Exploring the experience of students making the transition from primary school to secondary school: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the role of friendship and family support

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The transition from primary to secondary school has long been recognised as one of the most challenging in a child's education. Whilst most children ultimately make this transition successfully, it can nevertheless be an anxious time for the majority of children. For a minority, this may lead to high levels of anxiety that can have long-term negative impacts on mental health and wellbeing. Despite a plethora of research on transitions, current interventions are varied and largely ineffective with a lack of focus on the experience through the child's eyes. This paper describes two core themes emerging from an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study that aimed to uncover the real-life experiences of nine pupils who had recently undergone this transition. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of the first year at secondary school. Pupils were asked a series of open-ended questions about their experiences before, during, and after making this transition. Analysis showed that pupils worried about the transition very little whilst in primary school but that anxiety built over the summer break and continued into the start of Year 7. We present only two themes in this paper, (1) the role of Friendships and (2) Family Support, however, additional themes also emerged including Bullying, Teacher Style, Independence and Responsibility, Homework, and Mindset. Possible implications for schools and policy makers are detailed and areas for future research discussed.
Keywords: transition; experience; school; primary; secondary; friendship; family support.

A T 11 YEARS of age, many children transfer from primary school to secondary school. This transition has long been recognised as one of the most challenging times in a young adolescent student's education (Hopwood et al., 2016). The transition can impact them socially, emotionally, and developmentally (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008; Topping, 2011) at a time where children are seeking to fulfil their needs for safety, relatedness, autonomy, competence and identity development (Symonds & Galton, 2014). The potential impacts on children's future lives and mental health are so significant that the subject of this transition, the true impact that it has, and what local authorities, schools and educational psychologists can do to ease this rite of passage, has been debated for some years.

Whilst there is a lot of research in existence, it is disparate in terms of focus (West et al., 2010) and the majority of studies have been quantitative with fewer accounts published that focus directly on pupils' lived experiences (see review by Rens et al., 2018, for some notable exceptions). Further, as argued by Rens et al. (2018) in their review of the available evidence on the topic, there is a need for research that focuses on the perspective of children themselves and that much can be gained from asking children about their transitional experiences and what they think may help or hinder their passage from primary to secondary school. This lack of true understanding makes it difficult for teachers, caregivers, and policymakers to know where to focus their efforts in helping children through this transition.

This study uses interpretative phenomeno-logical analysis (IPA) to investigate the first-hand experiences of a group of pupils who are at the end of their first year at secondary school. The aim is to gain in-depth insight into first hand experiences to further understand what can be done to help children to make this key transition.

The experience of making the transition from primary school to secondary school

During this transition many children move from having a single classroom with a single teacher to being taught by multiple teachers with differing styles, in different classrooms spread across much larger campuses. Many children make this transition with none or few of their peers, find themselves surrounded by larger groups of children, and commute using public transport for the first time. The expectations on children also fundamentally shift in terms of their independence, workload, and responsibility for their own academic progress. The challenges that they face can be many and varied, ranging from increased anxiety to low mood to stress and a lack of motivation (Hopwood et al., 2014; Rice, 2001; West et al., 2010).

It is important to note that not all students will experience these negative transition-related challenges, and for many the post-transition anxieties may reduce within the first term of starting secondary school (Galton et al., 1999). However, although the anxieties may reduce, the majority of pupils can experience some degree of concern well into the first year at secondary school (Stradling & McNeil, 2000) and for many students, the transition is an overwhelming process where adequate support is essential (Bloyce & Fredrickson, 2012). This is particularly important given that anxiety disorders typically have an age of onset in childhood and adolescence which can result in significant disability in social and occupational functioning (Van Ameringen et al., 2002).

Concerns about the transition – child's perspective

One of the big focuses of much of the literature is regarding the concerns that exist before making the transition. Whilst research shows that fears begin to diminish by the end of the first term, a majority of pupils can still be experiencing some degree of concern well into the first year (Stradling & MacNeil, 2000).

