young people, down to 40% (Ofcom 2022) which suggests that this may not be the most apposite platform on which to advertise such material. Conversants did not confirm that they had engaged with any transition videos created by the school, which may be because the school use facebook and email to disseminate their online transition resources, rather than platforms more readily used by children, currently TikTok and Instagram (Ofcom 2022). Schools needs to be mindful that most social media platforms have recommended age restrictions of thirteen (two years beyond the age of transition), although many have developed 'kids' versions of their main platform which could be utilised. Although parents and carers were directly signposted to online transition resources, these were apparently not shared with their children.

Parent and carer support is reportedly one of the most important support networks for children when transitioning to secondary school (Evans and Field 2020) as with other aspects of success at school including wellbeing (Goff 2023). When their children transition to secondary school, a parent and carer's relationship with the school also undergoes a transition, with Bagnall et al. (2020) finding that parents do not feel informed about the transition process and how best to support their children. Bilton et al. (2018) found that teachers in secondary school have a less intimate relationship with parents in primary school, suggesting a less open and collaborative educational

provision; parents considered themselves passive and not part of a meaningful dialogue. This may account for the lack of parental engagement with online transition materials evident in this study.

It is clear from the data that social media has the potential to play an important role in the transition period, particularly pretransition, and young people would benefit from access to high quality resources to support their journey. Positive and negative representations of secondary school on social media had an, at times, significant impact on my conversants and increased their feelings of anticipation or stress, respectively. This negative imagery, and associated emotions, created a decline in wellbeing under the model of motivation put forward by Alderfer under the existence and relatedness dimensions as students were presented with a window into secondary school that seemed unsafe.

4.3.2 Representation of Secondary School in Film, Games and Television

Similarly, my conversants examined the representation of secondary school in film, games and television:

C: Like in movies, you always see … and games you always see… like there a bunch… there's always just like a bunch of bullies just going around … just being not nice.
R: mhmmm
C: then erm.. when you get there, you realise 'oh, yeah that's just in movies and stuff'.
[Francis]

R: Ok. What about any stories you might have seen on films or on TV?
C: The same thing really.. where the little ones, or the ones who like don't fit in.. the ones that are like really different to everyone else always gets bullied. **[Mark]**

Francis and Mark discussed content in film, TV and games centering around young children being bullied by older children and teachers being incredibly strict and how these stories were proved to be false once they experienced secondary school for themselves. This anticipatory anxiety may have led to a decline in wellbeing under the existence and relatedness dimensions of Alderfer's model, as Francis and Mark worried that they may not be safe at secondary school or have positive social interactions. This decline was resolved once they had transitioned. No positive representations of school on film, television or games were mentioned by any conversant, suggesting that this media landscape is dominated by negative representation. Indeed, Fedarov (2019) noted that depictions of schools in audiovisual media were not reflective of society, contained stereotyped characters and themes such as murder, violence and sexual harassment. Kubrak (2020) discusses the impact that film can have on young people in that it can influence their attitudes and thoughts towards a particular topic, supported by a study on the influence of romantic ideals in film on young people's beliefs about relationships by Hefner and Wilson (2013) that found young people's expectations of relationships were heavily influenced by the ideals they saw on film. Francis discusses representations of 'bullies' in films about school, which we know is a common pre-transition fear, and this may have exacerbated his concerns about this. Children's perception of the social realism of a piece of film or television footage can lead them to imagine themselves in the situations that are portrayed (Huston et al. 1995), which may have led to increased levels of anxiety for Francis and other conversants who were exposed to negative imagery of school in film, for example:

C: Well, I saw a film of a child going into primary school for the first time and it was... like in American so it made me seem like it was a lot more like secondary school… it made me a bit traumatised after watching it.
R: What happened?
*C: *laughing* The child got killed in the school*
R: oh my gosh
C: and everyone was bullying the poor child
R: Wow
C: That also made me feel a bit distressed
[Lynne]

Lynne discusses her exposure to a particularly traumatic piece of film pre-transition that, understandably, caused her distress and made her feel unsafe: threatening her wellbeing under the Existence and Relatedness dimensions of Alderfer's theory, linking to safety, security and connections to others. Lynne was denied the opportunity to engage with a transition programme due to the pandemic, meaning she had a limited alternative viewpoint against which to balance what she saw on film. Most conversants associated these representations with an increase in feelings of worry, nervousness, and anxiety, which negatively impact on their wellbeing. It follows that, particularly in an environment where an alternative viewpoint is not available, representations of secondary school on social media, film and television can have an impact on the perception of transition for young people and can lead to poorer feelings of wellbeing.

Social media, film and television, are powerful tools with wide-reaching influence on children's consumer behaviour (Lapierre 2019), aggressive and violent behaviour (Khurana et al.2018) and even civic participation (Hoffman and Thomson 2009). My findings suggest that negative portrayals of secondary school on social media, film or television can have a significant and distressing impact and lead children to imagine themselves in these situations. This can compromise feelings of safety in the new setting, which is a central part of the Existence dimension of Alderfer's model of motivation, a deficit of which can lead to a deterioration in wellbeing. Content that displays positive portrayals of secondary school, particularly when created by other young people, can have a reassuring effect and can act as a counterbalance to the negative portrayals that exist on various platforms, by offering an alternative viewpoint.

4.3.3 - Summary of Theme Two

The data in theme Two finds that my conversants had preconceptions of secondary school pre-transition that were informed by social media, film and television. The effects of this may have been exacerbated due to the lack of a transition programme, and so the lack of an alternative viewpoint. However, some of the concerns conversants raised that were informed by social media would probably not have been assuaged by a transition programme, as they referred to social contexts that may only become apparent post-transition e.g. bullying. Several conversants saw material on media platforms that represented secondary school as a negative, sometimes terrifying, place and this was perceived as a contributing factor to pretransition anxiety, with some conversants stating that they

felt more worried and distressed as a result of viewing this content. Some children, however, saw positive and informative material on social media which was a comfort; knowing that others had experienced transition in a positive way and were enjoying their time at secondary school offered an insight into some of the 'unknowns' some children navigate pre-transition and decreased conversants' feelings of worry, leading to increased wellbeing.

Similar findings were apparent when considering the representation of secondary school on film, television and games, with studies finding that young people often imagine themselves in situations they see on film, leading to anxiety and stress. Representations were reported to be singularly negative, with no conversants discussing positive representation on film, thus underlining previous studies that found secondary school representation in film to contain stereotypes and violent events. Some of the anxiety-inducing imagery viewed on film would probably not have been tempered by a transition programme due to its irrational nature in a UK setting e.g. school shootings.

The data generated during my research shows that representations of secondary school in social media, games, film and television can have a significant influence on children's wellbeing during transition. Viewing this material can stimulate a decline in wellbeing under the Existence and Relatedness dimensions of Alderfer's model of motivation that associate with safety and social connections, as students perceive the staff and students at secondary school to be threatening and unkind. Whilst the study school created online films and resources, no conversant confirmed they had viewed these. These resources were publicised using online platforms that were used less by children but more by parents (e.g. email and Facebook), suggesting a lack of parental engagement during the transition period. On arrival at secondary school, all conversants, reassuringly, found most of these negative preconceptions quickly evaporated, as explored in theme three.

The figure overleaf draws together the analysis of theme two through the lens of Alderfer's ERG

model, illustrating the key findings and how they relate to recommendations for practice (fig. 28):

Alderfer's model of motivation	Conceptual questions	Key Findings	Recommendations for practice
Existence Needs	Am I Safe?	- Social media and Film contained negative depictions of Secondary School as a negative, sometimes dangerous place. This led to greater anxiety regarding bullying and unkind, strict staff. - Social media content that depicted Secondary School positively reassured young people, particularly when created by other young people. - A lack of alternative viewpoint emphasised negative depictions. - School-created online content was not viewed by children, possibly due to the platform the school chose (Facebook).	1. Transition programmes should focus on social transition 8. Consider the power of social media when designing transition programmes 15. Reduce the social unknown of secondary school
Relatedness needs	Am I Valued?	- There was a lack of parental engagement in the transition period. - Social media content that depicted secondary school positively reassured young people, particularly when created by other young people. - School-created online content was not viewed by children, possibly due to the platform the school chose (Facebook).	1. Transition programmes should focus on social transition 8. Consider the power of social media when designing transition programmes 9. Engage with parents and carers 15. Reduce the social unknown of Secondary School
Growth needs	Am I happy?	- Social media content that depicted Secondary School positively reassured young people, particularly when created by other young people. - There was a lack of parental engagement in the transition period. - School-created online content was not viewed by children, possibly due to the platform the school chose (Facebook).	1. Transition programmes should focus on social transition 8. Consider the power of social media when designing transition programmes 15. Reduce the social unknown of Secondary School 9. Engage with parents and carers

Fig. 28 – Theme two refinement of Alderfer's ERG model (1969) in the context of facilitating successful transition.

4.4 Theme Three: 'A New Normal' - The experiences of secondary school

Theme Three explores conversants' perspectives of the reality of secondary school and the experiences they had during their first four months in the new setting. Some of these perspectives centered around the physical makeup of the site (e.g. Finding my way around was hard, moving classrooms) and how this was navigated, which is extensively covered in the existing literature (e.g Howe and Richards 2011). Conversants' perception of other members of the school community was also expressed *(e.g. Teachers were nice, older students were unkind, older students were nicer than I expected)* as was their experience of navigating of a new social landscape *(e.g. lack of familiarity, social etiquette, sense of identity/belonging/community, understanding procedure).* This theme explores the stage at which conversants considered they had settled into secondary school, signalling an end of transition and suggests a new conceptualisation of a transition awareness period for young people.

Research conversants also reflected on their personal development once they had started secondary school *(e.g. Developing resilience, Developing independence, Developing Confidence, travelling to school)* and the fact that many of their initial worries were unwarranted *(e.g. Things are better than expected, Making friends was easy, teachers helped us to settle).*

4.4.1 Logistical challenges

Whilst the findings show that almost all conversants were worried about navigating the larger school and getting lost before moving, fewer cited this directly as a problem post-transition citing social navigation as a more pervasive issue. It was, however, discussed by some conversants who found it a challenge:

> C: *Erm… the only challenge really was trying to make my way across the school.* **[Donald]**
>
> R: *What was the worst bit, or the most challenging bit?*
> C: *Trying to find my way around* **[Peter]**

Both Donald and Peter felt that navigating the school site was the most challenging part of their transition to secondary school, despite also having concerns about the social hurdles they encountered. The existence dimension of Alderfer's model relates to security, so this lack of security and safety in their surroundings may have contributed to poorer feelings of wellbeing. This data underlines existing literature that cites getting lost, or navigating a new school site as salient challenges that children must overcome when transitioning (e.g. Brewin & Statham 2011, Zeedyk et al. 2003). In addition to reducing levels of anxiety, familiarity with the school site can support the development of place attachments with school increasing a sense of school belonging (Foster et al. 2021) with children beginning to form place attachments, or subjective bonds with places (Pacheco et al. 2022) when they feel their physical and emotional needs are met. For Peter and Donald, becoming familiar with the school site was part of meeting their needs. Place attachments to school in children are an important part of self-identity, contribute to positive wellbeing (Jack 2010), and have significant implications for academic success (Beheiry and Gabr 2022). Although worrying about navigating a bigger school and getting lost are well-reported phenomena, it is disappointing that children are still reporting this as a key concern in their transition journey 25 years after the last government review and following numerous studies finding this a source of anxiety for children, pointing to the need for this research and effective practice recommendations.

Some of those who did not cite this as a direct problem, did feel that familiarity with, and confidence in navigating, the new, bigger site was a benchmark of their successful integration into secondary school:

> *R: By the end of the first day, where were you with regards to how you were feeling about coming to school?*
> *C: I felt that I know some of the places around school, it might be alright, I might have fun.* **[Lynne]**

> *R: So at the end of the first week, how were you feeling about secondary school, do you think?*
> *C: Not as worried as I was.*
> *R: Why was that?*
> *C: Because I had made friends and I knew a bit of the way around school.* **[Jen]**

> *R: Do you remember how you felt at the end of the very first day?*
> *C: Erm… I was quite happy because I got the day over without getting lost or anything,* **[Mark]**

The above data extracts show conversants' responses when asked how they felt about secondary school after a day, or a week in their new environment. Both Mark and Lynne cited a greater familiarity with the school site as the reason that they felt 'happy' and that secondary school might 'be alright', despite pre-transition worries centering around social issues for these two respondents. The confident navigation, and increased familiarity, of the site increased feelings of safety and security under Alderfer's ERG model. Jen, however, cited making friends and knowing her way around the school as the reasons she felt less worried at the end of her first week, linking to greater accommodation of the relatedness dimension. As has been previously discussed in this chapter (4.3.1, 4.3.2), this cohort of children had access to little by way of alternative viewpoint to alleviate their worries due to the absence of pre-transition school visits. When starting at secondary school, they were met with the reality and were able to create their own perceptions as they experienced it, to challenge the notion of the 'unknown' (see 4.2.3). Being presented with the reality of the school site and given some time to explore it over the course of their first day meant that the notion of the 'unknown' situation was somewhat resolved, reducing this negative influence on wellbeing. Overcoming this challenge fostered a sense of achievement in some conversants, linked to feelings of positive wellbeing (Bradford 2016).

4.4.2 - Transition awareness and effects

There is debate in the literature over how long transition lasts, with claims ranging from one term post-transition (Zeedyk et al. 2003) to over a year post-transition (Topping 2011) which seems to be universally measured from the point of transition onwards, not accounting for periods of pre-transition worry that affect children. Conversants discussed when it was that they began to think about leaving primary school and moving to secondary:

> **C:** *Yeah… And also… about transitioning…. When you're in Year… even like when you're in year 5, you still think about it, but just nowhere near as much. Then halfway through year 6, you think about it quite a bit.* **[Francis]**
>
> **R:** *Ok so when do you think you first started thinking about moving?*
> **C:** *Erm… near the end of Year 6.* **[Peter]**

Most conversants, including Peter, considered that they began to think about moving to secondary school towards the end of year six, as their primary school journey was coming to an end with end-of-year productions and conversations about induction days. However, some, like Francis, were considering transition from as early as Year Five, casting a different perspective on the conceptualisation of the transition timeframe; could transition really begin up to two years before starting secondary school? Francis shared that in Year Five he was aware that he would be moving to secondary school in two years. Although he acknowledges that it was not on his mind as much as it was in Year Six, it was something he was thinking about. This data challenges existing transition literature that focusses on issues arising as children arrive at secondary school and presents a contrasting way to conceptualise transition, illustrating that for some of my conversants, transition may have begun in Year Five. This led me to consider a new conceptualisation that includes an awareness of transition from Year Five, which is illustrated in fig. 29:
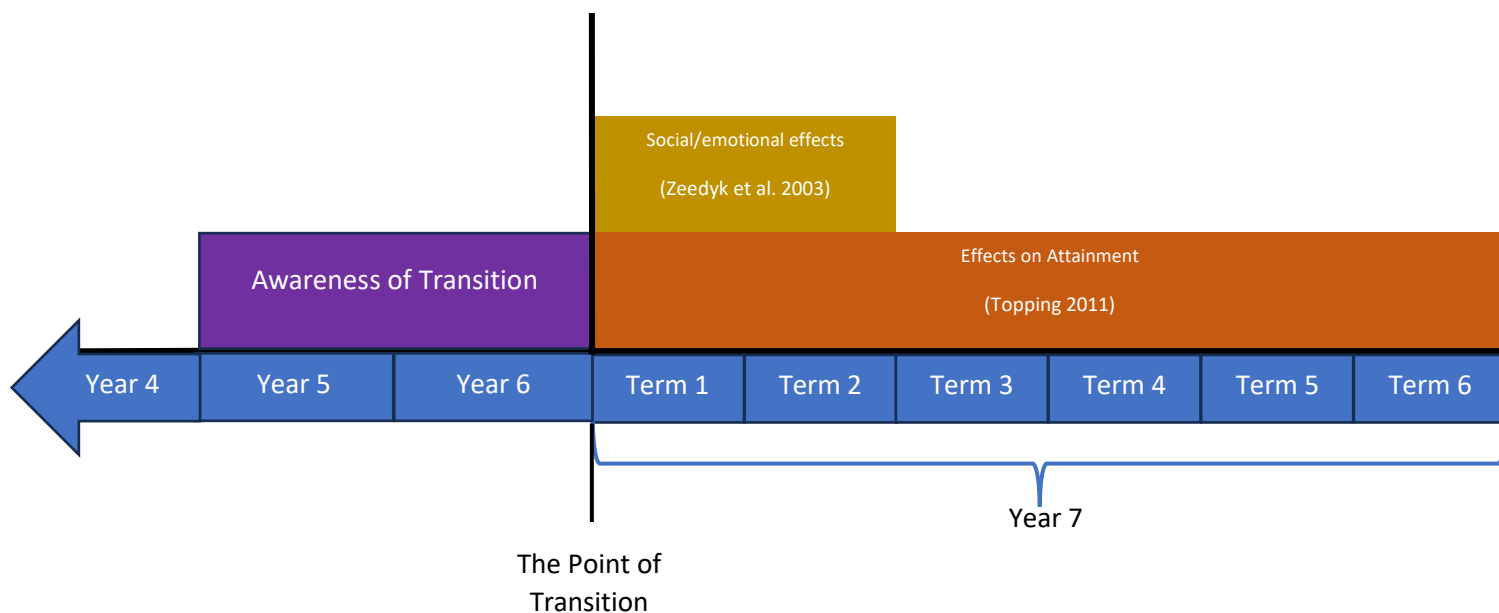
Fig. 29 – Conceptualisation of the timeframe of transition

