

Written evidence submitted by Charlotte Bagnall

Self-introduction

My name is Charlotte Bagnall and I am a current final year fully funded studentship PhD student at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) within the Faculty of Education, where I am an active member of the research and teaching community. I have an MSc in Child Development (distinction) and a First Class Dual Honours English and Psychology BSc Degree.

Recently, I was elected onto the BPS Developmental Committee. I am particularly interested in educational research that can make a real-world difference and have examined the impact of primary-secondary school transition on children's psychosocial adjustment over my BSc (exploring the significance of social support during this time), MSc (exploring the significance of emotional centred support intervention timing) and PhD (see below). I also have first-hand experience supporting children during this time through my work as a teaching assistant in Year 5 and 6.

My PhD is in Educational Psychology, thesis titled: 'How can we improve children's emotional resilience over primary-secondary school transition'. To date I have 90% of my thesis written and am due to submit in October 2020. I am supervised by Dr Claire Fox at MMU, Dr Yvonne Skipper at the University of Glasgow and Dr Jeremy Oldfield at MMU.

As part of my doctorate research I have designed, implemented and evaluated an emotional-centered intervention called *Talking about School Transition (TaST)* which aims to improve children's emotional resilience and coping skills over primary-secondary school transition. The content, design and delivery of *TaST*, including the preliminary research, psychological theory and existing research which informed the intervention is published in the *Journal of Pastoral Care in Education*, see Bagnall, C. L. (2020). Talking about School Transition (TaST): an emotional centred intervention to support children over primary-secondary school transition. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 1-22. DOI: 10.1080/02643944.2020.1713870.

To inform *TaST* I have also conducted three preliminary research studies in the UK and USA, in mainstream and special schools obtaining insight from Year 6 and 7 students, their parents and teachers, using observations, focus groups, interviews, surveys and document analysis methodologies. The UK focus group research is published in the *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, see Bagnall, C. L., Skipper, Y., & Fox, C. L. (2019). 'You're in this world now': Students', teachers', and parents' experiences of school transition and how they feel it can be improved. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*.

DOI:10.1111/bjep.12273; the USA case study research is under review in the *Journal of Pastoral Care in Education*, see Bagnall, C.L., Fox, C.L. & Skipper, Y. (under review). Does the timing of school transition

impact adjustment? An insight into USA transition systems. *Pastoral Care in Education*, and the UK case study research which was conducted in a special school is in preparation: Bagnall, C.L., Fox, C.L. & Skipper, Y. (in preparation). What emotional centred challenges do special schools face over primary-secondary school transition? To submit to *Journal of Special Education*.

Reflecting my expertise in this area, I am submitting evidence to address pupil's progression to the next stage of education and children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education, specifically relating to primary-secondary school transition. As discussed above, I have conducted significant work in this area, and the evidence and insight outlined below has been informed by rigorous psychological research, theory and transition literature, in addition to consultation with organisations, such as Emerging Minds and 42nd Street (who work with schools and key stakeholders to support children during this time) and school staff within our research network. I have also recently written a blog for Manchester Metropolis addressing anxieties and policy issues pertaining to Covid-19 and primary-secondary school transition and posing concrete and immediate policy responses. The blog is titled: 'Transition years and the lockdown. What impact a prolonged school closure might have on children transitioning from primary to secondary school' and the target audience is policy-makers and influencers. See: <https://mcrmetropolis.uk/transition-years-and-the-lockdown/>

Evidence

Primary-secondary school transition is a major life event for eleven-year-old children in the UK, and one of the most difficult transitions faced within education (Zeedyk et al., 2003). During this time, children face simultaneous psychosocial, environmental and academic discontinuity, alongside negotiating the onset of puberty and national Standard Assessment Tests (SATs). Negotiating the multiple changes inherent with primary-secondary school transition can have a significant negative impact on children's short- and long-term psychosocial adjustment and mental health (Symonds, 2015). This is especially concerning if children are vulnerable, whether that is because children do not receive sufficient support (West et al., 2010) or if the move exceeds the child's coping capabilities (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016), which was shown in our previous research (Bagnall, 2020).