Zeedyk et al. (2003) carried out a survey in the UK that looked in more depth at the concerns of children as they made this transition. They developed a questionnaire with open-ended items that were completed by 192 final-year primary school pupils and 128 first-year secondary pupils. Responses to each question were subjected to a content analysis in which key themes within the response set were identified and responses were classified into thematic categories. Interestingly, a key observation of this study was that a large proportion of the primary school pupils stated that they were not concerned about anything at all about the transition. For those that did have concerns the issue mentioned most by far was that of being subjected to bullying when arriving at secondary school. This was also the case for the secondary pupils who completed the survey and seems to be consistent across much of the literature in existence. Other issues identified by a sizeable proportion of both the primary school and secondary school pupils were their relationships with peers, fears of getting lost, and handling the new workload. There was a low frequency, however, of reference to concerns about academic matters. Whilst this study is widely quoted and identified some clear themes that seem to be consistent with other literature, analysis of the data was restricted to a descriptive level due to the relatively large size of the study. Any form of inferential analysis would have been impractical to complete, meaning that what it lacked was any depth of understanding of the experience of the pupils and what could be learned from that.

Rice et al. (2011) also carried out a study that focused on the key concerns of children

making this transition. They used the School Concerns Questionnaire (SCQ) which was developed by Thomasson et al. (2006). The SCQ lists 17 potential concerns about moving to secondary school, and pupils were asked to rate their level of concern for each item on a 10-point Likert Scale. The study examined a UK sample of 147 Year 6 primary school pupils and 263 Year 7 secondary school pupils. Through use of this questionnaire they identified five concerns with the highest mean ratings both pre-and post- transition. There were similarities in the findings between this study and that of Zeedyk et al. (2003) in terms of being bullied and homework being the most highly endorsed concerns both pre- and post-transition. For children still in primary school environmental and procedural features (e.g. changing classes and size of school) were highly endorsed. This was seen slightly less for those who had already made the transition. This demonstrates another theme that exists across the literature that the concerns that feature for children when still at primary school can change when they have been in secondary school for a short period of time. Another key finding of the study was that school concerns at both primary and secondary school were strongly associated with generalised anxiety symptoms, further making the case for the importance of focusing on this period of transition. Although one of the conclusions from the study was that the SCQ is a useful tool in understanding pupil response to this transition, it is not able to show the nuances that may be at play for each individual child that would be captured by using qualitative methods.

Helping to make the transition – child's perspective

In the study carried out by Zeedyk et al. (2003) children were also asked what skills they believed would help most in making this transition. Primary school pupils were widely of the view that academic ability was important for managing the transition, but did not endorse any other skill with any frequency, which could be suggestive of their lack of understanding of the number of changes that they will experience when making this move. For the secondary pupils who had already made the transition, academic matters were not prioritised and instead they emphasised time management, the ability to focus on a task, good behaviour and social skills as useful. This demonstrated the breadth of expectation they have faced on making the transition that they may have been unaware of whilst still in primary education.

Zeedyk et al. (2003) also asked for suggestions as to how to ease the transition, with the key suggestions being teacher visits from secondary school teachers, former pupils coming to speak at the primary school, and using a buddy system to help to ease the transition. Many of the respondents also suggested that the process of liaison with the secondary school should take place steadily throughout the year, rather than be confined to a few days in the final term, which currently seems to be the case for many primary schools.

In 2004 the government's Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners acknowledged that too many children find the primary to secondary transition difficult, with some falling back in their learning as a result (Evangelou et al., 2008). A sub-study on this transition was undertaken as part of the Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education 3–14 project, a major longitudinal study investigating the influence of pre-school, primary and secondary school on children's cognitive and social/behavioural development in England. This study used a mixed-methods approach to investigate the issues related to transition and again focused on responses from children, the difference here being that the questionnaire was completed by 550 participants at the end of their first term at secondary school, with no questionnaires completed with children whilst still at primary school. The questions focused on their thoughts and experiences of their transition and twelve case studies were also selected from respondents of the questionnaire, chosen because their answers reported positive experiences of their transitions. This study found that most children had a positive

experience of the transition but a noticeable minority did not, and this fits in line with many other studies in this area. They concluded that for children's transitions to be successful, three factors needed to be considered at both local authority and school levels. These were: social adjustment – 'the extent to which children have more and new friendships and higher self-esteem and report greater confidence after their transition to secondary school'; institutional adjustment – 'the survey showed that settling well into school life and getting used to new routines were two important elements of a successful transition'; and curriculum interest and continuity – 'children need to understand what is expected of them in secondary school, be prepared for the level and style of work, and be challenged to build on progress at primary school'. These few studies illustrate the breadth of areas that can possibly be considered when designing the right interventions for pupils going through this transition making the job of the policy makers very difficult. They also illustrate the different approaches that are being taken in investigating the issues and the lack of in-depth understanding of the transition from a child's perspective.