My data show that the point at which children begin to consider transitioning to secondary school is unique to each child, but for some this can be as early as Year Five. This is significant new knowledge when considering emotional transition is felt to be complete two terms after the point of transition but experiences in the two-year period prior have not been explored nor understood. Having thoughts about a concept or upcoming event does not necessarily mean that a child may be affected by it. However, Francis does not say he thought about transition only once in Year Five, he says he was generally thinking about it, which could have been enough to generate anticipatory anxiety for Francis when considering this ambiguous situation (Vassilopoulos et al. 2015). As transition is an event that is understood to be a time of stress and anxiety for children, it could be argued that Francis was beginning to feel the effects of his upcoming transition on his wellbeing at this time. Zeedyk (2003) promulgates the findings that children's fears about secondary school begin to diminish by the end of the first term, whereas Topping (2011) argues that 40% of children are still feeling the effects of transition a year after the point of transition, citing an attainment dip that recovers after this time. Within the literature this draws the endpoint of transition as the point where fears are abated and attainment recovers from a post transition dip, up to a year post-transition. This conceptualisation of the end point of transition as the point at which fears come to

an end substantiates my argument that the transition period starts when fears around transition

begin for children: potentially as early as Year Five for some. Conversants discussed when they felt

'settled in' to secondary school, highlighting that as they became more familiar with the physical

make up, social differences and expectations, their sense of acclimatisation to secondary school

increased:

> *C: So, after like the first week, it was decent. I had settled in, I had gone through all of the subjects, and it felt pretty decent. After about the next week, you actually got to know other people. People older than you, new people. And after about the first month, you felt quite settled in. You would like know where every subject, but maybe like two of them, were. After about the first term, you know where everything is, you would feel right at home like you've been here for years.* **[Francis]**

> *R: Ok. Erm…. And how do you feel about it all now?*
> *C: It's fine.*
> *R: Literally fine?*
> *C: Yeah.*
> *R: Any worries at all?*
> *C: No.*
> **[Mark]**

> *R: How are you feeling about secondary school now?*
> *C: I enjoy it! A lot.* **[Lynne]**

When asked at the end of Term two, Mark, Lynne and Francis felt that they were settled into

secondary school. Francis shares his experience of how this was an evolving process as he

increasingly became familiar with other people, the makeup of the school site and curriculum

content. Conversants were demonstrably most concerned with social stressors and navigating the

school site, which they shared was a significant pre-transition worry, and all felt that they had

settled in by the end of term two (Christmas of 2021) once these concerns had been managed. This

underlines the assertion from Zeedyk et al. (2003), who stated that most children have overcome

social challenges by the end of the first term. From the date of this study, we can infer that this

assertion was made on the framing of a school year on three large terms. The current practice is the

division of a school year into six shorter terms, with the current end of term two coinciding with the

end of the previous understanding of term one, thus this data aligns with the finding of Zeedyk et al.

This confirmation allowed me to add to my new conceptualision of the transition period (the timeframe in which conversants reported they felt the effects of transition) from Year Five to term two of Year Seven, as shown in figure 30. This finding is important because existing transition literature highlights the significant drop in wellbeing and attainment from the point of transition and up to a year post-transition. My new conceptualisation opens a two-year period prior to the point of transition where children can experience anxiety, which has not previously been understood or considered in research or professional practice.
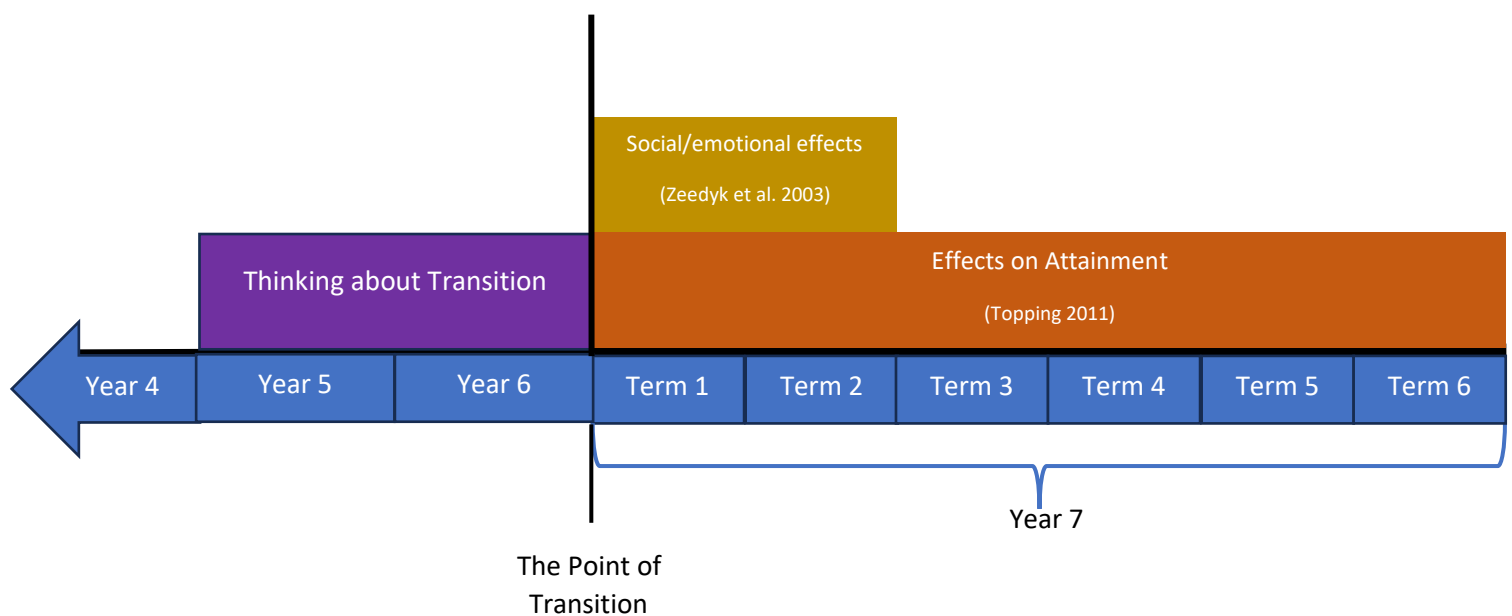
Fig. 30 – Reconceptualisation of the timeframe of transition

This conceptualisation indicates that children can begin to be aware of leaving primary school and transitioning to secondary school in Year Five. This awareness, and potential associated anxiety, increases up to the point of transition, with children feeling progressively more comfortable from the point of transition until, by the end of term two, they feel more at ease in their new school. Whilst an attainment regression has been found to occur (Topping 2011), this was not evident in the awareness of conversants, or at least was not forthcoming in their contributions.

In the literature review chapter of this thesis, following an exploration of terminology around transition, I generated the following definitions as a way of cutting through the literature on transition timeframe:

The Point of Transition – The climatic point of transition, when children arrive to school on the first day of Year Seven.

The Transition Period – The period of time children are affected by transition.

I conceptualised these definitions from the common perspective of transition in the literature, which viewed transition from the point of starting secondary school and the challenges children may be presented with when they arrive. As has been argued above, some children become aware of leaving primary school and moving to secondary school as early as Year Five, though the extent of this, the details of it, and how this may affect them are outside of the scope of this research and should be pursued further. This revelation does, however, call for a revision on my proffered definitions that I offer thus:

The Point of Transition – The climatic point of the transition period, when children arrive at secondary school on the first day of Year Seven.

The Transition Period – The period of time children are *known* to be affected by transition.

The Transition 'Awareness' Period – The period of time that children are aware of transitioning from primary school to secondary school.

Within these definitions, I offer my final conceptualisation of a timeframe of transition and how this might impact children (fig. 31):
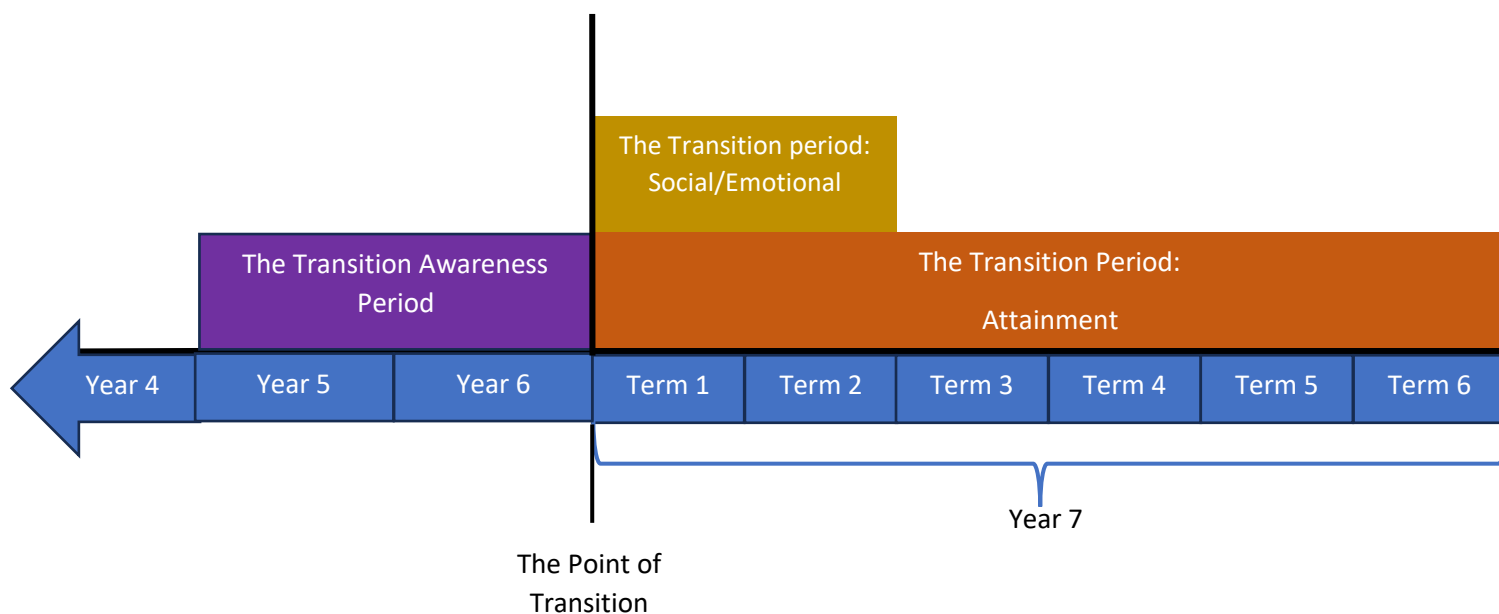
Fig. 31 – Final Conceptualisation of the timeframe of transition

This conceptualisation demonstrates the boundaries of transition, informed by this study and the wider literature. It demonstrates that some children begin to consider transition to secondary school as early as Year Five. Following the point of transition, my conversants confirmed they felt emotionally and socially secure in their new school after two months have elapsed, with Topping (2011)'s research highlighting that the attainment dip associated with transition is resolved by the time one year has passed. This conceptualisation is an important development for practitioners, researchers and policymakers.

4.4.3. Growing up

My Conversants discussed the transition to secondary school as a developmental milestone, citing the feeling of growing up and moving from being the eldest students in primary school to the youngest in secondary school:

> *C: and then it would be alright until like the last month and then you would think about it a lot more and think 'I'm not actually going to go to this old school again'. And yeah… you… cause you go instantly from the oldest people in your school, right to the youngest. Yeah… […] it just feels like odd, honestly, cause you work your way up through all the years back to year 6 and then you're suddenly, you just find yourself at the bottom of the year and you're the youngest out of everyone.*
> **[Francis]**

> *R: ok. Have you changed since you were in primary school?*
> *C: er…I guess… Like … matured more…erm…*
> *R: What does that mean?*
> *C: kind of grown up a bit… yeah… less … I dunno…. silly… I dunno really.*
> **[Alice]**

> *C: I feel it's like…. Hm… I don't have long as a kid before I grow into a teenager. So, I just want to make the most of it.*
> *R: That's really interesting. What does that mean to you, 'make the most of it'?*
> *C: Like…. Don't take as… like still take them seriously, but don't take things as seriously.*
> *R: Mhmm.*
> *C: Like…. I don't really know, but it's like …as you grow older you get more responsibilities, so like take this time now to, like, have a lot of freedom.*
> *R: Mmm.*
> *C: Because you don't really have a lot of responsibilities, right now. Apart from doing your homework, and .. yeah… basically.*
> *R: Is that something you worry about?*
> *C: Er… yeah, a little bit. Quite a bit usually.*
> *R: And what particularly are you worrying about?*
> *C: Er…I'm not sure.*
> *R: What's so scary about getting older?*
> *C: ….. like dying and stuff. I do not like the thought of dying.*
> **[Mark]**

Alice articulated the notion of the development of her maturity since moving to secondary school and considered that development, along with a reduction in 'silliness', to be part of her growing up and aligning this with a new secondary school student identity. Francis had a slightly different perspective, referring to a sense of loss of social status as he moved from the oldest year group in primary school, to the youngest in secondary school, raising another aspect of both social transition and a feeling of loss relating to his primary school: a place where he was one of the oldest and felt more competent. Mark presented a more existential contribution relating to his correlation between transition and the loss of childhood, leading to an apprehension of what he felt adolescence and adulthood would ultimately bring: responsibility and death. All conversants reflected on their own development as they transitioned from primary school to secondary school and had a sense of 'growing up' and of leaving aspects of their childhood behind.

Transitioning to secondary school aligns with the transition from childhood to adolescence, which is a period of significant physical, hormonal, and social development (Pfiefer and Allen et al. 2021). The advent of puberty marks a child's development into an adolescent which brings with it greater vulnerability to mental health concerns (MacSweeney et al. 2023), adding urgency to the importance of prioritising mental health and wellbeing at this time. Transition is considered to represent a boundary between childhood and adolescence (Zimina 2021) as this time in the lives of young people aligns with many other changes, a boundary that my conversants were aware of crossing. Age eleven, the age at which my conversants made this transition, marks the beginning of a new period of biological, emotional and intellectual development (Howe and Richards 2011; Waters and Lester 2012). Alongside the stressful life event that is transition (Junge et al. 2016), my conversants have had much to navigate during this key developmental point in their lives which left their wellbeing more vulnerable to negative influence.

Children benefit from intimate teacher-student relationships in primary school and are generally more motivated to learn and be active members of the school community (Hung 2014). In many cases, children have been embedded members of this school community for seven years, from reception to Year Six. Children consider transition as both an end and a beginning, as different from the adult perception of transition as a necessary bridge in the overall educational journey of young people (Howe and Richards 2011), suggesting a reflective moment when they try to manage the emotional bond they have to their primary school (Ozgenel et al. 2018) and the fact that their time there is ending. Topping (2011) and Mackenzie et al (2012) discuss Francis' awareness of the process of gaining status as the one of the oldest members of the primary school and how transitioning to the youngest in the secondary school removed this, which negatively affected Francis' self-image and confidence and, in turn had a negative impact on his wellbeing (Lemon 2017). Alderfer's model of motivation highlights the importance of confidence and self-image as part of the Growth dimension, meaning that this change in social status led to a decline in Francis' wellbeing under this model.

Conversants invariably felt that their experience of secondary school was far better than they had expected, and that secondary school had become the 'new normal' by the end of four months, or two terms, and that feelings of transition-related anxiety had significantly reduced:

> *R: That's good. Ok. And how do you feel about it now…at the end of your second term?*
> *C: Erm… really good, actually.*
> *R: Yeah?*
> *C: Mmm*
> *R: Why?*
> *C: Coz it was a nice introduction to the school and then… it's normal now. Getting up, coming to school, seeing loads of friends waiting for people to get here on the bus*
> **[Peter]**

C: It was a bit scary at first but then it got better, quite quickly.
R: Quite quickly, that's good. When you were, before you started, out of ten how scary was it? Ten being 'oh my gosh this is the scariest thing I've ever done in my whole life, and one 'No, it's not scary at all'...before you started?
C: 9
R: A 9? And then... how does school... on the same scale, 10 being really scary, 1 being not scary at all, how does school feel for you now?
C: Mmm......1 and a half?
[Jen]

As can be seen through the exploration of previous themes, Jen was very anxious about starting secondary school but, demonstrably here, found that her worries quickly abated once she had started. At the end of his second term, Peter felt that secondary school had become 'normal' and felt that his new morning routine was a testament to this. This was typical of all conversants who, whilst acknowledging it was a challenging period, felt positive about secondary school post-transition, referring to an increased confidence with social structures and friendships and greater familiarity with the school site and staff. Pincus and Friedman (2004) attest that children's reactions to challenging events is context-dependent and that children become more adept at emotion-focussed coping as they grow older, particularly when faced with stressors over which they have no control. Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2016) confirm that by the time a child reaches adolescence, they have developed significant coping capacities and begin to see this period as a time of progress and growth. Considering this perspective through the context of the above data suggests that by the time my conversants left primary school, they should have acquired the required skills to enable them to transition successfully, despite pre-transition anxiety. This understanding, along with the data in this research and my conceptualisation of the transition period, challenges the area of focus in current transition literature. Existing literature considers the effects of school transition from the point of transition onwards, a period when children have already acquired, according to Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2016), the skills to manage the transition. The transition awareness period, prior to the point of transition, is an important area to consider, particularly when considering children's coping skills are less effectively established. Self-efficacy is the belief that one has the capacity to

face change and challenge, levels of which are a crucial factor in the wellbeing of adolescents (Cattelino et al. 2021). Levels of self-efficacy have been shown to decline between the ages of nine and fourteen (Usher et al. 2018) which links with conversants' belief that transitioning to secondary school would be a challenge that provoked anxiety and worry.

