Examining the socio-emotional aspects of primary-secondary school transitions: Support systems and resilience

Professor Divya Jindal-Snape

Director, Transformative Change: Educational and Life Transitions (TCELT) Research Centre

6th March 2019
Primary-Secondary School Transitions
Conceptualisation of Transitions: Primary and secondary school teachers’ views

1. *The movement* of pupils from one phase of their education to the next.

2. *Seamless move from primary to secondary with a clear focus on teaching and learning.*

3. *Any move* between stages or establishment or settings or even classes.

4. *Any change* in learning environment or expectation.

5. *A period of change* which can affect young people in a variety of ways (i.e., psychologically, socially, physically etc..)

6. *Transition is physical, social and emotional adaptation* to new environments and stressors.

7. *The move on from one state to another where change can have a major impact on an individual. Moving out of ones comfort zone and meeting and overcoming new challenges.*

   Jindal-Snape, 2018; Jindal-Snape & Mitchell, under review
Conceptualisation of Primary-Secondary School Transition in research literature

Systematic Literature Review from 2008-2018
96 papers; 86 papers included some insight into researchers’ conceptualisation
Not always explicit; inferred on the basis of theory used

Conceptualisation categories
- Multiple conceptualisations (so over 86 mentioned)
- Transition as change (n=54)
- Normative period in school career (n=20)
- Multiple transitions (n=11)
- Discontinuity, both curricular and relationships (n=6)
- Normative life transitions (n=41)
- Rite of passage (n=3)

Jindal-Snape, Symonds, Hannah & Barlow (in preparation)
Transition can be defined as

(i) an ongoing process of psychological, social and educational adaptation,
(ii) over time,
(iii) due to changes in context, interpersonal relationships and identity,
(iv) which can be both exciting and worrying, and
(v) requires ongoing support.

Jindal-Snape, 2018
Transition can also have new exciting choices!

- Secondary School
  - Lunch
    - Pasta
    - Fish
    - Meat
    - Sandwich

look! we have a choice for lunch!

great! we never had that in Primary School.

- Challenging and stressful

Changing expectations can be difficult

I had a grasp of what was expected last week.

But this week it’s different.

But I can cope!!

Self-esteem, emotional intelligence, confidence!

Illustrations: Graham Ogilvie
authors’ discourse around primary-secondary transitions: Systematic literature review (2008-2018)

96 papers reviewed; published between 2008-2018

Positive impact of transitions (n=2)

- Transition efficacy and impact of perception of teachers' mastery goals; transition as normative school career, developed a transition efficacy scale aligned to stage-environment fit theory (Madjar & Chohat, 2017)

- Took a strength-based approach, positive experiences of six children with ASD, highlighted that with appropriate support children could have successful transitions and positive experiences (Neal & Frederickson, 2016)

Both negative and positive aspects of transitions (n=25); however 15 highlighted more negatives than positives

Neutral discourse (n=9)
Authors’ discourse around primary-secondary transitions (contd.)

Negative discourse (n=60)

• Premise and argument based on previous literature:

- Disruptive and challenged children’s psychological wellbeing (e.g., Poorthuis, Thomaes, van Aken Japp, Dennisen and de Castro, 2014)
- Decline in subject-specific self-efficacy scores (Lofgran, Whiting & Smith, 2015)
- Decline in achievement (Mudaly & Sukhdeo, 2015; Serbin Stack & Kingdon, 2013; Vasquez-Salgado & Chavira, 2014)
- Led to high dropout rates (McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun & Cochrane, 2008), caused stress and anxiety (Peters & Brooks, 2016),
- Especially challenging for children with ASD (Mandy et al., 2016a; Tso & Strnadova, 2017)
Discourse in children and young people’s natural environment

(preparation by primary school) Didn’t really help, just became more strict and they said "the teachers at secondary are very strict"
(Pupil, Stage 2; Jindal-Snape & Mitchell, 2014-2016)

She [cousin] started talking about the lunches and I got really confused, and was really scared showed me her maths jotter and it looked really hard but when it was actually me that was at the ‘secondary school A’, it’s not really that hard. You do get a little bit frightened before you come up but when you’re actually here it’s better.
(Child 5, initial interview in S1; Jindal-Snape & Foggie, p. 13)
Looking forward to in P7 and what has been good in S1 and S2 (in percentage)

Jindal-Snape & Cantali (under review)
Worried about in P7 and still worrying in S1 and S2 (in percentage)