In fact, primary-secondary school transition is repeatedly outlined in DfE government reports as a period 'not handled well' (Ofsted, 2015, March, p. 65) where the quality of transition between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 is 'much too variable' (Ofsted, 2015, September, p. 21) and arrangements for transfer as a result 'weak in over a quarter of the schools visited' (Ofsted, 2014, p. 21). This is despite students' needs to access timely and sensitive emotional centred support in the lead up to and over this period (Rens et al., 2017).

Following the international outbreak of COVID-19, which has resulted in the abrupt closure of schools for at least the next few months, Year 6 children face increased uncertainty. This means cancelled school trips, leaving assemblies not taking place, missed opportunities to say goodbye to teachers and classmates, and pupils not taking SATs, which all involved have worked tirelessly for. Transition preparations, including visits to prospective secondary schools and much needed classroom discussions, may also no longer take place.

Negotiating multiple changes or 'stressors' within a relatively short period of time can have a significant negative impact on our ability to cope, especially if concerns accumulate, co-exist and persist, which is in line with Coleman's (1974) *Focal Theory of Change* which outlines the importance of gradual as opposed to rapid change. In light of this, COVID-19, an additional stressor, is likely to heighten the impact of primary-secondary school transition, with Year 6 pupils feeling anxious and apprehensive about the here-and-now associated with COVID-19 stressors, on top of facing uncertainty associated with transition provision and support. In fact, this is something we are starting to see in practice. For example, through consultation with Emerging Minds, 42nd Street and school staff within our network, it is clear that in practice, key stakeholders are facing significant uncertainty pertaining to when schools will reopen, and how best to implement clear and consistent transition provision in the meantime to prepare anxious Year 6 children for primary-secondary school transition.

Below is evidence that examines how COVID-19 will affect children's short and long term transitional adjustment and recommendations for where key stakeholders can intervene to improve the process in the here and now.

Coping and feelings of control

Children's mental health and wellbeing is largely shaped by their feelings of control, safety, emotional resilience and ability to cope (Jordan, McRorie & Ewing, 2010). Nonetheless, major life events such as primary-secondary school transition and COVID-19 can pose threat to children's mental health and wellbeing. This may in part be shaped by a mismatch between children's concerns regarding secondary school and the repertoire of skills they can draw on to address them (Rens et al., 2017). As a result, the greater this mismatch the more support children need to cope (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008).

Drawing on my own research (Bagnall, 2020), in addition to *Resilience Theory*, we know that increasing children's emotional resilience and ability to cope prior to critical events, such as primary-secondary school transition, can promote both short and long-term adjustment, and many successful primary-secondary school transition interventions, such as *TaST*, are underpinned by these concepts. For example, *TaST* includes spoken and written emotional expression group, class and individual-level activities that focus on improving children's confidence, self-esteem and feelings of control, in addition to developing awareness of their self-influence - in other words, how our thoughts, feelings and behaviours are interlinked. See Bagnall (2020) for a full outline of the Talking about School Transition (TaST) emotional-centred intervention. By

focusing on improving Year 6 children's appraisals, coping skills and emotional resilience prior to the transition to secondary school through these activities *TaST* was shown to improve Year 6 children's concerns about the transition.

This same approach is likely to be effective in supporting Year 6 children navigate primary-secondary school transition against our current backdrop of Covid-19. For example, supporting children to develop emotional competence and psychological resilience will not only help children cope with the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 in the short term, but could also feed-forward to primary-secondary school transition in September.

The school and safety

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, there has been increased media attention placed on the role of the school as we negotiate the 'new normal' and children engage in distance learning. However, recognition of the school as more than a platform for education is not a new idea, and as outlined in the government's recent paper *The Green Paper: Transforming children and young people's mental health provision* (2018) the school has a 'frontline role' in supporting children's mental health and well-being (DfH & DfE, 2018, p. 9). For example, children spend a substantial amount of their day at school, which is availability for educational practitioners to recognise and respond to children's emotional and social needs (Barrett & Turner, 2001). This is no exception over primary-secondary school transition where schools can have a key stake in children's adjustment.