Peter discussed the importance of a positive transition programme to support his integration to secondary school. He also shared that secondary school felt 'normal' to him once he was confident with new routines that surround different aspects of secondary school life, particularly social interactions. Routine has been shown to be important in feelings of safety and security in young people and can support the development of social-emotional skills (Hatherly et al. 2023). The Existence dimension of Alderfer's model of motivation concerns feelings of safety and security, meaning that prioritising the establishment of new routines may bolster feelings of wellbeing in children as they transition. Whilst there is literature on the importance of the development of routines with younger children transitioning to primary school (e.g. Wildenger et al. 2008), Peter highlighted the notion that routines are important for people at all stages of development (e.g. Weisner 2010).

The above contributions underline the notion of loss and belonging as conversants transition from primary school, but from the perspective of social status. Social hierarchies are apparent in groups of children from the age of five (Halpern et al. 2015) and by the end of primary school, children have established themselves in positions of power in the social arena by virtue of their age and position in the school, which leads to a positive sense of self-worth. When beginning secondary school, young people find themselves without this social status, having become the youngest members of the school community (Kiefer and Ryan 2008). Some conversants correlated starting secondary school

with the end of childhood and the development of themselves as more confident and mature members of the school community, despite their pre-transition worries.

4.4.4 Personal Development

As part of this study, despite pre-transition worries, conversants reflected on their increased confidence and independence post transition:

> *R: How have you changed since you were in primary school?*
> *C: I feel like I'm more confident now, in doing stuff*
> **[Donald]**

> *C: Yeah, you sort of like more personal with a lot more people… teachers and things…. And that means your attitude is coming a little bit more friendly to a lot more… so like strangers… you would greet them and find it a lot more better than you would in primary. You'd be less shy, basically.*
> **[Francis]**

Francis, despite acknowledging the importance he placed on now being the youngest in the school, reflected on how he had developed as a person physically, emotionally and socially. He, like others, voiced the notion of becoming more mature and confident in social interactions, particularly with adults in the school where he noticed the development of different relationships which he extended as a development of his overall personal and social development. This view was, perhaps more reservedly, echoed by Donald who felt he had become more confident since attending secondary school. This may be linked, according to Zhang and Qin (2023), to the social acceptance of peers and teaching staff which can bolster self-image and confidence. This is interesting when considering the contrast between theme two (Not being ready for secondary school and worrying about social hurdles) and how conversants felt post-transition, having navigated those social hurdles. This research finds that overcoming social challenges and feeling comfortable in the new school

contributed to an increase in confidence and generated feelings of achievement for Peter and Donald, which contributed to an increase in positive feelings of wellbeing under the Growth dimension of Alderfer's model of motivation.

Gurney (1988 p.21-22) states that one's conceptualisation of oneself (self-esteem) evolves from perceptions derived from experiences and between the ages of two and thirteen this is heavily influenced by interactions with significant adults, both positive and negative. Positive student-teacher relationships are considered to have a beneficial impact on achievement and are particularly important during periods of vulnerability (Roorda et al. 2011), such as transition. The increasing interactions with different teachers (despite children worrying about this pre-transition) arguably provides young people with a valuable opportunity to develop their confidence in interacting with adults. Interactions with secondary school staff that do not foster positive relationships on the other hand, are likely to have a negative effect on the confidence and overall transition of young people.

Whilst acknowledging that transition can be a point of stress and worry for children, leading to a temporal reduction in wellbeing, the findings of this study suggest that social hurdles, once positively navigated, can have a positive effect on aspects of a child's personal development, such as self-esteem, confidence, and therefore improve their wellbeing under Alderfer's model of motivation.

Existing transition research positions children into one of two groups: children who are worried about transition and how they can be supported, and those who are excited and need less support. This data presents a different way to consider the relationship between these two groups and their transition journey. As some children in this research considered moving to secondary school to ultimately have a positive impact on the development of their self-esteem and confidence, it could

be considered that transition is an event that allows children that have deficits in this area to 'catch up' to their peers. Whilst research has been published on the importance of 'struggle' as a way of pushing children beyond their abilities in the classroom to advance their learning (Friedrich et al. 2015), how this might be a factor in the social development in children is less clear.

4.4.5 Navigating the social landscape

Navigating the new social environment of secondary school was a strong pattern within the data of Theme Three, both peer-peer and student-teacher.

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> **C:** Umm…Like there's lots of homework isn't there. So, I thought, like, there was going to be loads of homework, like, so I got, like, I had like one day to do it. But you have like a week to do it.
> **R:** So, you were worried…
> **C:** Yeah.
> **[Mark]**

> **C:** …and also, with other stuff like... um… just a lot of things… just like normal things like…. the benches outside you would like… you'd think 'well, how are we going to go there?'. There's only like a couple of benches, just like… are there certain parts for each year group? And I didn't realise there's like a part for Year 7s and like a part for year 10s and 11s and the year 8s and 9s usually go on other places.
> **R:** But you didn't know that?
> **C:** No, I just thought maybe… it would just be like the… key stage four would just basically have the benches.
> **[Francis]**

> **C:** Erm… I got here … erm... my friend, she was telling me about the stuff
> **R:** The stuff?
> **C:** About where the stuff is, because I didn't go to some bits… and where the tutor room is… and how to say like 'I'm here' because we didn't say 'I'm here Sir, or Miss'
> **R:** What did you used to say?
> **C:** We just said 'Hi!'
> **[Peter]**

Once these hurdles were overcome, conversants felt part of the school community:

C: I know a lot of the teachers. I've been on the courts, I've been on the field and made a lot of new friends and it feels that you… sort of… belong here a bit more than you did at the start. **[Francis]**

Peter, Francis and Mark all considered understanding the social expectations of them, both in and out of the classroom, a signal that they were secondary school students, and that a lack of understanding could contribute to a lack of security in this space leading to poorer feelings of wellbeing. Conversants felt that the development of friendships and the navigation of social hurdles were of significant importance during transition, in terms of feeling safe and secure in their new surroundings, which is reflected in the existing literature (e.g. Spernes 2020) and has relevance under the Existence dimension of Alderfer's model of motivation. Children at this stage of development are particularly open to influence from their peers, perhaps accounting for Peter's reliance on peer support in navigating the new expectations that teachers had of him. Francis raised the notion of not understanding the implied social hierarchy or expectations between himself and other students in the school community, which manifests here as an anxiety about where he was 'allowed' to sit during unstructured times. This left him feeling insecure in his place in the social landscape of the school, linking to the notion of school belonging discussed as part of Theme One (4.2.3), but illustrating here how this develops post-transition as aspects of the social arena are made sense of, and confidence grows, linking to the Relatedness dimension of Alderfer's model of motivation. Success in this area is dependent on several social cognitive processes which continue to develop during adolescence and facilitate effective social transition into adulthood (Andrews et al. 2021).

There was a pattern of data concerned with the lack of knowledge and information the respondents had of the social and procedural aspects of secondary school life. The deficit of a transition programme for this cohort inarguably had an effect in this regard. As students were unable to

explore the social and procedural etiquette of secondary school before arriving in Year Seven due to the pandemic: much of secondary school life was a mystery to them. Rider et al. (2021) discuss the fear of the unknown that children can develop as a result of pandemic-related vulnerability, which can have a negative impact on a young person's feeling of security, and therefore wellbeing. Transition programmes designed by school staff cannot hope to cover every aspect of social life at secondary school, as this is constructed by the students in the school community whose experiences are difficult for adults to perceive (Casas 2010).

Mark and Peter were less concerned about the etiquette around peer social interactions than about expectations adults in the school had of them regarding procedural issues, such as homework, and respectful social interactions with staff: and even how to answer the register. Mark and Peter wanted to ensure that they understood the social framework that exists between teacher and student so that they wouldn't commit any faux pas, leading to negative interactions with adults in the school. Peter had not attended the first day of school and therefore had not experienced many of these 'firsts' with his peers. He chose to rely on support from a friend to help him navigate these concerns which was effective.

Several conversants talked about the challenges they experienced with older students already at the school, suggesting a culture of unkindness:

> C: When I first joined, I felt a bit manipulated by the older students but now they don't bother me that much now.
> R: How do you mean manipulated?
> C: Well, they would always like tell us stuff that would not be true… or they'd sort of get in the way and nudge you… […] they said that there's no year 7s allowed in the canteen. My poor soul felt that was true and I ran away *laughs*
> R: And now?
> C: Now I just walk in there whenever I want.
> R: So, you're not bothered by the older students now?
> C: No. [Lynne]

C: Erm… they don't really bother us that much. Except for when we're playing football on the field and the ball goes over to them, they boot it really far away which is a bit annoying.
R: How did you feel about them before you started?
C: Didn't really like them that much. They were running around and shoving us to the side. **[Donald]**

C: It was very nice. Erm… and then it was like … I still had a bit of nerves for the first week
R: Mhmm
C: But after that it kind of went… and then… erm… it came back a bit… because like the big kids were holding the door… but then it went again
R: What do you mean the big kids were holding the door?
C: like… they held the door by the English upstairs bit…
R: mhmm
C: Up the stairs, the door there
R: Yeah
C: The inside door by Mr B's?
R: mhmm
C: I couldn't really… no one could really get through..
R: So, they were holding the doors closed?
C: Yeah
[Peter]

Lynne, Peter and Donald all shared their experiences of being intimidated by older students, which emphasised their changed position in the social hierarchy. They shared examples of direct physical interactions (Being nudged and pushed) but also behaviour associated with control and intimidation (being denied access to areas in school). These interactions had an impact on the wellbeing of my conversants as they shared feelings of sadness and annoyance which influenced their wellbeing under the Existence and Relatedness dimensions of Alderfer's model, which accounts for safety, security and interpersonal relationships. Peer victimisation, being the subject of unkind or intimidating behaviour, is a fear for many transitioning children which causes stress and anxiety (Barlow 2021) and was a concern for children in this research. Stiehl et al. (2023) found similarities in their study, where children discussed fears, and experiences, of various negative behaviours from older students that impacted on their wellbeing. Transitioning children navigate significant social hurdles during the process and whilst these hurdles are generally managed by them, the evidence suggests that negative experiences can have a lasting effect on wellbeing (Sabolova et al. 2020). All

conversants who mentioned unkindness from older peers described emotional responses such as annoyance, nerves and feeling manipulated, though all said that these behaviours and emotions quickly subsided. It is likely that this lack of peer acceptance will have been a barrier to them feeling a sense of belonging to the secondary school (Flannery and Smith 2017), and to positive feelings of wellbeing under Alderfer's model, delaying the protective factors this can bring, as discussed earlier.

4.4.6 - Summary of theme three

The data in Theme Three suggests that children's negative perceptions of secondary school were quickly challenged on arrival in Year Seven, but that they experienced challenges that were not considered pre-transition. Conversants felt that secondary school quickly became 'a new normal' and that their perception of other members of the school community were positive once they had met them, despite some unkindness, and the social stressor of meeting new people was removed. Alderfer's model of motivation highlights the importance of social connections under the Relatedness dimension, meaning the anticipation that connections with staff and students would be negative led to a dip in wellbeing. Post-transition, the Relatedness need was more fulfilled, thus improving feelings of wellbeing when the reality of positive social connections was realised.

Challenges with navigating the school site were discussed, as covered in existing research, but even those who had not cited it as a concern still felt that knowing their way around the site as an important milestone in their transition journey. Some conversants considered transition an important developmental milestone in their lives, some worried about growing up and perceiving the end of childhood and being determined to make the most of it. This, alongside the loss of relationships, social status and familiarity at primary school affected the wellbeing of conversants as they transitioned to secondary school, from the eldest in school to the youngest and occupy, what they perceive as, the lowest rung on the social ladder. These physical and social hurdles negatively impact on transitioning children under the Existence and Relatedness dimensions of Alderfer's

model of motivation, as students feel less familiar (and therefore secure) in their new environment and fear negative social connections, leading to a decline in wellbeing. Once these hurdles were overcome, the Existence and Relatedness needs were more fulfilled, consequently improving feelings of wellbeing. This suggests that children experience a dip in wellbeing at the point of transition due to deficits in these areas, which improves once they feel more secure in the new physical and social arena.

The period of transition in existing literature is said to begin at the point of transition: the day children start at secondary school. Transition literature focusses on how children can be supported and facilitated to make good progress during the two terms that follow. The findings of this research challenge this approach and provide a contrasting way to conceptualise transition. Conversants discussed having thought about moving to secondary school as early as Year Five and considered themselves accustomed to life at secondary school by the end of term two, which informs a conceptualisation of a 'transition awareness' period that lasts from the beginning of Year Five until the end of term two in Year Seven, with the attainment dip explored in other studies (Topping 2011) resolving one year post transition. Despite significant pre-transition anxiety, my conversants felt that they were more confident, mature and independent post-transition, and talked about an evolution in identity from primary school students to secondary school students. This suggests that although transition was anxiety-producing for some, children develop their confidence and self-esteem beyond pre-transition levels, partly due to a sense of achievement once the transition period comes to an end. This also adds a valuable perspective to my conceptualisation of the transition awareness period and how this can affect young people in Years Five and Six.

Conversants talked about navigating the unspoken social and procedural aspects of secondary school, particularly managing the expectations of a greater number of teachers, and social etiquette at social times, which generated uncertainty and anxiety. It is difficult for adults to design a transition programme that facilitates social transition into the wider school community, as the social

structure of the student body is one that adults are not a part of and, therefore, do not have to navigate so the involvement of children in the design of this process is important.

The figure overleaf draws together the analysis of theme three through the lens of Alderfer's ERG model, illustrating the key findings and how they relate to recommendations for practice (fig. 32):

Alderfer's model of motivation	Conceptual questions	Key Findings	Recommendations for practice
Existence Needs	**Am I Safe?**	- Bigger site/getting lost at Secondary School was a source of stress - Being familiar with the site meant successful transition and positive emotions - Some children are aware of transition as early as Year Five. - Establishing routines encouraged feelings of 'normal'. - Social unknowns and expectations were a source of stress - Older students were unkind.	1. Transition programmes should focus on social transition 2. Facilitate familiarisation with the new school site 4. Transition programmes should begin in year five 7. Provide a framework for meaningful student voice work 10. Support children to develop their social skills
Relatedness needs	**Am I Valued?**	- Making friends meant successful transition - Navigating social hierarchies and hurdles meant positive transition and acceptance - Becoming the youngest in the Secondary School, losing social status - Navigating a sense of Primary School loss was difficult. - Older students were unkind.	1. Transition programmes should focus on social transition 5. Consider a sense of Primary School loss 6. Provide safe spaces in school 7. Provide a framework for meaningful student voice work 10. Support children to develop their social skills
Growth needs	**Am I happy?**	- Being familiar with the site, meant successful transition and positive emotions - Making friends meant successful transition - Navigating social hierarchies and hurdles meant positive transition and acceptance - All felt settled by the end of Term two. - Feelings of being more 'grown up', confident and mature after the transition period. - Establishing routines encouraged feelings of 'normal'.	1. Transition programmes should focus on social transition 2. Facilitate familiarisation with the new school site 10. Support children to develop their social skills 11. Support students to navigate new expectations

Fig. 32 – Theme three refinement of Alderfer's ERG Model (1969) in the context of facilitating successful transition.

Theme Four: 'A Helping Hand' - Supporting Transition

Theme Four explores aspects of transition that participants highlighted as helpful *(e.g. Visiting before I started helped, Teambuilding activities helped, previous school moves helped, knowing my way around helped me settle).* The theme also examines the support that participants sought out, or were able to access, during transition *(e.g. support staff, talking to parents, taking to friends)* and identified issues that were potentially challenging *(e.g. losing friends to other schools, I think students with problems at home found it harder).*

The theme brings together data that conversants suggested may refine future transition practice *(e.g. An older buddy would help, please help me to make friends, meeting all staff earlier would have helped)*, things that may not be helpful *(e.g. A buddy would limit my independence and confidence)* and suggestions to other young people who are to undergo the process *(e.g. Advising future students).*

4.5.1 A gentle start

All conversants cited feelings of nervousness and anxiety on their first day at secondary school. Part of the school's transition programme is to welcome Year Seven only into school on the first day, with older year groups beginning the school year one or two days later. Many conversants described this as a positive feature of their first day at secondary school:

> **C:** *The first day wasn't that bad because we got the whole school to ourself.* **[Mark]**

> **C:** *Well, the first day. Cause there was no one there apart from us,*
> **R:** *Just year 7, you mean?*
> **C:** *Yeah. The entirety of year 7 felt like.. that literally felt like the entirety of St Peter's. So I thought 'WHOA! This is JUST Year 7 and there's going to be a lot of people going round.* **[Francis]**

> *C: That was a bit nerve wracking because there are older children and stuff. But the first day there was only year 7s…. so that was fine. But when everyone came back it was more nerve wracking.* **[Alice]**

Alice, Mark and Francis all shared that having the school to themselves on their first day, without any older students, was helpful in their transition. This arrangement acted as a stepping stone for Mark and Alice who felt more at ease in gaining some familiarity with the school and staff without the added pressure of older students. The rural location of the study school means that its feeder primary schools are typically small village schools with fewer than 100 children each on roll, which makes the transition to a larger secondary school even more significant. Francis was overwhelmed by the number of students in Year Seven and attending alone on the first day, acted as a stepping stone to Francis' integration into the wider school community. This links to the Existence and Relatedness dimensions of Alderfer's model of motivation, as conversants felt a greater sense of safety and security with fewer children on site. As has been discussed, children face a range of stressors which can activate the stress response, resulting in worry or anxiety. When a child experiences stress responses that are prolonged or excessive, this can result in toxic stress (Clifton and Milton 2021). Whilst research in toxic stress places it as one of the outcomes of Adverse Childhood Experiences (Beal 2019), there is research that expands the notion of adversity, and associated stimuli for toxic stress, that includes perceived unsafe community environments (Douglas et al. 2015), a notion that is explored in the Existence and Relatedness dimensions of Alderfer's model of motivation. Theme One explored the significant levels of stress that transition can place on children, and Theme Three established that transition may feature in the awareness of children for longer than previously understood, from as early as Year Five. For some children, transition could be a potential source of toxic stress and staggering children's exposure to the stresses of transition may constitute a protective measure. Children moving to secondary school from smaller feeder schools may be at greater risk due to the larger contrast in the student population and size of the secondary school.