This study aims to build on the foundation created by previous studies and brings in the use of IPA in order to explore in detail the transition from the pupil's experience and how they are making sense of this key change in their lives. The four key questions that are being asked are: At the end of the first year of secondary school, how do pupils describe their personal experience of transition? What are the key concerns in existence prior to making the transition? What, if any, concerns exist at the end of the first year at secondary school? What are the most important factors that help to make this transition from a pupil's perspective?

Method
Design
An interpretative phenomenological analysis was conducted as it was congruent with the focus on exploring in detail how students are

making sense of their personal and social world (Smith & Osborn, 2008) during the transition.

Participants
One secondary school in England was approached and agreed to participate in the study. The school was a state-funded institution with intakes from a large number of local 'feeder schools', meaning that often pupils are arriving with no friends or a very small number (3–4), which can be particularly challenging as opposed to arriving with a large number of peers (see Gibson & Telhaj, 2016). Nine participants took part and represented a reasonably homogeneous, purposive sample (Smith & Osborn, 2008). There were seven girls and two boys who were all European, Caucasian, and aged 11 years at the time of the study. All of them joined this secondary school from different primary schools 10 months before the study took place. They were recruited by volunteering to take part in the study following a letter sent out to all Year 7 pupils and their parents describing the study. Various sample sizes have been used for IPA, typically from 1 to 15. The final sample size was limited to 9 based on the number of parents and children available/volunteering to take part.

Procedure
The interviews were conducted in a semi-private space in a busy area of the school. Each interview lasted approximately twenty minutes followed by a debrief with the pupils taking away the interviewer's details in case of any further questions or requests to withdraw.

Measures
A semi-structured interview schedule was designed with IPA guidelines and the age of the children in mind. The questions focused on the experience of transitioning to secondary school from the perspective of the children having made that transition 10 months earlier. Responses were probed further, as necessary, for clarification or further understanding. At the end of the interview pupils were invited to add any addi-

tional comments to ensure their experiences had been sufficiently covered.

Data analysis

The first step of the analysis was to transcribe the interviews verbatim. The data were then analysed using IPA. The analysis followed very closely the four-stage process described in Smith and Osborn (2008).

Analysis and discussion
Analytical overview

Through following the process of IPA analysis, seven superordinate and nine subordinate themes were identified all of which seemed to have high importance to some or all the pupils in being able to make this transition successfully and with limited anxiety. The analysis led to the formation of seven main themes, however only the first two main themes are presented as outlined below.

1. **Friendships**
   1.1 Making friends
   1.2 Changing nature of friendships
2. **Family support**
   2.1 Practical support
   2.2 Emotional support
   2.3 Impact of older sibling

1. Friendships

Across the majority of participants, making friends and the nature of these friendships as they move through Year 7 was a key contributing factor to how settled they felt. This fits in line with much of the literature that identified the importance of relationships with peers when making this transition (Evangelou et al., 2008; Zeedyk et al., 2003).