Jindal-Snape & Cantali (under review)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Experiences</th>
<th>Negative Experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationships with Peers</strong></td>
<td><strong>Relationships with Teachers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Wider group of friendships</td>
<td>• Clear structure and routine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Positive relations with new friends</td>
<td>• Positive relations with new teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Opportunity to reject prior social roles and transformative for their sense of identity</td>
<td>• Dynamic, fun and knowledgeable teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Opportunities to make friends with older peers as a marker of esteem</td>
<td>• Different pedagogical approaches in primary and secondary schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Perception of secondary teachers being stricter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Leaving behind primary school teachers with whom they had formed secure attachment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lack of positive attitudes of secondary school teachers towards the pupils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lack of respect and trust from secondary school teachers towards pupils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Secondary school teachers’ higher expectations and rules, sometimes unspoken and inconsistent rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical environment</strong></td>
<td><strong>Physical environment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Being able to move between classes</td>
<td>• Getting lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increased school population</td>
<td>• Difficulty coping with the larger environment of the secondary school, noise and hustle making pupils with ASD feel unsafe, Acoustics in certain spaces being unpleasant for a pupil with ASN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Better and more resources</td>
<td>• Travelling to secondary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic matters</td>
<td>Engagement and motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Challenging work, being able to learn new and interesting things in secondary school, opportunity for growth and development</td>
<td>• Reduced feelings of connectedness with the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Feeling of being grown up with more responsibility</td>
<td>• Increase in school absences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Diverse curriculum</td>
<td>• Decline in positive attitudes towards studying, especially mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Decline in grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harder academic work and inability to do it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greater personal responsibility related to academic planning and organization in secondary schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Volume of homework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Concerns about tests and assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of curricular continuity and progression, including in music, mathematics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jindal-Snape, Cantali, MacGillivray & Hannah, 2019
What does successful transition look like?

School adjustment* → good attainment → good attendance and engagement

Social and emotional adjustment at school* → like school and do not feel lonely at school → sense of belonging and wellbeing** → respectful, reciprocal relationships**

In other words, the Affective-Behaviour-Cognitive- ABCs of adaptation involving sense of belonging, identification/group identity, cultural and pedagogical adaptation***

* Rice et al. (n.d.)
** Peters (2010)
Transition and Wellbeing
Wellbeing

- Least well defined term
- Can include emotional and psychological wellbeing, spiritual wellbeing, physical wellbeing and social wellbeing

20 studies focussed on at least one of these aspects

- 4 studies reported that transition had a positive impact on pupils’ wellbeing outcomes (improvement in QoL, no dip in self-esteem rather than increase)
- 16 studies reported negative impact on pupils’ wellbeing outcomes
  - increase in school misbehaviour
  - decline in feelings of school belongingness and connectedness
  - poorer social and emotional health
  - higher levels of depression and anxiety

Increase in pupils’ anxiety during transitions was associated with decreased connectedness to school and decline in perceived school belongingness over time.

Two studies reported that most pupils adapted quickly to secondary school which was found to be important for wellbeing of pupils in another study.

Jindal-Snape, Cantali, MacGillivray & Hannah, 2019
Link between wellbeing and educational outcomes

Robust evidence from three large scale studies (two used the same secondary dataset) that bonding with peers and teachers is important to pupils in the transition from primary to secondary school.

→ If bonding is positive and good social integration has happened, they helped pupils to be resilient to the transition and accompanying changes.

→ However, if this bonding and the overall transition experience are negative, then pupils can experience long term mental health issues and lower educational outcomes; in some cases the latter is the result of the former.

Jindal-Snape, Cantali, MacGillivray & Hannah, 2019
Transitions and Wellbeing

Anxieties were linked to school move and manifested as:

- depression
- generalized anxiety
- school anxiety and emotional issues
- peer/social problems

And if unresolved, led to:

- poor outcomes in the long-term
  → poor academic attainment
- psychiatric difficulties throughout the lifespan

Neal et al., 2016; Rice et al., 2010; West et al., 2010
Understanding potential reasons: Stage-Environment Fit (unfit)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early Adolescent Development</th>
<th>Post-Transfer School Environments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased desire for autonomy</td>
<td>Increase in extrinsic motivational strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased salience of identity issues</td>
<td>More rigorous grading practices resulting in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lower average grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing need for safe environment in</td>
<td>Increase in practices likely to incur social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>which to explore autonomy and identity</td>
<td>comparison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability grouping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Whole class instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased peer orientation</td>
<td>Normative performance grading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased self-focus and self-consciousness</td>
<td>Competitive motivational strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased cognitive capacity with movement</td>
<td>Increase in teacher concern with control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>toward formal operational thought</td>
<td>Decrease in teachers’ trust of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical and hormonal changes associated</td>
<td>Decrease in opportunity for student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with pubertal development</td>
<td>participation in classroom decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decrease in student autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decrease in teachers’ sense of efficacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Initial decrease in the cognitive level of tasks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eccles & Midgley, 1989
Differential impact on children with ASN, including poverty