4.5.2 Sources of support

Some conversants stressed the importance of discussing their upcoming transition to secondary school with parents, carers and peers as a way of managing their anxieties, which they cited as helpful:

> *C: And because my Dad went to St Peter's… he was able to tell me a bit about the school… at least when he was there.*
> *R: … St Peter's… or Dillon Road?*
> *C: Dillon Road, sorry.*
> *R: Yeah, ok. So, were you thinking about it over the summer?*
> *C: I was a bit. Mostly, when I was… we … me and my friends, if we were going down to the rec.. and we would talk about it a bit. And ….yet again, when it got closer, you would think about it a bit more…. But you.. you're not really aware of it until like the last couple of weeks, or the last month … because then you're like 'oh! I've only got a month left before I'm in Dillon Road.*
> *R: And do you think… was it something you were talking about with your friends?*
> *C: ahh yeah. We would talk about it a decent amount. We would talk about other stuff to do with other things but you'd also talk about things like Dillon Road and what you were going to do there, really.*
> *R: and did people… did you feel, if you were worried about it, did you feel able to tell your friends you were worried about it?*
> *C: Yeah, things I was worried about I would be able to tell like people like My Dad, and my friends, … cause they were… they were gonna be there, or they had been there .. and there gonna be there too with it.* **[Francis]**

Francis discussed the importance of having a trusted adult, in this case his father, in whom he was able to confide, which was even more powerful as that person had undergone transition to the same school and could talk to him about various aspects of the school. Whilst it is likely the school has changed since Francis' father attended, Francis had someone with whom he was able to discuss his worries and concerns and who was able to offer credible reassurance. It appears that conversations Francis had with his peers were lighter in content and centered around engaging with new and different activities, rather than discussing worries and fears.

Discussing the emotional aspects of a stressful situation such as transition can help children to learn about, and practice, regulating their emotions (Klemfuss and Musser 2020). Matejka et al. (2013) found that children talking about worries and concerns with a parent or carer helps them to

emotionally regulate, contributing to positive wellbeing. This notion is supported by the relatedness dimension under Alderfer's model which can be fulfilled by positive connections to other individuals. Parent-child communication about emotions promotes understanding and emotional resilience (Haukeland et al. 2022) meaning that children who can discuss the challenges of transition with a trusted adult are more equipped to navigate this potentially difficult time than those who lack this framework.

Talking to an adult, or person outside of transition, may have been a sensible choice by Francis. Felton et al. (2019) found that excessively discussing problems, what they term as 'co-rumination', can lead to problem-focussed conversations which can escalate when not with these peers, despite the fact that self-disclosure, sharing personal and intimate information, can increase closeness and the quality of friendships amongst adolescents (Korem 2023). Francis discussed his concerns and worries with his father and shared more light-hearted discussions with his peers focussed on his personal interests and hopes, reducing the risk of co-rumination. Having these levels of social support was advantageous for Francis' wellbeing under the Relatedness dimension of Alderfer's model of motivation which cites the importance of connections to other individuals. The availability of a trusted adult with whom to discuss concerns reinforced positive social connections and led to greater feelings of security and, therefore, positive wellbeing.

4.5.3 Buddying up

Several participants felt that having an older student to act as a buddy during their first steps at secondary school, to support them in navigating the physical make-up of the school and the social landscape, would have been beneficial:

R: Would a buddy system have been good as you started? So, if you'd have come and we'd have paired you up with an older student to look out for you and show you around, things like that, and be someone you could go to… would that have been a good thing?

C: Yeah... because then like they could like get you used to them …like taking you around… and…then if you need help later on, you could just go and ask them because you know who they are.

R: OK and would that have made you be less worried about older students do you think?

C: erm… ye

[Mark]

R: Would a buddy system have been good when you started? So, being paired up with an older student as someone who could show you around, someone to go to when you're worried.

C: Yes, that would be good, but it depends on who the person is.

[Lynne]

Mark and Lynne could see the positives of having a supportive older student to help them during their start at secondary school and felt it may have been helpful for them, although with some concern about ensuring the right person was chosen for the task. Other participants recognised the potential benefits of having a buddy but reflected on the potential deficit of their experience had they been given one and where this was cited as a potentially positive intervention there were caveats, as with Francis below.

C: There'd be good things and... sort of worse things. So, on the good side, you'd be less sort of scared and confused instead of having to ask a teacher to tell you where to go, cause they could just show you that science is here and computing is here, who do you have it with? You have to go to this room… but also, you would know where you are going less once they've gone… after… so let's say on the first week you had one. Then the week after that you didn't, because you didn't sort of learn it yourself, and all of that, you still probably want someone to try and help you and tell you where to go. But if you did it on your own, you would half know what you're doing. So… yeah.

R: So what would the bad things be? You said there were two sides.

C: So, it would be nice on the first sort of couple of days to know, to have somebody help you where you're going. Then you're a little bit on your own and you'll feel a little bit stuck for that week. And then the week after that, you'll probably be fine again.

[Francis]

R: Would a buddy system have been good as you started? So, being paired up with an older student to show you around and be someone to go to if you had a question or were worried?
C: erm... I think I would have been fine with that one because I have teachers and staff and I kind of like to explore the school on my own
R: So, you wouldn't have been interested with that?
C: No.
[Donald]

Most conversants agreed with Donald and Francis' position, discussing the importance of practicing independence and 'figuring things out' for themselves, with some arguing that the support of a buddy might pose a barrier to their integration to secondary school. Dockett and Perry (2013) argue that utilising older students as buddies to support younger students has great benefit*, in the experience of educators,* regarding the promotion of leadership for older students and as a support mechanism for younger students, particularly at the point of transition to a new school. Indeed, it has been argued that young people are better placed to support each other through situations than adults as they can better relate to one another, and the power differential is narrower (e.g. Moensted 2022 and Creaney 2018). Lloyd-Rose (2017), however, discusses the importance of young people being given the space and opportunity to make mistakes, and that a healthy amount of 'struggle' is an important part of learning. It is important that children are encouraged to explore their environment, take risks and accept challenges (Pearce 2011) and external support, where it is not necessary, can impede development and progress (Price 2010, cited in Mazar et al. 2016). Support provided where it is desired, though, can positively impact on a child's wellbeing and development (Fingerman et al. 2012), lending weight to the importance of children's voice influencing practice.

4.5.4 Bridging the gap: What helped?

Conversants spoke of several things that they universally considered as being helpful in their transition from primary school to secondary school. Many of these things were centered around managing social hurdles, becoming familiar with the school site, and understanding what to expect. These are salient concerns under the Relatedness dimension of Alderfer's model. The practice of Secondary school teachers visiting primary schools pre-transition was unanimously cited as an important protective factor against a dip in wellbeing, as illustrated by Lynne's contribution:

> *C: I remember you coming to St Peter's.*
> *R: do you?*
> *C: yeah*
> *R: was that useful or not?*
> *C: Yes, it made me feel a lot less nervous because I knew who you were already*
> **[Lynne]**

Meeting just one secondary school teacher pre-transition meant that Lynne felt less nervous about the social hurdles she would have to navigate at transition, established as a source of anxiety for her. Thomas et al. (2016) found that often children's (and teachers') conceptualisation of their own wellbeing in school is contextualised within relationships between students and teachers (supported by the Relatedness dimension of Alderfer's model) and there is evidence to show that these relationships may be initially challenging to form for children when starting secondary school, where the adults hold positions of power (Tobbell and O'Donnell 2013). Meeting a secondary school teacher in the safety and familiarity of their primary school environment, surrounded by their current teachers, with whom she had well-developed relationships, facilitated, for Lynne, the development of the new teacher-student relationship in a more power-symmetric way. This research finds that the development of teacher-student relationships in the 'territory' of the student can be a way of staggering exposure to some of the sources of stress that children cite pre-transition.

Transition programmes are most often centered around primary school children visiting their

secondary school during Year Six as a way of familiarising themselves with teachers and the physical

layout of the school. The study school invites all prospective students to three induction days in the

summer of Year Six for this purpose. The restrictions put in place due to the Covid-19 pandemic

meant this was not possible for students in this cohort. A small group of students, identified due to

their SEND and/or Child in care status, were invited to visit the school for a tour and to meet some

adults in the school. Of the research participants, only two students were invited: Alice and Jen.

> *C: Erm… well…. I think it ...um… at the end of year 6, since I had a myplan I got to come and see the school.*
> *R: That's right, I remember.*
> *C: Erm… and I saw Grace there as well, who I'm now friends with.*
> *R: That's nice*
> *C: …but I didn't really make friends with them then.*
> *R: Yeah. Because that was more of a show you around, wasn't it?*
> *C: Yeah.*
> *R: Would you say that was useful?*
> *C: Yeah, I kind of forgot most of the school but...yeah*
> *R: So why do you think it was useful then?*
> *C: Erm….so like I knew what the classrooms looked like and where about they were*
> **[Alice]**

> *C: Once I came and I think you showed me and some other people around.*
> *R: Was that helpful do you think, to have come first? Would it have felt worse if you hadn't come and looked around?*
> *C: Yeah.*
> *R: Why was that helpful, do you think?*
> *C: So I *kind of* knew where some things were.*
> **[Jen]**

Both Alice and Jen felt that visiting the school before arriving in Year Seven was of benefit to them.

Whilst they acknowledge that they did not have a comprehensive understanding of the school site,

looking at the classrooms and being aware of the general makeup of the school was helpful, which

may have bolstered their wellbeing under the Existence and Relatedness dimensions of Alderfer's

model as they had a greater sense of familiarity with the school. This finding has the practice

implication that pre-transition school visits should form a central part of transition programmes

moving forwards.

Conversants shared that they felt less worried about secondary school when they had made friends, knew their way around and knew what was expected of them as secondary school students. This sense of social and physical familiarity is reflected in the following extracts:

> *R: by the end of the first day, where were you with regards to how you were feeling about coming to school?*
> *C: I felt that I know some of the places around school, it might be alright, I might have fun.*
> *R: Mhmm. So you felt a bit brighter about it?*
> *C: Yeah.*
> *R: And how long before you felt really comfortable, do you think? Until you thought 'this is going to be ok'?*
> *C: Maybe the second week?*
> *R: Ok! So quite quickly, really?*
> *C: Yeah.*
> *R: And what do you think helped you to feel like that?*
> *C: I don't know…. Maybe… like, my friends being around me. Like knowing where I had to go, because I had to plan out where I was going.* **[Lynne]**

> *R: So at the end of the first week, how were you feeling about secondary school, do you think?*
> *C: Not as worried as I was.*
> *R: Why was that?*
> *C: Because I had made friends, and I knew a bit of the way around school.* **[Jen]**

Here, Lynne and Jen emphasise the importance of forging new friendships and feeling comfortable with navigating the school site as markers for 'settling in' and a successful transition was likely. For Lynne and Jen, this happened within the first few weeks as their initial feelings of anxiety started to lessen. These findings align with much of the existing literature which claim that children are worried about getting lost whilst navigating a bigger school and about interpersonal relationships but go further in that all conversants described the overcoming of these concerns post-transition as having a positive impact on their wellbeing (under the Existence dimension of Alderfer's model), sense of school belonging and anxiety levels.

4.5.5 Onwards and upwards

Conversants shared their thoughts on how the transition process could be developed to support children more effectively. Unsurprisingly, their suggestions focussed on supporting them to overcome social hurdles, correlating with established pre-transition fears of strict and unkind teachers. There was a suggestion that meeting all teachers as soon as possible may be supportive:

> *C: So, it would have been quite helpful… like because in the hall, you did get to see a couple of the teachers, but just seeing all of the teachers before you went into lessons, that probably would have helped. Because then when you went to a classroom, you'd be like 'ah, this is..um…Mr A's class' or something.*
> **[Francis]**

Francis' above suggestion of meeting all social actors in the school would be simple to include in transition programmes and would be of benefit, particularly when considering that all conversants had anxiety around meeting new adults. An addition of Francis' suggestion to a transition programme may temper levels of anxiety and reinforce the Relatedness needs of children under the ERG model.

Some of the interventions that were put in place by the study school were cited as being effective, but conversants spoke of the benefit of extending these activities to support social interaction and relationship building and bolster wellbeing under the Relatedness dimension of Alderfer's model:

> **C:** So like I think it would be good if we did more ice breakers and got to know people a lot more. Because there's some people who everyone just doesn't like because they don't look a certain way. I feel like if they got to actually know them, they would like them a lot more. So, getting to know people and stuff. **[Lynne]**

> *C: Like… I guess in tutor. On the first day, maybe if everybody could say their name….
> or something…. And maybe something, a little bit about them.*
> *R: Mhmm*
> *C: Then you would know .. you'd think 'oh, they like football! I like football.' So yeah,
> you would see what you have in common with quite a lot of people.*
> *R: good idea. So that didn't happen in your tutor group on your first day?*
> *C: and that would also be quite helpful for the people from far away or something,
> cause then they actually …. Cause they probably… a lot of their friends did not go to
> Dillon Road. So they could …um… know… find out about new people.* **[Francis]**

Francis recognises the importance and value of ice-breaker activities to develop social interaction and group dynamics but, unfortunately, these activities were not completed with his group as they were with others. These interventions did not continue beyond the first day and although they may have been effective in the sense that children began to engage with more peers, Lynne seems to be touching on the idea that these interventions should have more longevity and may even contribute to the positive development of the social landscape of the year group and help build a sense of community. Interventions that aim to facilitate the development of peer relationships can have a wide-reaching impact on the social structure of a group of young people, supporting them to develop appropriate social skills (Allen et al. 2021) which turn help them to navigate social hurdles. The Relatedness dimension of Alderfer's model of motivation concerns a sense of connection to other individuals, meaning that wellbeing is bolstered by a sense of community cohesion and social security and so interventions of this type supported wellbeing in children during transition. Lynne and Francis confirmed that the activities completed had a positive impact within this dimension but feel that these could be extended to greater effect.

Several conversants suggested that there was merit in the simple act of offering reassurance that secondary school was a positive place and providing an alternative viewpoint from which older students would not look like the bullies they saw represented on the media:

> *C: Hmmm…. Not really, but….maybeeee….. like tell people not to worry about the
> year 11s, like, tell them that they're not that scary.* **[Mark]**

> *R: Mmmm So what could we have done, do you think, that would have been helpful… other than showing you the school?*
>
> *C: Well it wasn't your fault…. But because of Covid, and stuff, the days couldn't happen… whenever it was. That didn't help very much. Erm... and like... I dunno… Just being reassured that everything is going to be ok.* **[Alice]**

Mark and Alice felt that the main thing that would improve the experience of transition was the simple reassurance that everything would 'be ok' and that they shouldn't worry about older students being 'scary'. McMurtry et al. (2010) found that, during medical procedures, parental reassurance using generic phrases such as 'it's ok' increased the levels of distress experienced by a child, though this was found to be linked to the child's perception that the adult was fearful and, therefore, there was something for the child to be fearful of. However, whilst Carter et al. (2021) agree that generic platitudes are counterproductive, credible reassurance given by a professional, alongside positive relationship building developed a level of trust between adult and child, and had a positive effect on anxiety levels. This study finds that children transitioning from primary school to secondary school are likely to benefit from credible reassurance from secondary school teachers and students, alongside positive relationship building, to allay their anxieties.

4.5.6 Summary of theme four

Whilst participation in a transition programme was not possible for most students due to COVID-19 restrictions, conversants who were able to visit pre-transition felt that this was useful in preparing them for the change of school. They felt this made them worry less as they had a basic understanding of the layout and appearance of the school, highlighting the importance of this in future transition programmes. Conversants appreciated the emphasis on team-building and facilitation of friendships within a cohesive year group community as they started secondary school but felt that there would be benefit in this continuing beyond the initial period. This importance of this was underlined by some conversants who confirmed that secondary school staff visiting primary

schools pre-transition was helpful. This led to them feeling they knew some staff already, which strengthen their sense of social connection, and thus wellbeing under the Relatedness dimension of Alderfer's theory. The notion of social inclusion was emphasised when conversants shared their wellbeing increased once they had made friends and their Relatedness needs were more fulfilled. Conversants felt that meeting all secondary school staff on their first day, even if briefly in an assembly, would have helped to mitigate nervous feelings as they navigated the new experience of having a different teacher for each subject, therefore bolstering their wellbeing.

All conversants recognised the potential benefit of having an older student to act as a buddy, to support them in managing the unspoken social and procedural expectations within the student body. Whilst some conversants said they would have appreciated this as they started secondary school, others felt that this could be counterproductive and extend the transition period for them. These conversants felt they would prefer to navigate these challenges without this support, citing an opportunity to become independent and confident. This data challenges current practice that utilises a buddy system as universally positive intervention.

