Pupil mental health, concerns and expectations about secondary school

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Talk overview

• Mental health and the transition from primary school to secondary school

• Children’s concerns and expectations about the transition to secondary school

• What factors are associated with transition success measured later?
  • Preliminary look at possible mechanisms (peers, bullying)

• What implications do the results have for supporting young people over the transition to secondary school?
Data overview

- School Transition and Adjustment Study (STARS)
- 10 secondary schools in Greater London and Cambridge N=1646

- School Health Research Network
- 210 secondary schools in Wales (94% response rate to 2019 survey, overall pupil response rate 72% N=119,388)
Transition from primary to secondary school

• Identified as one of five important transitions for young people by World Bank

• Co-occur with other significant changes (puberty)

• Transition periods – heightened susceptibility to change
  • Windows of opportunity for intervention

• Transition periods negotiated successfully can have long term effects
Background (i)

- Mental health difficulties at the beginning of secondary school associated with lower academic attainment (controlling for stability of)

Cross-lagged effects on academic attainment:

- Depressive symptoms
- Conduct problems
- School liking
- School concerns (boys)

Background (ii)
How to define a successful transition?

• Multi-dimensional construct

• Four primary cognitive and inter-personal demands:
  • Progressing academically
  • Meeting expectations of new school and teachers
  • Becoming comfortable in new school environment
  • Gaining acceptance by peers

Birch & Ladd., 1996; Ladd & Kochenderfer, 1996
Who’s concerned? Mental health and demographic influences

• Pupil mental health problems associated with greater concerns about transition (Moore et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2011)

• For those with mental health problems, parents and teachers have lower expectations that pupils will settle in well to secondary school
Table 2  Cross-sectional Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study variable</th>
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<td>4. Emotional problems</td>
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<td>5. Peer problems</td>
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<td>6. Conduct problems</td>
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<td>7. Hyperactivity</td>
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<td>8. Total difficulties</td>
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<td>9. FSM eligibility</td>
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<td>12. Attainment (year 6)</td>
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<td>.520***</td>
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<td>13. Female gender</td>
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<td>-.137***</td>
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<td>.37</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.45</td>
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</table>

*p<.1. **p<.05. ***p<.01. ****p<.001. N=433-1,643 Acronyms: START = The Secondary Transition Adjustment Research Tool; FSM = Free School Meal eligibility; SEN = Special Educational Need status; EAL = English as an Additional Language. a to examine the association of SEN with binary variables; SEN status was dichotomised and a tetrachoric correlation calculated.

Rice, Ng-Knight, Riglin, Powell, Moore, McManus, Shelton, Frederickson School Mental Health 13:279-298.
Who’s concerned?

• Representative survey of 2218 children in Wales
• One third children reported being worried about transition to secondary school
• Two thirds looking forward to it
  • These items moderately correlated ($r=-.37$)
  • 14% neither worried nor looking forward
  • 18% worried but not looking forward
  • 49% looking forward to but not worrying about
  • 19% worried and looking forward to

• Groups more worried:
  • Schools with a higher % of pupils eligible for free school meals
  • Lower family affluence scores;
  • Higher emotional difficulties;
  • Less marked association with higher behavioural difficulties

Who’s concerned? Summary

• Outcomes:
  • Children’s worries or concerns (total score)
  • Parent or primary school teacher expectations about how well children will settle in (academically, socially with peers, socially with teachers, to the new routine)

• Influences:
  • Special educational needs and lower academic attainment at primary
  • Those with pre-existing mental health difficulties
  • Eligibility for free school meals measured differently across studies
    • No clear association in STARS where measured at individual level (except on teacher rated expectations)
    • In SHRN schools where a greater % of children were eligible for free school meals had more pupils who reported being worried about secondary school
What are pupils worried about?

• Open ended responses classified into themes:
  • Bullying (35%)
  • Friendships (impact on existing friendships) (23%)
  • Academic aspects (14%)
  • Navigating a new physical environment (12%)
  • Relationships with teachers (3.5%)

What do pupils look forward to?