Only five studies compared typically developing pupils with those who have ASN
Wider body focussed on children with ASN only
Most authors have argued that transition is more difficult for pupils with ASN
Pupils with ASN can be more vulnerable during primary-secondary transitions
Pupils with ASN can be at risk of negative educational and wellbeing outcomes
Evidence of pupils with ASN having heightened anxiety during the transition → negative impact on their mental health and attainment
On the other hand, some pupils with ASN preferred the more structured environment of the secondary school

Jindal-Snape, Cantali, MacGillivray & Hannah, 2019
Risk and stressors

Some children are considered to be at risk during transitions, such as children with autism (Schoon, 2006) and SEBN (Mowat, 2019).

However, risk factors interact with other influences. Considerable individual variability with individual differences in the anxiety levels of children (Hannah and Topping, 2012) might be due to difficulty in forming trusting relationships with adults and other children (Mowat, 2019).

Other risks factors might emerge such as bereavement, family problems.

Transition can be a time of risk for some and create Additional Support Needs.

Just make life easier on us and not put so much pressure on us ... and stop focusing so much on all of the disabled kids and start thinking more about the ones who aren't disabled, because they might have problems too. (Pupil, End of S2; Jindal-Snape & Cantali, under review)
Resilience
Resilience refers to a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity. Implicit within this notion are two critical conditions: (1) exposure to significant threat or severe adversity; and (2) the achievement of positive adaptation despite major assaults on the developmental process.” Luthar, 2007, p. 543

Does transition lead to significant adversity?

Everyday minor hassles build up (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008)
### Resilience factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Child</th>
<th>The Family</th>
<th>The Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temperament (active, good-natured)</td>
<td>Warm supportive parents</td>
<td>Supportive extended family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female prior to and male during adolescence</td>
<td>Good parent-child relationships</td>
<td>Successful school experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (being younger)</td>
<td>Parental harmony</td>
<td>Friendship networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher IQ</td>
<td>Valued social role (e.g. care of siblings)</td>
<td>Valued social role (e.g., a job, volunteering, helping neighbours)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social skills</td>
<td>Close relationship with one parent</td>
<td>Close relationship with unrelated mentor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal awareness</td>
<td></td>
<td>Member of religious or faith community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of empathy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal locus of control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humour</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source:: Newman & Blackburn, 2002, p. 8
## Risk factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Child</th>
<th>The Family</th>
<th>The Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning disability</td>
<td>High level of parental conflict</td>
<td>Poverty and low social capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genetic factors</td>
<td>Parental separation</td>
<td>Homelessness or fragile housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental delay</td>
<td>Lack of consistent guidance</td>
<td>Racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult temperament</td>
<td>Parent-child hostility</td>
<td>Unpredictable and unmanageable crises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with communication</td>
<td>Abuse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic illness</td>
<td>Parental psychological disorder</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor educational performance</td>
<td>Parental alcoholism or drug dependency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low self-esteem</td>
<td>Parental criminality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poor friendship networks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Newman & Blackburn, 2002, p. 8
Important to remember that, according to Rutter, “Protection…resides, not in the evasion of risk, but in successful engagement with it.” (1987, p. 318)
Resilience

Reduction of multiple ‘risks’ or ‘stressors’ and enhancement of resilience* during school transitions depends on:**

- **internal protective factors (e.g., self-esteem: messages of self-worth and self-competence from significant others in the environment)

- **external protective factors (e.g., positive relationships and secure attachments with significant others in the environment)

*Newman & Blackburn, 2002
**Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008
Complexity of the interaction between ecosystems, Jindal-Snape, 2016
Support system: People children spoke with most about the move to, and within, secondary school (Pupils could choose multiple categories; in percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support system</th>
<th>P7</th>
<th>S1 Autumn</th>
<th>S1 Spring</th>
<th>S2 Spring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My parents/grandparents</td>
<td>85.90</td>
<td>80.33</td>
<td>68.75</td>
<td>51.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My brother/sister/cousin</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>47.54</td>
<td>31.25</td>
<td>26.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My classmates in P7/S1/S2</td>
<td>76.92</td>
<td>47.54</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>24.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My other friends who are not my classmates</td>
<td>34.62</td>
<td>44.26</td>
<td>32.81</td>
<td>26.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My P7 teacher</td>
<td>34.62</td>
<td>19.67</td>
<td>10.94</td>
<td>4.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My primary school head teacher</td>
<td>8.97</td>
<td>13.11</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>7.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My S1 teachers/guidance teacher</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>19.67</td>
<td>31.25</td>
<td>21.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My secondary school head teacher</td>
<td>26.92</td>
<td>6.56</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>2.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Family: one of the few constant support mechanisms
Jindal-Snape & Cantali, under review
Pupils’ Perspective: Transition Support from Family

Being there for me and supporting my decisions.