As a way of managing pre-transition anxiety, discussing their emotions with a parent/carer, or other trusted adult, was important to my conversants and there is evidence to suggest that those who do not have these opportunities are disadvantaged. Examples could include children who are in the care of the local authority, who often have greater difficulty in forming and maintaining trusting relationships, and those supported by a social worker who may have a lack of this support at home. Some conversants shared that they had chosen to disclose feelings of worry and anxiety to adults, with conversations with peers centering around positive new experiences. Whilst conversants felt that greater levels of credible reassurance, particularly that older students would not be unkind, would improve the transition experience for future students, the analysis of the data in Theme Four

makes the distinction between support given by schoolteachers and existing students, and how one may be more credible to children than the other.

Getting lost was a significant concern for conversants pre-transition. Theme Four reveals that conversants felt they were effectively facilitated to quickly learn the layout of the new site which they cited as an important benchmark for 'successful transition'. Conversants expressed their appreciation of the fact that they were the only year group on site on their first day, with other year groups starting the school year the day after. This acted as a stepping-stone into the secondary school, as new students were not too overwhelmed and had time to become more familiar with the site and to complete logistical firsts, such as visiting the canteen for the first time, in a less populated school.

The figure overleaf draws together the analysis of theme four through the lens of Alderfer's ERG model, illustrating the key findings and how they relate to recommendations for practice (fig. 33):

Alderfer's model of motivation	Conceptual questions	Key Findings	Recommendations for practice
Existence Needs	**Am I Safe?**	- Year 7 students only on the first day was helpful in allaying anxiety - My parents talking to me about Secondary School helped - Meeting Secondary School staff prior to transition helped - Finding my way around school meant successful transition - Visiting ahead of Year Seven helped	1. Transition programmes should focus on social transition 2. Facilitate familiarisation with the new school site 6. Provide safe spaces in school **9.** Engage with parents and carers **10.** Support children to develop their social skills **12.** Provide a stepping stone at the point of transition **15.** Reduce the social unknown of Secondary School **16.** Enhanced Transition programmes
Relatedness needs	**Am I Valued?**	- Year 7 students only on the first day was helpful in allaying anxiety - My parents talking to me about secondary school helped - A buddy would have been useful - A buddy would have held me back - Meeting Secondary School staff prior to transition helped - Making friends meant successful transition - Meeting all staff straight away would have helped - Ice breaker activities helped us get to know new people - Reassurance that things would be ok, would help	1. Transition programmes should focus on social transition 3. Reassure transitioning children 7. Provide safe spaces in school **9.** Engage with parents and carers **10.** Support children to develop their social skills **13.** Consider the individual needs of transitioning children
Growth needs	**Am I happy?**	- A buddy would have been useful - A buddy would have held me back - Finding my way around school meant successful transition - Making friends meant successful transition - Overcoming challenges was positive - Reassurance that things would be ok, would help	1. Transition programmes should focus on social transition 2. Facilitate familiarisation with the new school site 3. Reassure transitioning children 8. Provide a framework for meaningful student voice work **10.** Support children to develop their social skills **11.** Enhanced Transition programmes **13.** Consider the individual needs of transitioning children

Fig. 33 – Theme four refinement of Alderfer's ERG Model (1969) in the context of facilitating successful transition

4.6 Revisiting Alderfer: a model for transition

When exploring models of wellbeing in the literature review chapter, I explored the use of Alderfer's ERG model (see 2.2.4.2). The ERG in comparison with Maslow's hierarchy of needs is presented here again for convenience:
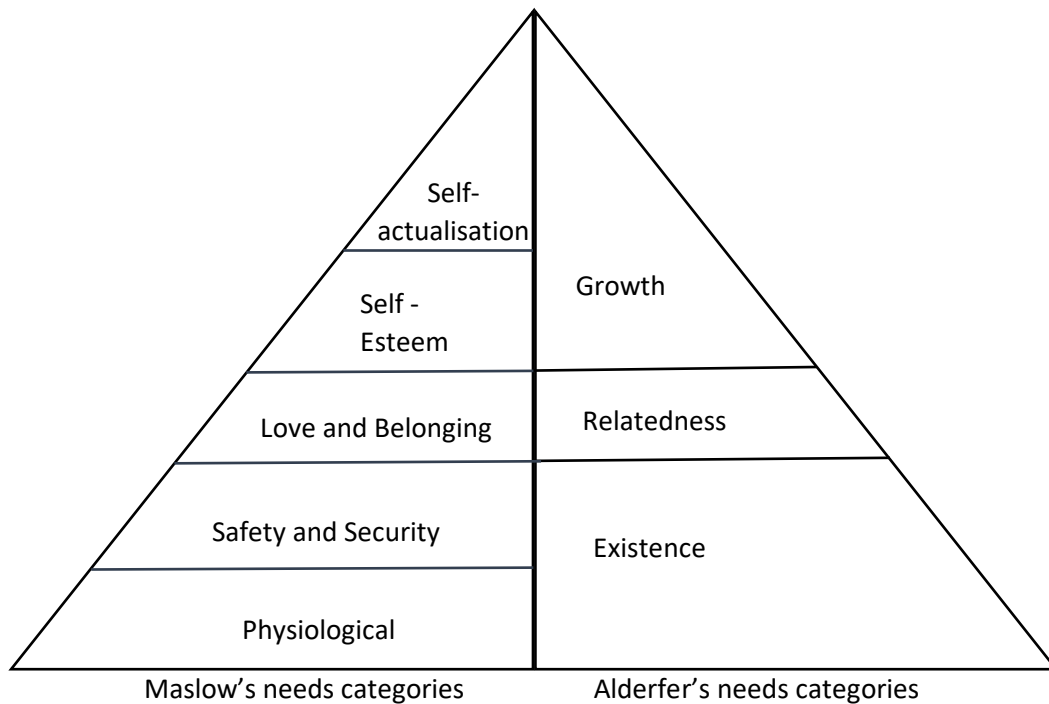
The findings of this research indicate that when children transition from primary school to secondary school, symptoms of stress and anxiety can be caused by social stressors. Developing feelings of positive self-esteem and resilience can be protective factors against declining wellbeing in children at this time. There may be benefit in transition programmes being created, or reviewed, through the lens of this model as a way of supporting children with pre-transition anxiety and in managing the challenges they face on moving to secondary school. Figure 34 is a final summary of how Alderfer's ERG model has been used as a lens through which to analyse the data, generating a refinement of the model relating specifically to transition from primary school to secondary school. The recommendations for practice are expanded upon in 5.4.

Alderfer's model of motivation	Conceptual questions	Links to Recommendations for Practice	
Existence Needs *(Food, water, shelter, clothing, security)*	**Am I Safe?**	**1** – Transition programmes should focus on social transition **2** - Facilitate familiarisation with the new school site. **3** - Reassure transitioning children. **4** - Transition programmes should begin in Year Five. **5** – Consider a sense of Primary School loss **6** - Provide safe spaces in school. **7** - Provide a framework for meaningful student voice work. **8** - Consider the power of social media. **9** - Engage with parents and carers. **10** – Support children to develop their social skills	**12** - Provide a stepping stone at the point of transition. **14** - Consider those who come alone. **15** – Reduce the social unknown of Secondary School **16** - Enhanced Transition programmes **17** – Curriculum collaboration
Relatedness needs *(Friendship, family, intimacy, sense of connection to other individuals)*	**Am I Valued?**	**1** - Transition programmes should focus on social transition **2** - Facilitate familiarisation with the new school site. **3** - Reassure transitioning children. **4** - Transition programmes should begin in Year Five. **5** - Consider a sense of primary school loss. **6**- Provide safe spaces in school. **7** - Provide a framework for meaningful student voice work. **8** – Consider the power of social media when designing transition programmes **9** - Engage with parents and carers. **10** – Support children to develop their social skills	**11** - Support students to navigate new expectations. **13** – Consider the individual needs of transitioning children **14** - Consider those who come alone. **15** - Reduce the social unknown of Secondary School **16** - Enhanced Transition programmes
Growth needs *(Confidence, achievement, respect of others, the need to be a unique individual)*	**Am I happy?**	**1** - Transition programmes should focus on social transition **2** - Facilitate familiarisation with the school site. **3** - Reassure transitioning children. **4** - Transition programmes should begin in Year Five. **5** – Consider a sense of Primary School loss **7** - Provide a framework for meaningful student voice work **8** – Consider the power of social media when designing transition programmes **9** - Engage with parents and carers.	**10** – Support children to develop their social skills **11** - Support students to navigate new expectations. **13** – Consider the individual needs of transitioning children **16** - Enhanced Transition. **17** - Curriculum collaboration.

Fig 34. Refinement of Alderfer's(1969) ERG Model in the Context of Facilitating Successful Transition

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

5.1 Reflecting on the study

This study utilised a qualitative enquiry approach to elicit the perspectives of children about their wellbeing as they transitioned from primary school to secondary school. The literature review of this thesis established that existing transition research is dominated by large scale quantitative enquiry and the voice of the child lacks amplification. Research conversations were used as a more accessible research tool for children, which allowed them to dictate the direction of conversation to topics most important to them, thus addressing the power imbalance between researcher and conversant. I subsequently designed multi-literacy research conversations as a new way of amplifying the voice of the child and gaining their unique perspectives on their experience of transition. This included photo and video-elicitation, metaphor sort technique and a research conversation. The data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis using guidelines put forward by Braun and Clarke (2021).

The data in this study was collected during the Covid-19 pandemic. Whilst this research is not a pandemic study, that is a study of Covid-19, it is likely that conversants, their parents/carers and teachers experienced some anxiety due to its prevalence at the time. The transition from Primary School to Secondary School that my conversants experienced, was normal for them at that time as they had not experienced a transition outside of the influences of Covid-19. Whilst Covid likely generated some contextual anxiety, conversants did not reference it as a direct stimulus for their anxieties, only mentioning it in the context of missing transition programmes and other pre-transition activities. Whilst the pandemic had significant implications for this transition period before the point of transition, restrictions had little impact on the normal working of the school day once conversants had started secondary school, meaning that their experiences were comparable with other cohorts from this point.

5.2 Returning to the research questions

This study addresses the three research questions that were established at the outset.

1) How do young people perceive the impact of the transition period on their wellbeing, and why?

Young people perceive transition to be an emotional, exciting, and potentially unsettling time. They recognise that secondary school brings with it a change in social culture, a raising of expectations and are keen to develop a sense of belonging.

Conversants in this study cited an array of different emotions as they discussed their transition from primary to secondary school during the 2020-2021 transition period. Feelings of anxiety and worry were common, with all conversants citing social stressors as the most significant source of anxiety. Many were anxious about meeting new peers and developing new friendships, worrying that they would find this challenging and be socially isolated. Some were affected by the loss of close primary school friends, where these friends had elected to attend different secondary schools than the conversant. Many conversants characterised older students as bigger and in possession of more physical and social power than themselves. This led to many conversants worrying about the potential of peer victimisation, particularly from older students, prior to the point of transition. Other sources of anxiety include navigating a bigger site and fearing getting lost, fear of unkind/strict teachers, and greater academic expectations.

Current transition research generally focusses on the transition to secondary school and how staff at secondary schools can support students to adjust to their new setting. This includes transition programmes that aim to bridge the academic gap and familiarisation visits for prospective students. Many conversants challenged this position, discussing the notion of transition from a different perspective; that of a sense of loss and potential bereavement at leaving primary school. This perspective is rarely represented in current literature and illuminated a need for change in practice whilst generating a key area for further research. All conversants discussed positive feelings of attachment and belonging to their primary school, both the physical place and the interpersonal relationships that had with teachers there. This was coupled with an anxiety that new teachers might be strict and unkind.

Feelings of excitement and joy were widely discussed too, with conversants excited to engage with new learning and to meet new friends, which bolstered their feelings of wellbeing. Some discussed that new experiences were exciting to them, so they were happy to start a new school with greater opportunities which may be linked to the known narrowing of the curriculum at the end of primary school, with a heavy emphasis on core subjects, likely due to formal assessment at the end of key stage two. This led to conversants looking forward to a broader curriculum, greater curriculum time for foundation subjects such as Art and Geography, and the new learning opportunities this would bring. Many conversants experienced anxiety and anticipation concurrently and, where this was the case, were likely to be affected most by their strongest emotion highlighting the importance of reducing feelings of stress and anxiety during the transition period.

Conversants acknowledged that transitioning from a smaller primary school, or transitioning alone, heightened these emotions. Some chose to hide their emotions, preferring to repress any negative feelings and 'get on with it', whilst others struggled to articulate, or share, their emotions. These conversants benefitted from my development of multi-literacy research conversations. This was a new approach which gave a scaffold that conversants could use to discuss their emotions and experiences which revealed negative or confusing emotions. This new approach capitalised on photo and video elicitation and the use of metaphor sort technique using emojis, heralded as a way that young people use to express their emotions on a daily basis, followed by a research conversation. This was of benefit to all conversants, not just those whose emotional literacy seemed to have a deficit, whose emotional narrative was enriched by the use of this approach.

When conversants shared feelings of anxiety prior to the point of transition, they universally shared that these feelings subsided quickly after joining secondary school. Conversants linked the reduction of anxiety with a sense of school belonging, feeling familiar with the school site and the successful navigation of the perceived social stressors; making friends and experiencing that older students and staff were not unkind, as they had feared. All conversants had a significant reduction in any feelings of anxiety by Christmas, two terms after joining secondary school, at which point they felt they had 'settled in'.

2) How do young people's perceptions of their wellbeing related to the transition period change over time, and why?

Before the point of transition, at the end of primary school, young people have a conceptualisation of what they think secondary school will be like based on several stimuli, which can affect their wellbeing. This study finds that children begin to consider their transition to secondary school as early as year five which, for some, may be when feelings of worry begin. Levels of worry and anxiety gradually increase and climax at the point of transition, before reducing thereafter.

The representation of Secondary school on Film, TV and social media informs this conceptualisation. Conversants disclosed that they had seen Films and TV shows that feature representations of secondary school that warned of bullies, strict teachers and a chaotic environment that led to traumatised year seven students. One conversant shared watching a film that showed a child being killed in a film which they found significantly increased feelings of nervousness about transition. Some participants felt that this had an impact on how they were feeling about moving to secondary school, citing increasing feelings of nervousness and stress. Participants shared that representations of Secondary school on social media could be helpful, if they were informative videos or shared stories of positive transition, but often they featured horror stories painting secondary school as an intimidating and, sometimes, dangerous environment. No conversants confirmed that they had viewed any of the school-produced YouTube content which was designed to support their transition. Age recommendations on social media means that it would have been inappropriate for the school to market these directly at prospective students, so they were signposted to parents. This raised the notion of parental engagement and support at transition and how parents could be facilitated to more effectively support their children, particularly as many conversants recognised the useful support they had received from their parents.

A feeling of insecurity was also talked about, with participants noting that a lack of knowledge and familiarity of the new environment was challenging. From worries of getting lost, which are widely cited in the literature, to the perceived pressure of having to grow up, grieving their time at primary school and not feeling ready for secondary school, which are not. The transition to secondary school corresponds with the onset of puberty and development into adolescence, as such some conversants considered the transition to secondary school as a marker of the end of their childhood,

considering the transition into a teenager as one that brought greater responsibility, less fun and more stress. When these two transitions coincide, there is a greater threat to the wellbeing of children. Some conversants shared anxiety around growing up and having a greater existential awareness.

Participants felt that it was only after the point of transition that these concerns began to dissipate. Their conceptualisations were challenged, horror stories exposed as untrue as they began to experience secondary school for themselves. Participants cited familiarity with the site, and the support of staff and older students as important in this regard and acknowledged that a sense of belonging to the new school is important.