1.1 Making friends

During the summer before joining secondary school one of the key concerns for the participants was how successfully they would make friends. Here is an extract that illustrates how front of mind this issue is to a lot of the participants:

I was quite nervous because I came on my own with nobody else, so it was, like, quite a big move, like, from having a load of friends to then like not knowing anyone. I knew one person, but sadly I'm not in any of my classes with her, umm, but I'm, I'm really happy now because it was like, everyone was really friendly and nice and stuff, ummm, and everyone was looking out for me and stuff so it was, yeah, it was alright, yeah. (Pupil 1: 5)

This participant spells out quite clearly the anxiety that is felt in arriving at a school and not knowing anyone compared to having lots of friends at primary school. She quickly goes on though to show that, down to people being really friendly, she quickly moved on from that anxiety and things were ok. This seems to be common across the participants – that they have quite high levels of anxiety about this just before starting school, and another demonstration of this can be seen in the extract below:

I think the last two weeks I sort of really started thinking: Oh god, I'm going into this new school and with all these new people and a lot of people from primary school are not coming with me and I don't know what to do and I was freaking out the night before what to do. Waking up at a new time because it starts earlier and thinking what will I do... aarrgggghhh. (Pupil 3: 30)

This extract shows even more clearly the feeling of anxiety that builds – the language with very little pause creates a feeling of panic, and strong language about 'freaking out' and even actually saying 'aarrgggghhhh' at the end. A useful reminder of how this must have felt in those last couple of weeks before starting school.

Interestingly, though, for every pupil who suffered from any initial anxiety about making friends it quickly dissipated after arriving, often within the first two weeks as demonstrated in the following two extracts:

It's been quite good I was quite nervous about making friends at the start but I seem to have settled in quite well. (Pupil 5: 2)

Uhm…. in the first two weeks when I started like getting a little friend group going. (Pupil 7: 24).

This worry did seem to be stronger for those who would be starting the school with no friends at all compared to those who were joining with some peers.

Although this initial anxiety was short-lived, the theme of friendships continued throughout the first year at secondary for most of the pupils, with the focus seeming to be less on making friends but more on the changing nature of those friendships.

1.2 Changing nature of friendships

There was very little mention of leaving friends behind and for many of the participants their new secondary school friends seem to be their main group of friends now despite having spent years at school with their primary school friends. This extract shows one of the very positive accounts of the experience of making new friends:

I think the new friends that I have got are much better than the people who went to different schools and stuff but I just made so many connections with these people it's just fantastic. (Pupil 3: 36)

And with these new friends seems to come new experiences and for some, new challenges. The extract below is from a participant who was finding it difficult to deal with the comings and goings of some of the girls into the friendship group:

I think I need to make sure everyone who is friends is friends because there is like a massive group of girls but like some of them are like not always with us, they are like in and out, like, if they don't like that person they come back to us, so I think I would get that settled and then it would be like a 10. (Pupil 6: 44)

From her language and description of what was happening she was obviously finding this difficult and would much prefer it if people had their friendship groups established and stayed within those rather than changing their minds. This is possibly in comparison to how things were at primary school, where there were a lot fewer pupils and therefore things were less complicated. This is a good demonstration of how having to navigate friendships is quite different in the secondary setting.

Another example of the changing nature is of a participant who had mainly male friends at primary school and played a lot of football. However, she had found things very different at secondary as this extract shows:

I'm a bit different to every other girl because I wear trousers and I play football, so I'm a bit different to everyone else, but I fit in fine…… I fitted in more with the boys than the girls at primary school and now I have more girls….. At primary I used to have goals and everything but now people just take the football and it's just not really as fun as it used to be…. It's ok because I get to learn a lot more about girls and get more into it, but I play football as well out of school so it's alright. (Pupil 7: 32)

As she talked about the situation she now found herself in it was clear that, although she said that she was fine with her new situation, it was actually quite difficult for her. Her whole identity seemed to have been questioned and she now felt that there was no choice other than to be with the girls, and although she was looking at the positives from this in terms of learning about the girls, she refers to now having to get the happiness she gets from her love of football outside of school. This is another good demonstration of how the dynamics of friendship have shifted quite fundamentally for this pupil.

It was also clear that friendships also become more supportive for some and that friends are using each other to help with problems – both academically and personally. This extract shows this:

I know a lot of people who find that very difficult because for me most of my friends are in top set like me and I think the homework is a lot harder and its pushed onto your back a bit and I do know people who struggle, but I think we are all helping each other and if someone needs help they just send us a message and we all help each other. (Pupil 3: 56)

This shows that when struggling with the new pressures of homework this pupil's first reaction for how they get help is from friends, not from teachers or parents – and this seemed to be common, especially when it came to homework challenges. This extract also introduces the use of mobile phones and that when arriving at secondary school the majority have mobile phones and so can have an independent level of contact with friends which seems to facilitate this assistance that they can give each other outside of the formal structures of the school.