My family help me a lot and said I will make new friends.
There's more freedom and you have more fun.

They told us about when they went and how good it is to move from classroom to classroom.

My sister helped me because she knew what high school was like so she helped settle in.

My family let me get on with it. I think this was important as I needed to experience this on my own.

Helping me with school work, when I’m stuck.
Are families experiencing transitions?

If parents/carers are not supported in their transition, how will they support their children?
professionals experience transitions too
Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions Model*


Rubik’s Cube® used by permission Rubik’s Brand Ltd. www.rubiks.com

### Aspects of effective transition practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key aspect</th>
<th>Potential actions for, and by, relevant stakeholders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child</strong></td>
<td><strong>Family</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Familiarisation**               | • Visits to the new school as early as possible, e.g., to use the swimming pool or other facilities  
• Staff and children visiting new school  
• Induction days  
• Information pack including photos of significant people and places  
| • Informal visits for parents over time  
• Induction visits  | • Reciprocal visits to interact with children and other professionals over time  |
| **Opportunities to create friendship and support networks** | • Through co-curricular activities with other nurseries and schools as well as in the community (to ensure multiple, stable support networks)  
• Peer buddies from the same and new institution  | • Formal parent networking events organised by schools  
• Informal networking events organised by (and through) parents, parent councils and/or Parent Teacher Associations  
• Adoption of a system of parent/family buddies  | • Teacher buddies and shadowing across stages (potentially in the school cluster)  
• Creation of transition teams  |
| **Secure attachment**             | • Portfolios or artefacts from previous school and/or home  
• Building on existing secure attachments and support networks such as with parents, community clubs  
• Opportunities for creation of non-stigmatised secure attachments with teachers, pupil support workers and guidance staff  | • Valuing the role of parents in forming secure attachments and ensuring their involvement in the transition process  
• Supporting parents’ understanding of the role of secure attachments during transitions  | • Sound school leadership from head teachers, supportive ethos and mechanisms for providing opportunities and support for staff  |

Jindal-Snape, 2018
| Continuous open communication and collaborative partnerships | Discussions about what to expect, opportunities to talk about what they are looking forward to, or worried about | Parents involved actively as partners  
- Effective two-way communication (not just provision of information) with parents  
- Parental input in the information that is shared about their child so as to include other aspects related to home/community and other transitions child might be experiencing  
- Opportunities to meet with staff working with their child  
- Understanding of legislative obligations of schools and local authorities and their rights, especially for children with additional support needs | Parents involved actively as partners  
- Effective two-way communication (not just provision of information) with parents  
- Parental input in the information that is shared about their child so as to include other aspects related to home/community and other transitions child might be experiencing  
- Opportunities to meet with staff working with their child  
- Understanding of legislative obligations of schools and local authorities and their rights, especially for children with additional support needs  
- Through reciprocal visits, intranet, and sharing of information about the child  
  - Information should focus on educational, social, and emotional aspects  
  - Parents and children should have opportunity to see the information and add to it  
- Working together to bridge the gap between pedagogical approaches and curriculum  
- Shared understanding of transition and best practice  
- Opportunities to meet with parents and other staff  
- Understanding of legislative obligations of schools and local authorities and children/parents’ rights, especially for children with additional support needs  
- Working collaboratively with other agencies involved in the life of the child as relevant  
- Early identification of support needs of child |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Co-curricular activities</strong></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• School fair</td>
<td>• Residential trips (especially for older children)</td>
<td>• Clubs/activities in the community to foster sense of belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Training and support for transitions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| • Rehearsing in a safe environment using creative approaches, such as creative drama, sketches, stories | • Increased understanding of own transition support needs | • Better provision of transition training in qualifying programmes  
• Enhanced CPD provision  
• Increased understanding of own transition support needs and clear mechanism of organisational support |
|  |  |  |
| **Active learning, participation and agency** |  |  |
| • Opportunities to participate actively in their learning in preparation for transition to different educational stages  
• Opportunities and ethos suitable to develop learner agency | • Active participation in all aspects of transition and child’s learning | • Peer education opportunities  
• Opportunities and ethos suitable to develop professionals’ agency |
Contact Details

Professor Divya Jindal-Snape
d.jindalsnape@dundee.ac.uk

References available on request

Illustrations by Graham Ogilvie