Participants experienced worry and stress in increasing amounts, peaking on the morning of the first day of school. All participants reported that transitioning to secondary school was better than they feared or expected and that their levels of anxiety quickly subsided. This study challenges the current literature that positions transition from the point of transition (the first day of secondary school) onwards. This data presents a new, contrasting way to conceptualise this timeframe which illustrates that for some of my participants, transition began as early as year five. This new conceptualisation is reproduced overleaf for convenience.
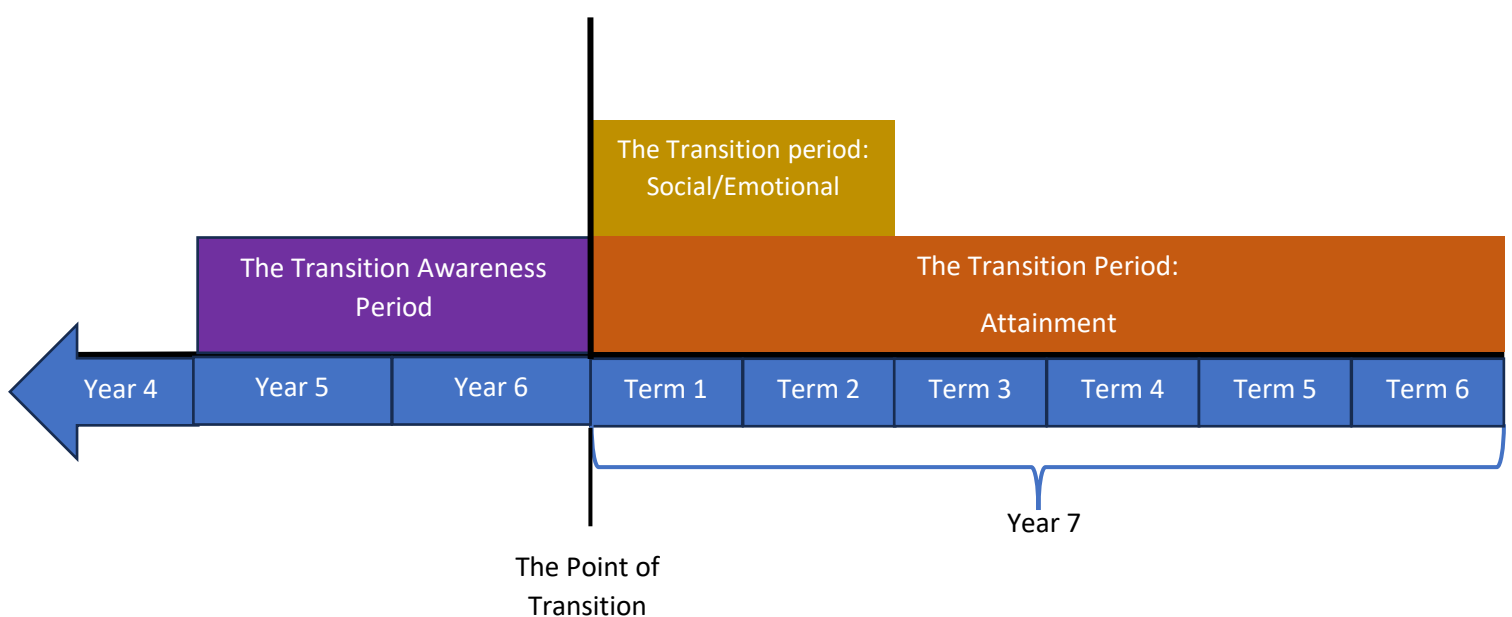
Some children start to think about transition in year five and their anxiety increases as the point of transition approaches. Once young people start secondary school, this study finds that their anxieties are quickly abated meaning that there is benefit in the development of a transition programme that bridges year 5 to year 7. This new conceptualisation develops the current understanding of the transition period and has significant implications for practice.

3) What do children tell us about their experience of transition and how we should manage the process?

Traditional transition processes focus on the perspective of moving to secondary school. This research finds that there would be benefit in an increase of the perspective of leaving primary school, and the associated sense of loss and grief that can exist. All conversants talked fondly about primary school and shared feelings of loss of the institution and interpersonal relationships that they left behind. Greater work should be completed to support children in managing this sense of loss as they progress on to the next stage in their learning journey.

Conversants had useful things to say about how to improve transition programmes moving forward. They cited aspects of the existing programme that work well, including teambuilding activities, visiting before they started (though not many could) and transition booklets that contained tasks linked to their first lesson in a series of subjects.

Participants acknowledged the importance of social support, be that from parents and carers, friends or teachers, but there was division over the perceived effectiveness of the introduction of a buddy system. This would be an opportunity for year seven students to be buddied with an older student who would be then available to guide them through their first year at secondary school. Some students felt this would be helpful, that older students would be more approachable than members of staff and some highlighted their feeling that a buddy would hinder their independence and confidence; they preferred to find their own way. Benefitting from support from a buddy was evidently a personal perspective and where conversants felt this would be useful, it invariable came with caveats that they wanted this support on their own terms, not as an imposed intervention.

All felt that the staggered start to the school year, opening the school to Year seven only on the first day, and secondary school staff visiting primary schools was important to continue. Establishing a clear, new routine made participants feel secure as they were able to predict what would happen at any given point in the day. Conversants broadly agreed that meeting all staff as early as possible would be helpful as they were worried that teachers would be strict and unkind but realised that when they met their new teachers, they were kind and helpful. Being introduced to all staff on their first day would moderate the feelings of anxiety that fill the first two weeks, as students complete their first full timetable cycle and meet all their new teachers. Some students requested support with making new friends and perceived those peers with difficult home lives found transition more difficult than others. Participants felt that a greater level of reassurance to provide alternative viewpoints, particularly relating to anxieties that older students would be unkind, would improve the transition experience.

<u>**5.3 Contributions to knowledge**</u>

The findings of this research make new contributions to knowledge in the field of transition research.

1) **The boundaries of the transition period -** Current transition research explores the impact of transition on children from the point of transition onwards. The existing conceptualisation of the transition period is from the point of transition until the end of term two (for social emotional transition) and term 6 (academic/attainment transition). This research challenges this conceptualisation, instead finding that for some children transition can begin as early as year five.

2) **Children perceive transition from a distinct perspective to adults –** Current transition literature focuses on the transition *to* secondary school. This research finds that children equally perceive transition from the perspective of leaving primary school, or the transition *from* primary school, citing feelings of loss. When children were asked why they did not want to come to secondary school, their answers were concerned with not wishing to leave primary school.

3) **The impact of the media** – This research finds that children's perception of secondary school, prior to the point of transition, is informed by material they view on social media, in films and on television. Negative imagery relating to secondary school can increase feelings of anxiety and worry.

4) **Transitioning alone** – This research finds that children transitioning to secondary school as the lone representative of their primary school might find this transition more challenging. This is due to the lack of peer support, which can act as a buffer for feelings of worry.

5) **Multi-Literacy Research Conversations** – This research finds that the use of three-phase Multi-literacy Research Conversations facilitates the authentic co-constructed voice of the child in research.

6) **Alderfer's ERG model for transition –** Alderfer's ERG model of motivation was conceptualised for the transition period during this study.

<u>**5.4 Recommendations for practice**</u>

The findings of this research have implications for professional practice, outlined hereafter.

1) **Schools should focus on social transition** – The findings of this research suggest 'social stressors' is the prevalent issue in the minds of children transitioning from primary to secondary school. Transition programmes should focus primarily on the development of positive interpersonal relationships between transitioning children, and staff and students at the secondary school to offer alternative viewpoints to the negative preconceptions that may exist.

2) **Facilitate familiarisation with the school site –** This research found that navigating the larger environment of secondary school was a significant source of anxiety for transitioning children. School staff should consider ways in which transitioning children can become more quickly familiar with the school site, including visiting the school prior to starting in Year 7. This may be a way of abating some of the fears and anxiety experiences by children, as some of the unknowns of secondary school and then known. Opening the school solely to Year 7 students on the first day may be advantageous in this regard.

3) **Reassure transitioning children –** The children in this student highlighted the importance of being reassured by professionals during the transition period. Students should be reassured that specific worries that they have are not likely to happen. This does not mean generic platitudes but credible reassurances, communicated by secondary school staff and students prior to the point of transition, to provide alternative viewpoints to sources of anxiety.

4) **Transition programmes should begin in year five –** This research found that the transition period can begin in year five for some children. Secondary school transition managers should consider ways in which they can begin to engage with children from year five, facilitating the building of relationships with secondary school staff and students. This will ensure a more effective transition, bespoke to individual cohorts of young people.

5) **Consider a sense of primary school loss –** The data in the research illustrates that children experience a sense of loss when leaving primary school. Work should be completed by primary and secondary school staff to support children from the perspective of leaving primary school and the subsequent sense of loss and grief they may experience.

6) **Provide safe spaces in school –** This research highlighted the importance of the counselling role that parents and carers play for transitioning children. Primary school staff should identify children that may be from families where parental support is not forthcoming and provide 1:1 or small group spaces for children to discuss their transition worries in school.

7) **Provide a framework for meaningful student voice work –** This research demonstrates that the traditional interview can feel like an interrogation to children and is not an effective way to elicit their authentic voice. Practitioners completing student voice activities, or otherwise attempting to gain the voice of the child, should consider employing strategies that avoid a traditional interview format, such as multi-literacy research conversations so the voice of the child can effectively inform policy and practice.

8) **Consider the power of social media** – Children in this research highlighted that their anxieties were partially fuelled by negative representations of secondary school on social media, and on television and video games. Education professionals should utilise social media to engage with children and families prior to the point of transition to provide positive alternative viewpoints, particularly platforms that young people engage with. Sharing positive stories of transition from existing students may be particularly effective in extending transition programmes beyond the days children physically spend in school, to online platforms.

9) **Engage with parents and carers** – Children in this study highlighted the importance of the support they received from parents and carers. Education professionals should consider ways in which they can share information and strategies with parents and carers, empowering them to support their children most effectively through transition.

10) **Develop social skills –** Children in this research felt that worried around making friends were significant during the transition period and suggested that school staff could do more to support them in this area. Educational professionals should consider how they can support children to develop the social skills to engage with new peers as they transition. This might include secondary school students visiting primary school settings to discuss their experiences and to begin to forge relationships.

11) **Support students to navigate new expectations –** This research found that children found the change in social expectations challenging as they moved from primary to secondary school. Secondary school staff should ensure that children are given clear information as they encounter new experiences at secondary school so as to quickly embed new routines that encourage feelings of safety and security. This may involve each teacher explaining their expectations at the beginning of their first lesson and explaining to children how to navigate the canteen and social times.

12) **Provide a stepping stone at the point of transition** - The children in this study all shared that they appreciated being the only year group in school on their first day at secondary school. This practice should be included in transition programmes.

13) **Consider the individual needs of transitioning children** – This data found that the use of older students acting as 'buddies' should not be imposed on transitioning children as some would prefer for this not to happen. Some children felt that this limited their independence and would be counterproductive in them feeling confident at secondary school. An opt-in programme alongside 'student guardians' who are identified and trained to support new students if approached, would be better received by some.

14) **Consider those who come alone** – This research highlighted that levels of anxiety in transitioning children are bolstered by their existing friends. Those who transition without this level of support may find the transition more difficult. Secondary schools should facilitate the forming of friendships for children who are the only member of their primary school to have come to their secondary school.

15) **Reduce the social unknown –** This research found that children are worried about meeting their new teachers when the move to secondary school. As many secondary school staff should be introduced to new students as soon as possible, this may happen briefly in a welcome assembly, or through social media.

16) **Enhanced Transition** – This research found that children who have additional need, and those who experience higher levels of anxiety, and particularly social anxiety, find the transition to secondary school more challenging. Primary and Secondary school transition managers should work collaboratively to identify children who may benefit from an enhanced transition programme involving additional visits to secondary school and structured environments in which to make connections with future classmates and school staff, supported by their existing teachers.

17) **Curriculum collaboration** – Conversants in this research discussed the significant differences between teaching content and approach in primary and secondary school which contributed to feelings of anxiety as they were unsure of what to expect. There is value in school leaders making time for primary and secondary school staff to meet to facilitate a greater shared understanding of teaching and learning approaches across Key Stage Two and Three, and how children can be supported with this change in approach.

5.5 Recommendations for further research

Further research is required to establish:

1) **The perspective of transition from the perspective of leaving primary school, as opposed to joining secondary school –** Existing literature considers transition from the moment students arrive at secondary school and how this affects young people. This research highlighted that children can experience a sense of loss as they leave primary school and that the transition period can begin in Year 5 for some. There would be merit in researching transition from the perspective of leaving primary school to gain an understand as to how children in Years 5 and 6 are affected by transition, and to explore effective interventions.

2) **Harnessing the support of parents and carers –** This research found that transitioning children benefit from the emotional support provided by their parents/carers. How might parents and carers be empowered to support their children more effectively throughout transition? How could the parental transition from Primary to Secondary school be further understood, so as to facilitate greater parental engagement with secondary schools?

3) **Peer support during transition –** Some participants in this research could see the value in being 'buddied up' with an older student as they joined secondary school, but the majority felt this might hinder their independence and be counterproductive. This highlighted the need for peer support to be 'opt-in' for most children during transition. How might the notion of a voluntary 'student guardianship' programme support transitioning children?

4) **School presence on social media** – This research found that negative imagery of secondary school on social media can increase feelings of anxiety prior to the point of transition . The need for schools to challenge these viewpoints with positive representations was raised. There would be merit in exploring how schools can utilise social media to support transition and the impact that social media has on transitioning children.

5) **Social integration activities –** Conversants in this research universally felt that social stressors were their salient concern, which highlighted a need for transition programmes to focus on social transition. There would be value in researching effective interventions to support social integration during the primary to secondary school transition period.

6) **Peer or teacher reassurance? -** The children in this research felt that more reassurance that 'everything would be ok' at secondary school would be helpful. Some conversants also cited viewing stories of positive transition from older students useful. There is merit in exploring whether children consider reassurance given by teachers or older students more credible during transition, as this may inform a refined practice on this matter.

7) **Positive impacts of transition stress** - Does overcoming the challenges of primary to secondary school transition drive a development of self-esteem, confidence and feelings of wellbeing?

5.6 Limitations

I bring a wealth of professional experience to this research that have influenced the deployment of research activities and subsequent analysis of data. Whilst subjectivity is emphasised as a resource within the analysis of data in this research, other researchers may identify themes and concepts as more dominant than others.

This study relies on self-reported data from my conversants which could contain bias due to Selective memory, Telescoping and Exaggeration. Whilst this may limit the study in some ways, the aim of the research was to procure the authentic voice of the child which, by definition, leads to self-reported data.

A convenience sample of seven children was used in this research. The case study methodology of this research offers a unique window into the experiences of children transitioning to secondary school in 2021 and does not claim generalisability. This mean that the findings are specific to this time and context, so they may not apply to other settings or periods. This research could be developed by including a larger sample of conversants that are more representative of the population to explore the validity of findings.

The fact that participants were aware that they were involved in research may have influenced their contributions.

5.7 – Dissemination Strategy

The purpose of this research was to establish children's perspectives of their wellbeing as they transition from primary to secondary school. Initially, I will seek to disseminate the findings across the Multi Academy Trust (MAT), to which the study school belongs. A presentation of the findings will be made to senior leaders and transition managers in both primary and secondary school across the trust, which will focus on the transition period and theoretical lens which has been developed. This will support practitioners across both phases to view transition as an important matter for all. Primary school colleagues will be empowered with the knowledge that students have feelings of loss and grief as they leave primary school, and so could develop strategies and interventions that support children to manage these. Secondary colleagues would benefit from this knowledge, but also that of the experiences of transitioning young people, which could positively impact their practice when working with Year Seven students.

Beyond the MAT, our Local Authority coordinates associations of Primary School, and Secondary School Headteachers who meet once per term. A presentation to the members of these associations will provide the knowledge that transition is an important issue for all working in education and empower them to develop effective transition programmes in their settings. Primary school leaders will have a greater understanding of the experiences of loss and grief that leaving primary school can present and develop setting-, and cohort-specific strategies to support young people during this time. There are also opportunities to generate discussion around the facilitation of co-constructed student voice, something valued in education, to inform School improvement and the development of student experience, through multi-literacy research conversations.

By liaising with Initial Teacher Training (ITT) providers to gain dissemination opportunities as part of the ITT programme, the next generation of classroom practitioners and school leaders could enter the workforce with a more holistic understanding of children's experience of the education journey from primary to secondary school and be able to hone their craft with the voices of young people at the centre.

The development of multi-literacy research conversations is important to share through publication in research methodology journals. This aspect of the thesis could be reworked and published in publications such as 'the international journal of social research methodology', 'the international journal of qualitative methods' and 'children and society'. This dissemination adds relevant

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knowledge to the development of research with children, and facilitating their authentic, co-constructed voice.

The findings of this research constitute new knowledge in the field of transition research. The development of the transition period and theoretical lens for transition, my conversants experiences of transition and discussion of the insider-outsider research positioning could be disseminated through publications such as 'The Journal of Pastoral Care in Education' and 'Frontiers in Education'. The findings of this research could also be relevant to those working and researching in countries with similar education systems such as Australia, The Netherlands and New Zealand where conversations relating to transition are ongoing. As such, the publication of findings in journals such as 'The European Journal of Education' and 'The international Journal of Educational Research' may also be appropriate.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 – Participant Information Sheet

Student Research Participant Information Sheet

Children's Perspectives of their Wellbeing During the Transition from Primary School to Secondary School.

You are invited to take part in research taking place at the University of the West of England, Bristol. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why the study is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and if you have any questions or would like more information please contact Peter Dillon, Faculty of ACE, University of the West of England, Bristol [Peter2.Dillon@live.uwe.ac.uk].

Who is organising the research?

The project lead is Mr Peter Dillon. The director of studies is Dr Dean Smart and Second supervisor Dr Ciaran Burke.

What is the aim of the research?

The research is looking at how young people experience the transition from Key Stage Two, to Key Stage Three, with regards to their emotional wellbeing. Our research questions are:

1. How and why do students perceive the impact of the transition process on their wellbeing?
2. How and why does student perception change over time?
3. How and why is transition managed in two other schools in the Multi Academy Trust?
4. How do staff in my setting perceive the impact of the transition process on student wellbeing?
5. How can future transition programmes be designed to prioritise the wellbeing of students?

To help us answer these questions we will be asking students to take part in a survey observations and interviews. The aim will be to collect information to inform our research. All information will be made anonymous.

The results of our study will be analysed and used in a report made available on the University of the West of England's open-access repository. The anonymised results may also be used in conference papers and peer-reviewed academic papers.

Why have I been invited to take part?

As a young person making the transition from Year Six to Seven, we are interested in gaining information about your experience so the survey, observations and interviews will focus on

these things. The purpose of the activities will be to gain information about your experience and views so that we can improve transition in the future.

Do I have to take part?

You do not have to take part in this research. It is up to you to decide whether or not you want to be involved. If you do decide to take part, you will be given a copy of this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign a consent form. If you do decide to take part, you are able to withdraw from the research without giving a reason until the point at which your data is anonymised and can therefore no longer be traced back to you. This anonymisation will take place 6 months from the date you signed your consent form. If you want to withdraw from the study within this period, please write to Peter Dillon, Faculty of ACE, University of the West of England, Bristol. Or email Peter2.Dillon@live.uwe.ac.uk. Deciding not to take part or to withdrawal from the study does not have any penalty.