This theme of the importance of the changing nature of friendships seemed to fit in line with the importance of social adjustment as identified by Evangelou et al.(2008) in their study. Fenzel (2000) found that the strain of managing new peer relationships following transition was associated with decreases in self-worth over this period. It seemed to be that for a few of the participants in this study this was the case and that the continued uncertainty about friendships and friendship groups was causing them continued anxiety and was the one thing that might be preventing them from truly feeling settled. Weller (2007) stated that children's relatedness with peers undergoes big changes at transition. Old friendships are dismantled, new ones form, and old friends are introduced to new ones in larger peer groups. This makes for a period of relational instability; however, in time, children are able to make a better matched group of friend's post-transition (Weller, 2007) and can move into larger cliques of friends (Symonds, 2009). This certainly seemed to be the case for many of the pupils who were experiencing changes in friendships. For some this seemed to now be settled, but others were still experiencing shifts in friendship groups and finding their stable group, something that seemed to be very important to them.

There were also positive changes in terms of the relationships that were being made. Weller, (2007) stated that children purposefully use friendships and acquaintances to support their adjustment to secondary school, and this was also seen to be the case – several of the participants gave examples of where their new friends were supporting them through friendship or academic issues.

This theme of 'Friendship' seemed to illustrate that whilst making friends is a key concern to pupils during the summer before they arrive at secondary school, this quickly dissipates and then the bigger area of concern and the thing that stays with many of them throughout the first year of secondary school is managing the changing nature of their friendships, which can have both positive and negative impacts.

2. Family support
In every interview the importance of family support was clear, this was both in terms of emotional support and practical support. And there was a striking impact of having an older sibling in the school.

2.1 Practical support
Practical support seemed key to quite a few participants, someone at home who was checking that they had what they needed for the day as well as help with homework when they were stuck. This extract shows the range of areas that this support can cross:

They kept reminding me for the day did I need any homework or any books or they like would be saying about yeah they'd just like support you as well and say hope you have a good day and whatever and guide you out the door. The first couple of days they drove me up to the bus stop and then I started walking. (Pupil 2: 58)

For Pupil number 4 there seemed to be a lot of comfort in knowing that her mum could contact the school if she needed to:

> *I think like with homework if they need help they can help and if you have a problem you can go to them and they can help you because they are in contact with the school. We haven't needed to do it but I have a brother and he is autistic so then sometimes the teachers sort of forget that and mum needs to mail them and they take off a bad point or something cos he didn't mean to do that if that makes sense. So they can get in contact because if they are worrying about it then they, it's good.* (Pupil 4: 50)

For all of these pupils there seemed to be a mixture of new found independence, but still needing that back up support at home which was a reminder that they are still fairly young at 11 years old, with some maturing more quickly than others.

2.2 Emotional support

The need for some emotional support at home for the participants came through in many of the interviews:

> *Yeah, definitely, every time that like my nan calls she says are you still with the friends who you made before and stuff and has anything happened and, uhmm, obviously because the two girls get on my bus, one of them gets off two stops, uhmm, before me and one of them is same stop as me so I see them like at the same time every day and if they like upset, or something I always go home and like mum is there and I always talk to her about it and sometimes it's online and sometimes it's not so I show my mum if is online obviously and I tell her if it isn't, yeah, and so that has really helped me.* (Pupil 1: 77)

This extract shows the importance of mum being at home – several participants mentioned this; it seemed to be a great comfort to know that they would get back and have that safe place with someone to

talk things through with. They can also help in terms of using their own experiences e.g. Pupil 9 took a lot of comfort in the help from his mum and dad:

> *I had my mum and my dad, they like helped me like, they kind of helped me too, because they knew what it was like they helped me to feel the way that they did.* (Pupil 9: 4)

This need for support seemed to be so important that it was also key not to feel an additional pressure coming through from home as depicted below:

> *Uhm, I wouldn't want them to be too strict, like when you are in primary school they might be really nice but then when you are on high school they like might be like you have to do this now because you're older and mature I wouldn't do that because I think that makes you even more stress.* (Pupil 6: 80)

It seemed that Pupil 6 might have been told that she was older and more mature and it worried her that parents would be stricter and went as far to refer to them being 'nice' at primary school suggesting that they were not quite so 'nice' now. It conjured up an image of parents being fairly 'soft' throughout primary school in line with how the children are treated there, but when things get a bit tougher at secondary school, a desire for the parents to stay more in 'primary mode'. There is so much adjustment with secondary school that this need at home seems greater than ever.

There was also an example, in Pupil 3, of a participant struggling but actually finding that the way her parents were responding to her was making her scenario harder:

> *I don't feel comfortable talking to my parents about my friends and things like that. I feel comfortable talking about my homework and my grades and how I'm going to do it, but when I have a friendship that may not go well or something has happened with them in their life I just don't talk to my parents because they*

sort of, they sort of make it seem bigger and they sort of say ok we won't talk about that – you don't need to go to youth club this week because obviously you don't need to see that person. Well I do want to see that person; it's just they've got something going on. I do want to see my friends, so I don't always feel comfortable talking about it. (Pupil 3: 60)

This is a pupil who is struggling and who talks about her parents making it 'bigger' than before for her. It creates a feeling of her parents not being fully in tune with what she is talking to them about and suggesting that she stops doing something that is obviously important to her. This results in her no longer wanting to talk to them and therefore missing out on the support that so many of the other pupils seem to rely on and take comfort in.

A small but increasing number of studies have focused on the role of parents and family processes at transition. In their review of the literature, Symonds and Galton (2014) found that parents who were sensitively involved with their child's social and academic lives can decrease their child's risk for negative adjustment at transition. This seemed to be the case across the majority of the pupils here that they were still very reliant on the support from home and that where that was in place it made a huge difference to their experience of transition. This was positive for most with one example of where parental intervention was having a negative impact and resulting in the pupil covering up the bullying that they were experiencing. This seems to be an area that warrants much more research and focus due to the impact that it can have.

2.3 Impact of an older sibling
One of the most striking areas in this study is the positive impact of having an older sibling who is already at the secondary school:

If you have like a sister or brother or someone you're really close to then tell them about it. Like I told my sister that I was nervous and she was like well do this and do that and they

really help you and so now I'm alright because that really helped. (Pupil 6: 86)

This theme was consistent; that nerves seemed to dissipate for those who had an older sibling who they could talk to and who could allay their fears. It also seemed to hugely reduce the nerves before arriving, and with most participants they did not even feel the need to visit the school before they started, as it already felt like a familiar place to them that they had been to for more relaxed reasons than due to it being their future school. Another extract that shows the assistance this brings is below:

My brother already came here so I went to his visiting evening so I didn't need to come… yeah, because I catch the train and so my brother does everything with me… Just my brother really telling me what to do, where everything is, what every teacher's like, if they like give lots of homework or if they don't. (Pupil 7: 14)

They could also assist practically in terms of showing them where to go within the school:

No, my brother was already here so he told me what it was about and what they did and everything so that kind of got it over…. cos we have like different rooms for every lesson, like at primary school we only had one room for every lesson so he told me like I didn't say like go to a science room and I didn't know what it was called and he showed me where to go compared to like one of my friends who like did come he didn't have like a brother or sister here so it meant that he had to like work it out… (Pupil 8: 16)

Throughout the interviews, for those who did have an older sibling there seemed to be less anxiety and more excitement in the build up to making the transition. They also seemed to settle very quickly. The pupils with older siblings also seem to have started to build a relationship with the school over time through attending events at the school

which seemed to have had a much bigger impact on feeling settled at school than the more structured formal events organised as part of the transition.

This would be an interesting area of future study due to a lack of current literature in existence that focuses on the impact of families and specifically siblings.