- Open ended responses classified into themes:
  - Peer relationships (44%)
  - Academic aspects (28%)
  - Independence (5%)
  - Extra-curricular activities (6.5%)
  - A new start (7%)
  - Relationships with teachers (2%)
  - Better food (4%)

What are pupils worried about?

- School concerns questionnaire (20 items rated on a 10-point scale)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>End of year 6</th>
<th>Start of year 7</th>
<th>End of year 7</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Getting lost</td>
<td>Losing old friends</td>
<td>Losing old friends</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Losing old friends</td>
<td>Discipline &amp; detentions</td>
<td>Discipline &amp; detentions</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>Being bullied</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Being bullied</td>
<td>Getting lost</td>
<td>Homework</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Discipline &amp; detentions</td>
<td>Older children</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Being bullied</td>
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<td>9.</td>
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<td>Getting lost</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
What are pupils worried about? Change over time

- Reduce over time
- Reduce more slowly for girls
- Certain items persistently endorsed:
  - Losing old friends
  - Homework
  - Discipline and detentions
What are pupils worried about? Summary

• Concerns reduce post-transition

• The nature of concerns changes subtly pre and post transition

• Losing old friends is a persistent concern

• Transition is a period of flux for friendships

• Evidence that maintaining good quality friendships over transition is beneficial (Ng-Knight et al., 2019 B J Educational Psychology)
What best predicts how well pupils settle into secondary school?

Year 6 (summer term)
- Concerns
- Expectations
- Mental health

Year 7 (summer term)
- Multiple indicators of transition to secondary school
  - Academic attainment
  - Classmate rated behaviour (cooperative, disruptive)
  - School liking
  - Loneliness at school
What best predicts how well pupils settle into secondary school?

**Year 6 (summer term)**
- Concerns
- Expectations
- Mental health

**Year 7 (summer term)**
- Loneliness
- Multiple indicators of outcome
- Attainment & classroom behaviour
- Primary teacher ratings all outcomes
Summary of findings

• Some degree of apprehension appears normative:
  • Worry often co-occurs with looking forward to transition (1/2 of those expressing worries)
  • Most concerns reduce post-transition
    • More slowly for girls
  • Concerns about friendships, homework, discipline and detentions elevated post-transition

• Which young people have more concerns or parents/teachers expect difficulties with transition?
  • Children with special educational needs
  • Children from poorer schools and families
  • Children with pre-existing mental health difficulties (strongest associations for total difficulties and emotional problems)

• Longitudinal analysis shows:
  • Parent and teacher expectations associated with all aspects of post-transition functioning (attainment, classmate rated behaviour, liking school, not being lonely at school)
  • Pupil concerns associated with relatively few aspects of post-transition adaptive functioning
  • Mental health difficulties associated with academic attainment and classmate rated behaviour
Implications for practice

• Transition to secondary school
  • Key life course stage when inequalities emerging during childhood may be widened (Moore et al., 2020)
  • Window of opportunity for intervention as most schools have support programs in place (but vary widely and are not evaluated)
  • Need for universal and targeted approaches
  • Vulnerable groups identified here
  • Effectiveness of the same approaches may differ in different groups (Neal et al., 2016)

• Concerns about transition common but for most reduce rapidly post transition
  • Need for support to consider those elements of persistent concern for children (e.g. maintaining existing friendships) which are often not seen as priorities for schools (Keay et al., 2015)

• Primary teacher ratings on how they expected children to settle into secondary school associated with multiple indicators of post-transition adaptation (moderate effect sizes)
  • Brief 4-item questionnaire (START) free to use (Rice et al., 2015 and 2021)
Future directions

• SHRN currently piloting an electronic survey with Year 6 pupils
  • Enable analysis of pupils concerns about transition among a cohort of children who have missed large chunks of in person KS2

• Expansion of the SHRN network downwards to include primary school will enable exploration of models of data sharing and collaborative working across school transition to support pupils
Acknowledgements

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  - Chris McManus, Norah Frederickson, University College London
- School Transition and Adjustment Research Study:

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