What will happen to me if I take part and what do I have to do?

If you agree to take part, you will be asked to complete a survey and take part in observations and interviews. This will be conducted by Peter Dillon. The team are all experienced in the subject matter and are sensitive to issues it may raise. The interviews will take approximately 30 minutes. The interviews will take place at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or, in the case of Covid-19 restrictions, over Microsoft Teams. Your interview will be recorded on a voice recorder, but the recordings will not contain your name. A unique identifier will be used to re-identify you if you choose to withdraw from the study within the period. At the point of transcription, your recordings will be deleted. Your data will be anonymised at this point and will be analysed with interview data from other anonymised participants. The subject and focus of the discussion will be transitioning from Year 6 to Year 7. Your answers will be fully anonymised.

Observations will be completed over two days in July and October and will be recorded. The observations will focus on social interactions of the year group as a whole, during the school day. Observations and recordings therefore will be non-obtrusive; not focussing on individual students and will be stored on a secure server. At the point of transcription, all recordings will be deleted. Your data will be anonymised at this point and will be analysed with observation data from other anonymised participants.

What are the benefits of taking part?

If you take part, you will be helping us to gain a better understanding of the experiences young people have when they transition from primary to secondary school and will be helping us to develop strategies that could improve this transition for others in the future.

What are the possible risks of taking part?

We do not foresee or anticipate any significant risk to you in taking part in this study. If, however, you feel uncomfortable at any time you can ask for the survey, interview and/or observation to stop without giving a reason. If you need any support during or after the research, then the researchers will be able to put you in touch with suitable support agencies.

The research team are experienced in working in education and are sensitive to the subject area. The interviews have been designed with these considerations in mind.

What will happen to your information?

All the information we receive from you will be treated in the strictest confidence.

All the information that you give will be kept confidential and anonymised by December 2021. The only circumstance where we may not be able to keep your information confidential is if you communicated something that made us concerned for your welfare, or that of others; we then have a Safeguarding and Child Protection duty to pass this on, to ensure you and others are kept safe. Any hard copy research materials will be kept in a locked and secure filing cabinet to which only the researchers will have access in accordance with the University's and the Data Protection Act 2018 and General Data Protection Regulation requirements. Voice recordings will be destroyed securely immediately after anonymised transcription. Your anonymised data will be analysed together with other interview and file data, and we will ensure that there is no possibility of identification or re-identification from this point. All other data will be destroyed following publication of the final report.

Where will the results of the research study be published?

A Report will be written containing our research findings. This Report will be available on the University of the West of England's open-access Research Repository.

A hard copy of the Report will be made available to all research participants if you would like to see it. Key findings will also be shared both within and outside the University of the West of England and the Athelstan Trust. Anonymous and non-identifying direct quotes may be used for publication and presentation purposes.

Who has ethically approved this research?

The project has been reviewed and approved by The University of the West of England University Research Ethics Sub Committee. Any comments, questions or complaints about the ethical conduct of this study can be addressed to the Research Ethics Committee at the University of the West of England at:

Researchethics@uwe.ac.uk

What if something goes wrong?

It is important that you are able to raise any concerns, queries and/or complaints that you might have. Please contact Peter Dillon – Lead Researcher, Dean Smart – Director of Studies, or the University of the West of England Ethics committee below:

Peter Dillon, Lead Researcher - Faculty of ACE, University of the West of England, Bristol
Peter2.Dillon@live.uwe.ac.uk

Dean Smart, Director of Studies – Dean.Smart@uwe.ac.uk

UWE Ethics committee - Researchethics@uwe.ac.uk

What if I have more questions or do not understand something?

If you would like any further information about the research, please contact in the first instance:

Peter Dillon

Faculty of ACE

The University of the West of England

Bristol

Peter2.Dillon@live.uwe.ac.uk

> Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study.
>
> You will be given a copy of this Participant Information Sheet and your signed Consent Form to keep.

Appendix 2 – Research Consent Form

Parent and Student Research Consent Form

Children's Perspectives of Their Wellbeing During the Transition from Primary School to Secondary School

This consent form will have been given to you with the Participant Information Sheet. Please ensure that you have read and understood the information contained in the Participant Information Sheet and asked any questions before you sign this form. If you have any questions please contact a member of the research team, whose details are set out on the Participant Information Sheet

If you are happy to take part in surveys, observations and interviews as part of this research, please sign and date the form. You will be given a copy to keep for your records.

- I have read and understood the information in the Participant Information Sheet which I have been given to read before asked to sign this form;
- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the study;
- I have had my questions answered satisfactorily by the research team;
- I agree that anonymised quotes may be used in the final Report of this study;
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time until the data has been anonymised, without giving a reason;
- I agree to take part in the research

Participant Name (Printed)……………………………………………………………………………

Participant signature…………………………………………………….Date…………………….

Parent/Carer Signature*……………………………………………. Date…………………….

Parent/Carer Name* (Printed)………………………………………………….................

Parent/Carer Signature*……………………………………………. Date…………………….

if participant is aged under 18 Years, parental consent is also required.

Appendix 3 – Emojis used in multi-literacy research conversations

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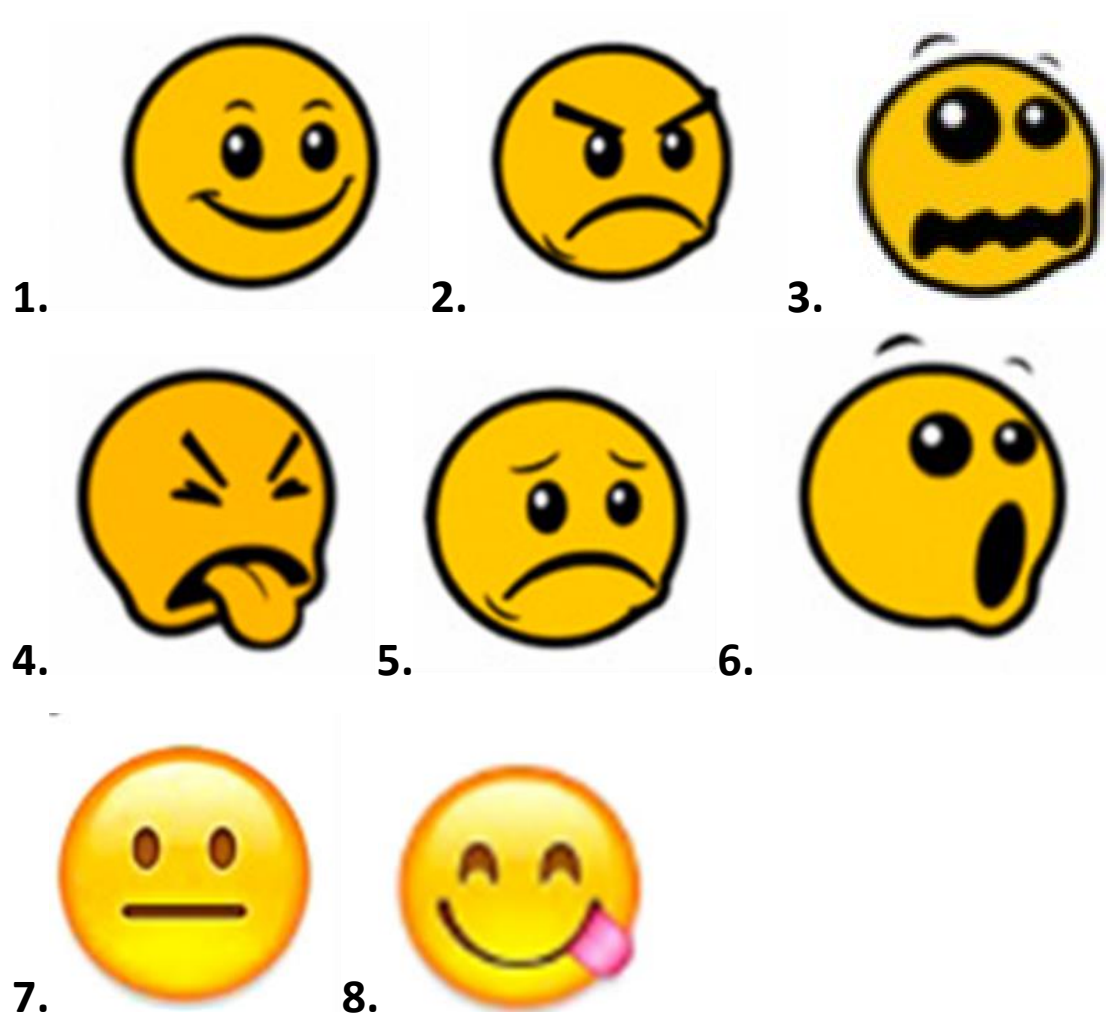
Appendix 4 – Example research conversation transcript

Speakers – P Dillon (Interviewer) and Francis

9th December 2021 11.am

Interview length - 20 minutes.

During the following transcription 'R' refers to researcher and 'C' refers to conversant.

C: Er.. I remember. So, I've got a friend named Charlie…

R: Yeah

C: He came in…to my house, just to come round to watch some… a football match… and half way through he started sneezing and that and got quite ill….. and then after quite a bit I got.. I had the same thing he had… and then yeah.

R: oh? What was the matter?

C: It was like a bad cold… I took a test! I didn't have Covid, it was just a bad cold.

R: Yes, I had a cold myself that was erm… and that's the thing now, as soon as you get anything you think *Gasp* is it Covid? And it wasn't, it was just I had a cold *Laughs*. OK. But you're feeling totally better now? Or still a little bit rough?

C: Yeah, I'm feeling better

R: Totally?

C: Yeah. It's just… I have a heavy chest when I did basketball, but it was not that much.

R: Just as you're getting back used to stuff isn't it, just that last bit?

C: Yeah

R: Well that's good. Erm.. What did you do while you were off?

C: I basically just sit inside and just ch…relaxed. So…

R: That's good. Are you a video game player?

C: Yeah

R: What do you play?

C: Er…. Roblox, Minecraft, Fortnite and a couple of games on the switch like Fifa.

R: OK! So apart from your switch, what consoles?

C: Er…. I have a Wii, A wiiU and I have an iPad and a Phone but I don't usually play on my phone because I don't have any games on it.

R: So what do you play Roblox and Minecraft on?

C: Er… Xbox.

R: I'm an Xboxer as well. I bought one during the first lockdown and I used it a lot and I've kind of stopped using it so much. *Sneezes* so Yeah… oh well, good!

R: SO! What's your take on this transition thing then, Francis? You've always got a lot of good thoughts on things. What's your thoughts, as a student who has just, kind of, done it. You've gone from Year 6 to Year 7, what do you reckon?

C: Erm… So, at first it is quite worrying. Because you think oh this is going to be different. Is stuff going to happen that I don't want to happen?

R: Like what kind of stuff?

C: Like .. erm… like maybe you'll come into like somebody who looks like he's 12 metres tall compared to you and then yeah…. Then you'll be scared of him…. Because yeah…..

R: Ok.

C: But yeah… as soon as you get to near Christmas, it feels like you've been in the school for the whole year … like you get quite used to it after a bit.

R: OK..

C: And then… you also… you do actually get to meet people that are older than you and a lot of them are quite nice.

R: Mhmmm

C: Yeah… And also… about transitioning…. When you're in Year… even like when you're in year 5, you still think about it, but just nowhere near as much. Then halfway through year 6, you think about it quite a bit and on the like the day that you leave…a lot of them either cry or others just like will smile about it and think it's something new.

R: Yep

C: Yeah

R: OK. And how did you feel?

C: I was … I was sm… I did smile about it, even though I was quite worried.

R: mmm. Yes, because you've been at primary school… Did you go to St Peter's Primary School all the way from reception?

C: Ahhh yeah

R: So you'd been there a long time?

C: Yeah

R: so… and you were saying that even in year 5 you were thinking about it?

C: Yeah

R: and what were your thoughts around it? How were you feeling about it year 5, if you can remember back that far?

C: Ahh. Cause the only time I'd ever been there (Secondary school) was just for like a music thing or for like the leisure centre…

R: Mhmm

C: Like it was…. Like… back then I didn't really know about as much about what you would do in that school. Because I didn't know… I thought it was going to be just the same subjects at this school instead of like …. And aswell I thought it would basically be … the fields that I

know, I didn't know that it was quite as big as it was, I thought it was just the bit near the leisure centre, I didn't know there was another massive bit of field. And I didn't know that the tarmac courts were there.

R: Ok..

C: Yeah.. and also… like when you walk in, on year 5 I would always… sometimes, I would just end up walking past there bercause I was either going on a bike ride. I would look in and just see the different blocks, a little bit.

R: mmm…. So you hadn't really been. So that was year five… Did you know you were going to come here in Year 5?

C: er…. I'm pretty sure I did, yeah.

R: So … would you say in Year 5 you were just aware of it? Aware that's where I'm going? Did you have any feelings around it?

C: er… I knew I wanted to go there. I wanted to just be able to walk to my school.

R: Mmmm

C: … and be able to meet up with my friends before I walked to my school. Because that would make me… I just like doing that. Because … it makes you feel fresh in the morning and get me warmed up for other things, like games… and it just felt nice because I got to chat to my friends whilst doing it.

R: That's nice. And you knew your friends were going to come here, even in year 5?

C: er… yeah. Well… most of them would have at least plans.

R: Yeah, Yeah. OK. So that did that then... so would you say you were feeling quite excited about it in year 5? Were you feeling nervous about it in year 5? Or...where you just aware? How about your feelings? Because I'm really interested in how youj were feeling about it.

C: I was... honestly I was feeling both.. more... in year 5.... More excited. In Year 6 a bit more worried.

R: Ok..

C: Because in Year 5, It was quite.. it was still like a good year or so in the future.

R: mmm

C: and then ... um.... Because in the future, you're thinking 'oh, that's probably juts going to be fine.' But then suddenly, when the day starts coming, you think 'This is ... this might not be as good as I use to think it was.' And stuff like that.

R: That's really interesting. So, when do you think that change happened? When do you think you stopped being... you know... just excited about something that felt like it was a little while away in the future, to 'oh my gosh, this is going to happen soon now, I'm starting to feel a little bit worried about it.'?

C: So, it started to get a little worse maybe about six months in... but then...it was...

R: Six months into what, sorry?

C: Into like the last 6 months of year 6.

R: ok, yeah.

C: and then it would be alright until like the last month and then you would think about it a lot more and think 'I'm not actually going to go to this old school again'. And yeah... you... cause you go instantly from the oldest people in your school, right to the youngest. Yeah...

R: and how does that feel?

C: er.. just different, cause you … it just feels like odd, honestly, cause you work your way up through all the years back to year 6 and then you're suddenly, you just find yourself at the bottom of the year and you're the youngest out of everyone.

R: Yes, that's a weird thing. Because, in year 6 were you like … because I remember when I was in year 6 and you finally… and I don't know if it was the same at St Peter's, but in our school, in like Assembly, you'd sit on the floor… and then in year 6 you could sit on the benches.

C: Yeah!

R: and that was like… you felt you'd made it then. And it was really really nice to sit on the benches.

C: Yeah. Too bad for us, though. We only got to do that for a couple of days because of Covid. We had to sit on the floor.

R: Ohhhhhh of course!

C: Though I do have a couple of memories from Year 5 and year 6; If there was a reception …. Or just like some year 1, ……or even if you were at the rec…like they would just look at you… because they.. you …they.. they think you're just massive compared to them.

R: The reception children?

C: Yeah.

R: Wow. Ok. So. On your last day there… so you …. Would you say as you got closer and closer to your last day, did it get more worrying?

C: err.. yeah. It sort of got more worrying and then after the last day, I did have my summer break.

R: Yeah.

C: And because my Dad went to St Peter's, he was able to tell me a bit about the school… at least when he was there.

R: … St Peter's or Dillon Road?

C: Dillon Road, sorry.

R: Yeah, ok. So, were you thinking about it over the summer?

C: I was a bit. Mostly, when I was… we … me and my friends, if we were going down to the rec.. and we would talk about it a bit. And ….yet again, when it got closer, you would think about it a bit more…. But you.. you're not really aware of it until like the last couple of weeks, or the last month … because then you're like 'oh! I've only got a month left before I'm in Dillon Road.

R: And do you think… was it something you were talking about with your friends?

C: ahh yeah. We would talk about it a decent amount. We would talk about other stuff to do with other things but you'd also talk about things like Dillon Road and what you were going to do there, really.

R: and did people… did you feel, if you were worried about it, did you feel able to tell your friends you were worried about it?

C: Yeah, things I was worried about I would be able to tell like people like My Dad, and my friends, … cause they were… they were gonna be there, or they had been there .. and there gonna be there too with it.

R: ok. So can I drill down a little bit more into… because you were saying you were getting worried about it. Now, you've mentioned…erm…..basically bigger students

C: Yeah

R: So can you give me a bit of an idea … if there was more… other specific things you were worried about?

C: So there was… there was specific things and every now and again you would think of something

R: Mhmm

C: That was quite small and you would probably forget about it after an hour or so. Like one of the things is just how massive it is compared to St Peter's. In St Peter's, I would always be just sued to staying in one classroom… or like moving about for maths and then going back to the same classroom. And it would feel decently normal… like back in St Peter's, I used to get like a bit caught up when I was going to a new year group, moving to a new class. And having to move to a new class every single time sort of would feel a bit different. And maybe a bit scary.

R: mhmm

C: and then for other stuff … there were just other small things that you would think about… even for stuff that you only find in movies… you think 'oh, that might happen!', even though you basically know in your head it's really not going to happen.