General discussion

This study set out to explore the direct experiences of pupils making the transition from primary to secondary school. The individual details presented in the participants' accounts articulate both some shared experiences and views as well as their unique and personal experiences. In analysing the interviews using IPA methodology it was certainly the case, as found in many studies, that most of the pupils had now settled at secondary school and, despite their initial concerns, that this had happened fairly quickly. It was also apparent that the majority of the pupils could not remember being particularly concerned about the transition whilst still in primary school as found by Zeedyk et al. (2003), they were too focused on being in the moment and therefore any interventions put in place by the secondary school such as open days and evenings were largely unimpactful.

A key finding of this study was that for eight of the nine pupils, although they were mostly settled, there were still areas that were causing them anxiety and that they were looking for support with even though they were nearly at the end of their first year. This fits with the views of Zeedyk et al. (2003) and Stradling and MacNeil (2000) that the majority of pupils do experience some degree of concern well into their first year at secondary school. In addition to those concerns there was one pupil who was struggling very much with settling, which seemed to be largely down to a bullying situation that had not been dealt with effectively. This seems to suggest that the concerns held by many around the possibility of experiencing bullying at secondary school can, in some cases, be a valid one.

The issue that impacted most at this stage was the changing nature of friendships, and this was continuing for many still, 10 months into their transition.

Practical implications

Following the literature review and the results from this study, certain practical implications have been identified that could influence school policy and the approach that is taken to improve the experience of transition for many pupils. This study suggests that any interventions that are put in place should start in the final year of primary school and continue well into secondary school. It does seem to be the case that although the earlier period in secondary school is categorised by considerable fluctuation in anxieties, that the more deep-seated ones only emerge later (Measor & Woods, 1984; Muldoon, 2005).

Families seem absolutely key in this transition being successful and yet there is currently very little, if any, attention paid to how to support with this. A programme of support for parents could be hugely advantageous in assisting them to understand the change that their children are going to go through and what they can do to support them. Jindal-Snape & Miller (2008) adapted Rutter's (1987) four-part model of protective factors which mediate risk at key life turning points and recommended four ways in which parents can support children at transition. These were altering how their child interacts with risk at transition, decreasing the number of risk factors at transition through their active involvement, providing opportunities for positive development that may impact their child's experience of risk at transition and attempting to increase their child's self-esteem and efficacy, which may help their child overcome negative transition experiences. The development of a programme for parents that covered these areas could be beneficial to both parents and pupils.

The possibility for schools to switch from focusing on the formal interventions such as open days, etc. and instead looking at creating informal peer relationships and involvement

in school during the final year of primary school should also be considered. The impact of having an older sibling was striking for the pupils in this study and so schools could look at how they could re-create some of the benefits gained from having a sibling at the school for those who do not have this situation. These could include inviting the Year 6 pupils into the school for events such as school plays, assemblies throughout their final year at primary, allowing them to get the chance to be in the school. The other would be to set up a buddying system where the new pupils are matched with an older pupil who they interact with during their final year at primary school and who plays a one-on-one role with them throughout their first year at secondary school.

What seems more important is a focus on the changing nature of relationships and how pupils can understand this and navigate their way through it. It seems most of the pupils interviewed could also benefit from some additional support with navigating the realities of secondary school and some of the key skills involved such as time management and behaviour management. This study would suggest that this work may not have the desired impact whilst still at primary school and would be more impactful if ran on arrival at secondary school and throughout the first year.

Delving more deeply into the impacts that families can have on making this transition a successful one and on children's education generally could be useful in understanding this more and in identifying ways to further support parents with this key part of their role. Finally, further use of IPA as a method to understand the reality of this transition for pupils would be valid, especially if used as part of a longitudinal study that started at the beginning of the final year of primary school and continued through the first few years of secondary school.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study has given a useful insight into the real-life experiences of pupils as they make the transition from primary school to secondary school. The key concerns picked up by much of the previous literature seem to be highlighting some key areas such as the role of peer friendship yet other areas of focus were identified that are seen less in the literature such as the impact of families – both parenting and older siblings.

This study has demonstrated that IPA is a helpful methodology to use alongside other types of research to be able to truly understand the experience of pupils, to give further details on areas already identified, to identify new areas for future focus, and to make recommendations for schools, parents, and policy-makers in how to manage this transition most effectively.

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