However, pressing academic and procedural demands such as national assessments, heavy staff workloads and difficulty finding space within the overcrowded curriculum (McGee, Ward, Gibbons, & Harlow, 2003), can mean that primary-secondary school transition provisions in many schools are often neglected or left until the summer term just before children make the transition. Nonetheless, this reactive as opposed to preventative approach to transition support is largely inconsistent with Coleman's (1974) *Focal Theory of Change*, which emphasises the importance of gradual developmental change when negotiating multiple discontinuities and can have both short- and long-term implications. In the short-term, leaving primary-secondary school transition provisions until the summer term can lead to a build-up of heightened anxiety and rush immediately prior to the transfer (Bagnall, Skipper, & Fox, 2019). In the long-term, poor primary-secondary school transition can heavily shape children's school attendance and engagement, psychosocial well-being and academic attainment (Riglin, Frederickson, Shelton, & Rice, 2013).

Within our current climate, reactive approaches to primary-secondary school transition provision has meant that majority of Year 6 children in the UK will not have received preparation for primary-secondary school transition prior to the lockdown. This is likely to have significant short and long-term implications for children's emotional well-being and mental health. Nonetheless, there is much that schools can do to mitigate these negative outcomes while maintaining social distancing, via the internet which can support

children, their families and teachers. Virtual transition work from live tours of the secondary school and interactive maps of the building, to moderated discussions between pupils and primary and secondary school staff, could provide much needed transition exposure, and reassure all involved for when schools restart (hopefully) in September. The internet could also be used as a vehicle to share resources to enable communication about the present and the future with families.

Social support

Research has shown that for Year 6 and 7 children, the people who helped the most to prepare them for secondary school were their parents/guardians (Hanewald, 2013), and children who perceive parents/guardians as available, open to communication and involved, show better adjustment. Thus, discussions between Year 6 children and parents/guardians, or older siblings who have already made the transition from primary to secondary school about their experiences, can help prepare Year 6 children for their move ahead. This is something that can be facilitated within our current climate. However, it is important that parents/guardians and older siblings are aware of the importance of ensuring that these discussions are sensitive, and child led as too much discussion can also be harmful (see Bagnall, Skipper and Fox, 2019, for discussion of the importance of gradual and sensitive transition exposure).

Primary-secondary school transition also needs to be positioned as a continuation and progression, as opposed to a loss; children who miss primary school are shown to report greater transition problems. Supporting children manage anxieties is even more important now given the sadness that will be associated with the missed opportunities Year 6 children will be experiencing in the coming weeks. Thus, discussions focused on moving on can help children come to terms with the loss, but also look ahead to new and exciting opportunities.

Closing remarks and support services

In sum, maintaining healthy and positive well-being pre, during and post navigation of key life changes, such as primary-secondary school transition, is paramount. This is not only to nurture children's short-term adjustment (Symonds & Galton, 2014) but also long-term functioning, as successful navigation of transition establishes the foundations for future and lifelong well-being (Kessler, Berglund, Demler, Jin, & Walters, 2005). Informed by a rigorous literature review in addition to my own research conducted with key stakeholders in the UK and US I have outlined above some recommendations that have immediate implications for transfer parents/guardians, teachers and children to improve experiences of primary-secondary school transition against the backdrop of COVID-19.

Nonetheless, these recommendations are also informing for policymakers. For example, there is need for the DfE to raise the profile and draw schools' attention to the significance negotiating two major changes (COVID-19 and school transition) will have on children's adjustment. Whilst the former is to some extent out of our control, I would argue that there is much that can be done by policymakers to support current transfer

children. In the short term, this may be providing key stakeholders access to wider evidence-informed approaches in order to support children's emotional resilience and coping skills. Whereas, when it is safe for schools to reopen, perhaps we should delay children's transition to secondary school and instead allow them to start back at primary school for a few weeks to gain some of the knowledge and skills discussed above, as well as to say their proper goodbyes and obtain closure, before moving on to secondary school.

The following websites may also be useful to support children and families manage anxiety during this time:

<https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-offers-advice-schools-parents-and-carers-help-children-through-uncertainty>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/closure-of-educational-settings-information-for-parents-and-carers>

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