R: like what kind of things?

C: Like in movies, you always see … and games you always see… like there a bunch… theres always just like a bunch of bullies just going around … just being not nice.

R: mhmmm

C: then erm.. when you get there you realise 'oh, yeah that's just in movies and stuff'.

R: Ok. So you were worried about…erm….bullies.

C: ahhhh yeah.

R: Older students…

C: ahhh yeah.

R: Anything else?

C: umm..

R: oh and it being much bigger, sorry, than *Primary School* aswell.

C: Maybe like…. The canteen, having to go into there, because I'm not used to that either. I would just line up for a line and you'd get your food and you would go.

R: mhmmm

C: Then yeah. Then when I actually got there I thought oh… this isn't really massive, I can sort of know where I'm going and there's a line still and it's all good. Yeah.

R: OK

C: and also with other stuff like.. um… just a lot of things… just like normal things like….the benches outside you would like… you'd think 'well, how are we going to go there'. There's only like a couple of benches, just like… are there certain parts for each year group? And I

didn't realise there's like a part for Year 7s and like a part for year 10s and 11s and the year 8s and 9s usually go on other places.

R: But you didn't know that?

C: No, I just thought maybe… it would just be like the… key stage four would just basically have the benches.

R: Got you, ok. That's interesting. Was there anything else you were worried about?

C: Ahhh… not really.

R: Were you worried about the work or anything? In terms of thinking it would be harder, or anything like that?

C: I was a bit worried because .. I … in St Peter's, I was used to having.. you'd have Maths and SPaG

R: Mhmm

C: Then you'd just have one you'd have to do in every month.

R: Yeah

C: Then in the other one, I was a bit worried about there just being one for most subjects.

R: After a couple, you get used to it and you can just do them all.

R: Ok, interesting. So, Over the summer, then, you were a little bit worried about it still but you were talking to Dad about it, who had been here before, and… erm… like friends and stuff, who were coming. Was that helpful to do those things? Did it make you feel better?

C: Yeah

R: ok. So then.. tell me about your first day when you came here. How did that feel?

C: Well, the first day. Cause there was no one there apart from us,

R: Just year 7, you mean?

C: Yeah. The entirety of year 7 felt like.. that literally felt like the entirety of St Peter's. So I thought 'WHOA! This is *JUST* Year 7 and there's going to be a lot of people going round.

C: Mhmm

R: But after that you get onto the grass, you get onto the court and then you start playing… because on the first day, none of us really knew you had to bring in a football

R: Yeah

C: But luckily *Teacher name* just had one spare and let us use it for break time

R: Mhmm

C: and that was nice. And Also, We would sit on the benches for the … for basically just for that… for the lunch and stuff and we would eat there. There would be your friend group and down, maybe the other end of the benches there would be another … maybe like in the middle there would be another. Usually we would all sit together though.

R: On your first day, how worried did you feel do you think? Or did you feel worried? How were you feeling when you walked into the hall?

C: When I walked into the hall, I was with my friends

R: Mhmm

C: So I walked in… it was like.. I wouldn't say I was shakey, I was just nervous, excited … quite a lot of emotions in fact

R: mmm

C: I was pretty nervous, because it's a new school. But it did comfort me knowing it would be just us,

R: Mhmm

C: And then quite excited because it's a new stuff, new subjects and also it's your first time to actually get to see some of the teachers and get given your timetable.

R: Mhmm

C: and then it was also, fun walking into school and if you didn't know, seeing what tutor group your friends are in.

R: mmmm ok.

C: Also, the ties. I think the ties are pretty good. When you walked in and you go into the hall with everybody you got your tie. It was pretty nice to get your tie because it showed what type of group you were… so you wouldn't really… say you say someone in your group, and you weren't really sure where … Maths was, you could ask them 'hey, do you know where Maths is?'. And if they do… or you could just follow them to …Maths, really.

R: Oh that's good. So you knew, because you wear a green tie, because you're in a particular house.

C: Yeah

R: If you saw someone else with a green tie, you know you would be in their group.

C: Yeah

R: That's really interesting. OK. Erm.. so then… how long do you think it took before you felt comfortable? So that first day, it's nervous and you're excited. So.. talk to me a bit about the days and weeks that followed. Did things get better? Worse? Did you come across new things? How did you feel as you were settling in?

C: so after like the first week, it was decent. I had settled in, I had gone through all of the subjects and it felt pretty decent. After about the next week, you actually got to know other people. People older than you, new people. And after about the first month, you felt quite settled in. You would like know where every subject, but maybe like two of them, were. After about the first term, you know where everything is, you would feel right at home like you've been here for years.

R: So by half term you think you felt like that?

C: Yeah.

R: That's good. And how do you feel about it all now?

C: Just like, …. It basically just feels like I know where I'm going, I know.. I know what to do, I know new people. I just.. Yeah.. I just know what's going on and I know how to do it and I know… like in break time and lunchtime, we also play football. I just… yeah.

R: So you are into your routine now, I suppose?

C: Yeah

R: And is there anything you are still worried about?

C: Erm… Not really.

R: Not really?

C: Like… maybe every now and then, like you'll walk in to like a Year 7 … maybe like.. you'll just be in a hall… no one that you know is there, and there's juat a bunch of year 9s and 11s. You're not really that scared about it, because you know they're not going to do a lot, but…but….

R: But it can feel a bit intimidating, maybe?

C: Yeah.

R: ok, I get that. Erm…. Ok. Is there anything we could have done, as a school… because normally, we would have you in here for your taster days and stuff

C: Yeah

R: So, would that have been helpful?

C: Yeah, that would have been quite helpful because I would have know… like I still would have had my first day, but with my induction days… is it?

R: Yeah yeah

C: ah.. that would have let me know where I needed to go a little bit, but on my first actual day there.

R: Yeah, I get you so you feel that you know the school a little bit before you start. Is there anything else that would have been useful when you started, that we could have done?

C: umm….. Like it was quite helpful that there were a couple of teachers around that you could ask 'Hey, do you know where… a subject is?' and then you could go there

R: Like, in between lessons you mean?

C: And when you … if.. like… I need to think a second.

R: Yeah, that's ok.

C: So, it would have been quite helpful… like because in the hall, you did get to see a couple of the teachers, but just seeing all of the teachers before you went into lessons, that probably would have helped. Because then when you went to a classroom, you'd be like 'ah, this is..um…*Teacher name*'s class' or something.

R: So, had all the teachers been there to welcome you, and maybe been introduced to them on the first day in the assembly, that would have been nice?

C: Yeah

R: ok. Were you worried about how the teachers might be?

C: Like.. this is one of the things I was talking about in movies… like if you have one like super strict teacher, that when you… if you …like …if she would hear a peep from you when you were in the lesson, then you would get like a detention. So that real…so that ..like …that didn't happen cause it's like in movies again.

R: But you felt a little unsure that it *might* have happened because you'd not met them before?

C: Yeah

R: Again, really interesting. Is there anything else you think I need to know, or would be useful for me to know about. Because, obviously, it's been a long time since I moved from Year 6 to Year 7, you've just done it, I'm really interested in how students feel and experience it. Is there anything you think, maybe about yourself or other people, that is important that I know?

C: Like… I guess in tutor. On the first day, maybe if everybody could say their name…. or something…. And maybe something, a little bit about them.

R: Mhmm

S; Then you would know .. you'd think 'oh, they like football! I like football.' So yeah, you would see what you have in common with quite a lot of people.

R: good idea. So that didn't happen in your tutor group on your first day?

C: and that would also be quite helpful for the people from stroud or something, cause then they actually …. Cause they probably… a lot of their friends did not go to Dillon Road. SO they could …um… know… find out about new people.

R: Yes. Anything else?

C: No.

R: That has been really, really interesting so thank you so much for your time and for talking to me because that's really helped.

Interview terminated.

Appendix 5 – Example of Multi-literacy research conversation transcript

Speakers – P Dillon (Researcher) and Lynne

17th May 2022 11am

Interview length – 13.10

During the following transcription 'R' refers to Researcher and 'C' refers to Conversant.

Low stakes questions asked on the walk to the room and when in room, before recording started.

STAGE 1 – Photo elicitation

R: Do you remember how you felt on the first day?

C: erm... I felt really anxious, but really excited as well... mmm

R: mmm... I think most people feel like that don't they. I'm starting already to do the year 6 visits again. So today I went to 2 primary schools and the first question I ask them is 'how are you feeling about moving to secondary school?' and they all say 'I feel nervous, and I feel excited'.

C: I remember you coming to St Peter's

R: do you?

C: yeah

R: was that useful or not?

C: Yeah it was

R: Because you knew me more than most people before you started, didn't you?

C: Yeah, I did

R: was that helpful

C: Yes, it made me feel a lot less nervous because I knew who you were already

R: That's good. Because some people literally meet me once before they start and that's it. But we'd done a lot of singing and stuff

C: Yeah

R: and had you done the carol service and proms in the park

C: Yes, I had

R: so, you'd even performed with some of our students

C: *nods*

R: Here we go then. So, this is our very first day... walking into the hall for the first time. Does this take you back?

C: *laughs* yes…. Oh no!! oh no there's me!

both laugh

R: How was it walking into the hall for the first time?

C: Well, I felt very excited! But I was also a bit weirded out by how short everyone was

R: Oh really

both laugh

C: Yeah … they were all really short

R: That's interesting. Everyone was much shorter than you

C: Yeah.

R: Here's another group of people. Everyone with different haircuts.

C: *laughs*

R: There's me… when I shaved my hair… oh no! It's not me, it's the head teacher!

both laugh

R: There we go – a room full of people excitedly waiting for our first assembly. There we go…and then we have some photographs as well

C: oh no!

R: of our first day. There we go… again in the hall – haven't even got our ties yet…. As we're being put into our tutor groups – there's you joining your tutor group! And then, do you remember what we did then?

C: Erm… didn't we do like teambuilding?

R: Yes we did. So, here's one tutor group…

C: … oh that's my tutor…

R: There you go... there's you again!

S; oh no!

both laugh

R: Then… You had to make shapes with the string and stuff. Were they useful those teambuilding sessions?

C: Yes, although I was quite bad at all of them

R: Well that's ok. In what way was it useful?

C: Well it just helped me to get to know everyone and helped me to learn their names a lot quicker.

R: That's good. And then… we went and we, for the first time, lined up for a fire drill. There's you!

S; Oh yes

I; Then we did some sunflower planting

C: Oh yes

R: Then the day r Wrenn left, a said day

C: yeah that was really sad

R: Also, on the first day I took a photograph of your tutor group. There you are right at the front

C: *laughs*

R: Does take you back a little bit, and help you remember what it felt like to move?

C: Yeah

STAGE 2 – Metaphor Sort Technique

R: The second little thing we've got, if it's ok with you. I have two boxes and some images. All I'd like you to do is to look at these images…

C: Alright

R: … decide what emotion, feeling, mood that you feel they are and associate with. And if you think at some point during transition that makes sense, put it in this box. If you think it was nothing to do with it, put it in this box… and if you can talk me through your thought process as you're doing it, that would be really helpful.

C: Ok. Right then… so… erm… I felt a bit sad that I was leaving primary (5) because I loved the teachers there. But… yeah… also I felt like that (4) because I thought the teachers would be snobby

R: What is that image to you

C: I don't know… sick?

R: ok

S; Also, I felt a bit shocked (6) when I saw everyone there because that's normally about everyone in my primary school and… erm… I didn't really feel angry (2), I felt this (8) because I like making jokes. I felt a bit happy (1) when I got to know everyone.

R: mhmm

C: I was a bit worried whilst walking through the school gates (3) … and no idea what that represents (7) but I wasn't feeling that.

R: Thank you – clearly you were experiencing a lot of emotions.

C: Yeah.

R: Out of all of them you only thought there was two that you didn't think were relevant. All of the others, at different points you were feeling… lots of different feelings. Cool, thank you for that.

STAGE 3 – follow up questions

R: If it's ok, I've got some questions to ask you at the end

C: Ok

I; These questions were just formed … from the first interviews

C: yes

R: basically, if someone said something that I thought was interesting, I wanted to ask others about it to see if they had a similar experience

C: Yeah

R: So…first one is… can you tell me any stories that you saw on social media about secondary school before you started.

C: Well I saw … probably a story on snapchat... there was this school... these year 7s who went to school before me

R: mhmm

C: I was watching I…, and I saw loads of kids crying and looking really upset and I then saw loads of people laughing... and I'm like 'oh no! it's going to be hell!'

R: Oh wow! That's interesting! Did that change how you felt about secondary school?

C: erm… yeah! Made me feel a lot more nervous!

R: I'm not surprised! It would make me feel nervous. Any other stories that you saw on social media?

C: No, I don't think I saw anything else

R: Just that was your main one

C: Yeah

R: ok interesting. Can you tell me about any stories you saw on films, or on TV, about secondary school before you started?

C: Well, I saw a film of a child going into primary school for the first time and it was... like in American so it made me seem like it was a lot more like secondary school… it made me a bit traumatised after watching it.

R: What happened?

C: *laughing* The child got killed in the school

R: oh my gosh

C: and everyone was bullying the poor child

R: Wow

C: That also made me feel a bit distressed

R: Well I can imagine, yes! It's making me feel a bit distressed as well! Any other stories on Film and TV?

C: No no others

R: so just two nice, really positive stories (!)

C: Yes, all really positive! (!)

R: Ok. What are the biggest differences between being in primary school and being in secondary school?

C: Well you have to move around a lot in secondary school

R: mhm that's the biggest? Ok and how have you changed since you were in primary?

C: In primary school I felt a lot more scared and small. But now, I don't really care what other people think and I do what I want.

R: Fantastic. So, your confidence has increased, perhaps?

C: Yeah

R: good to hear. Erm... did you think the work would be different in secondary school? If so, how?

C: Yes, well the maths work … that was really hard for me when I first started because I hadn't really done that. But the work in geography that was the easier thing I've ever done.

R: You're a proper geography fan, aren't you?

C: Yes

R: How did it make you feel?

C: Well… the maths one made me feel really really scared because I thought I wouldn't be able to make it through the first year because it was so hard

R: mhmm

C: but then the geography work got a bit harder, which I liked

R: brilliant. How did you feel about older students in the school and how do you feel now?

C: Well, when I first joined, I felt a bit manipulated by the older students but now they don't bother me that much now.

R: how do you mean manipulated?

C: Well, they would always like tell us stuff that would not be true… or they'd sort of get in the way and nudge you…

R: can you give me an example of things they may have said that you found not to be true?

C: Well, they said that there's no year 7s allowed in the canteen. My poor soul felt that was true and I ran away *laughs*

R: and now?

C: And now I just walk in there whenever I want.

R: So, you're not bothered by the older students now?

C: No

I; good. Erm… Would a buddy system have been good when you started? So being paired up with an older student as someone who could show you around, someone to go to when you're worried.

C: yes, that would be good but it depends on who the person is.

R: of course. But as a principle?

C: yes

R: how do you feel now about secondary school?

C: It's just like a normal thing now... you   just get used to it

R: yes ok. Erm…. What would you say to a current year 6 about moving to secondary school?

C: I'd tell them it's not as bad as you expect, and I'd have a lovely chat with Mrs A while I was there because she's my favourite. I'd tell them not to be worried and that it's all going to be fine. And you get used to it.

R: is there anything else you want to say or tell me about moving from year 6 to year 7?

C: well I think I felt, on my first day, that I was going to be pulled out of class and sent back to primary school, but that never happened

R: why did you think that?

C: I don't know but I'm still waiting for that

R: Why would we send you back to primary school?

C: I don't know, it felt really strange and I didn't really like it. And I was very hard to get around and everything
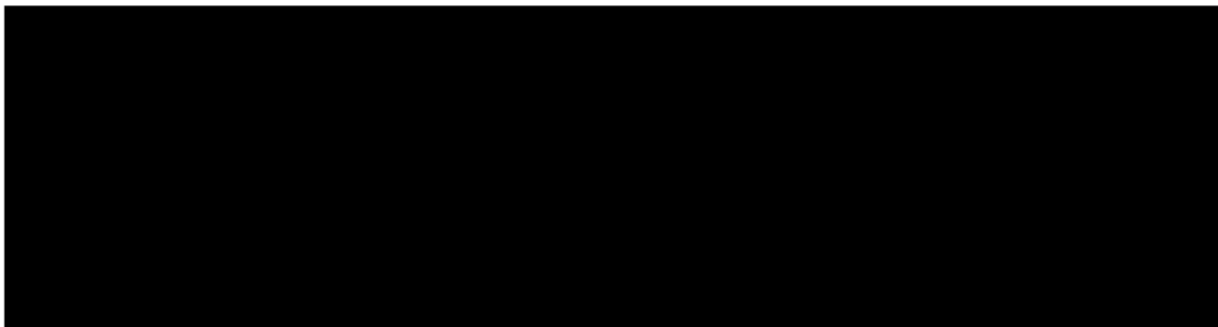
R: It's a big change isn't it

C: Yes

R: thank you very much for your time.

Interview terminated.

Appendix 6 – Confirmation of Gatekeeper and Photographic and Video permission

Note: My Director of Studies has viewed a non-redacted version of this evidence.

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to confirm that Peter Dillon discussed the use of photographs and videos as part of his doctoral research. These videos and photographs of students were created in school as part of the transition process and are cleared for use in staff research. Parental consent is given for such use on admission to the school.

I can additionally confirm that I acted as an independent gatekeeper during this research, as I was Peter's line manager at the time, when decisions were made re. which students should not be included in the sample.

Yours faithfully,

Assistant Headteacher