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Emotional Wellbeing in the Context of Primary-Secondary School Transitions: A Concept Analysis Paper

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Abstract

The number of children experiencing poor emotional wellbeing, which can lead to clinically significant mental health conditions in the long term, is increasing rapidly, as are government initiatives outlining the ‘frontline role’ of the school in supporting children’s emotional wellbeing during critical periods such as primary-secondary school transitions. However, both concepts (‘primary-secondary school transitions’ and ‘emotional wellbeing’) are poorly and inconsistently conceptualised and/or theoretically defined. This has significant consequences for identifying and supporting children’s emotional wellbeing. The aim of this concept analysis is to report a synthesis of the extant literature and define emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions as a concept of emerging importance. The Walker and Avant (2005) method was utilised as a framework. Attributes, antecedents, and empirical referents were identified through synthesis of methodological approaches (specifically an international systematic literature review, UK-wide survey and 10 focus groups) and the mapping of multiple stakeholder perspectives (specifically researchers, educational practitioners, policy influencers and/or makers, and children). Attributes of emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions include children’s affective experience of navigating primary-secondary school transitions in the here-and-now (e.g. presence of both positive and negative emotions), and their evaluations of their emotional wellbeing both globally and in the context of specific domains. Antecedents include children’s perceptions of their internal and external resources to manage the demands of primary-secondary school transitions and maintain a stable affective state. Consequences (positive and negative) include academic attainment, social adjustment, and school belonging in the short-term, and mental health, life chances, and social inequalities in the long-term. Our novel conceptualisation overcomes limitations in existing understanding of both primary-secondary school transitions and emotional wellbeing, establishing a foundation for developing a more cohesive and theoretical body of work within

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

the field. Our conceptualisation and operational definition will have notable positive implications in advancing future research, policy, and practice, which are outlined.

Keywords Primary-secondary school transitions · Emotional wellbeing

Background

There is shared agreement that transitions from primary school to secondary school, which children make at age 11 years in the UK, can be an emotionally demanding long-term experience (Bagnall, C. L. (2020); Department for Education, 2023; White, 2020). This is recognised in research (Beatson et al., 2023; Demkowicz et al., 2023), by those supporting children during transitions (e.g. parents/guardians, teachers) (Jindal-Snape & Cantali., 2019), and within policy (Department for Education, 2021), and is especially pertinent when considering the recovery of children’s emotional wellbeing following the COVID-19 pandemic (Bagnall et al., 2022; Leaton Gray et al., 2021). During primary-secondary transitions, children negotiate multiple and simultaneous changes, in their relationships with teachers and classmates, identity (primary to secondary school child, child to young person), school environment, and academic expectations. (Jindal-Snape, 2023) *Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions Theory (MMT)* proposes that adaptation to these changes leads to multiple and multi-dimensional “transitions”. These transitions can be both exciting and worrying at the same time, and span across several domains (e.g. psychological, educational, social) and contexts (e.g. school, home, community environment). Further, children’s transitions interact with those of significant others within their connected ecosystems, which are situated within an ever-evolving, dynamic environment, e.g. during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jindal-Snape et al., 2023b).

Primary-secondary school transitions occur alongside other developmental transitions, such as hormonal changes associated with puberty (Ng-Knight et al., 2016), in addition to school-based pressures, such as academic national Standard Assessment Tests in England, which can further disrupt children’s cognitive processing and perpetuate feelings of instability during this time (Bharara, 2020). For example, although many children feel optimistic about the opportunities that primary-secondary school transitions afford, a substantive body of research also shows that adapting to multiple and multi-dimensional changes can be difficult. A failure to navigate these school transitions can have ongoing short- and long-term social, academic, and emotional implications (West et al., 2010; White, 2020).

At face value, there appears to be considerable research in relation to primary-secondary school transitions. However, much of this research lacks holistic consideration of the impact of primary-secondary school transitions on children’s emotional wellbeing (Jindal-Snape et al. (2020); White, 2020). Instead, most focus on the social and academic implications of primary-secondary school transitions, despite emotional wellbeing having a demonstrable direct link with children’s academic functioning (Vassilopoulos et al., 2018) and social adjustment (Coffey, 2013).

A resultant criticism of the current field is that, to date, there is a limited understanding of (a) how primary-secondary school transitions affect emotional wellbeing and the implication of this for mental health, (b) which aspects of emotional wellbeing are most affected by primary-secondary school transitions, (c) how potentially vulnerable children can be identified, and (d) what universal and targeted emotional wellbeing support could be useful. For example, we know that there is a positive correlation between wellbeing and the criteria of positive transitions experiences, which include school bonding and behavioural adjustment, but as outlined by Bharrara (2020), “there is no model befitting the relationship between school transition and wellbeing” (p. 107). In part, research to advance this understanding is constrained by lack of conceptual clarity in how we define and understand emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions. Therefore, this concept analysis paper aims to establish a foundation for developing a more cohesive and theoretical body of work.

Conceptualisations of Primary-Secondary School Transitions

Jindal-Snape et al. (2020) undertook a systematic literature review of primary-secondary transitions research articles published between 2008 and 2018, and a systematic mapping of conceptualisations of primary-secondary transitions within them (Jindal-Snape et al., 2021). They found that most of the authors of the 96 included articles had neither clearly defined nor operationalised transitions (Jindal-Snape et al., 2021). They undertook a discourse analysis of the 96 articles, focussing on the words used in each article, as well as their research design and mentions/use of any theory. After a rigorous cross-check by the research team, they identified nine conceptualisation/s of primary-secondary transitions (see Table 1).

Further, none of these studies asked their participants about their conceptualisation. However, another study published in 2019, that asked educational professionals about their conceptualisations, found that there was no shared understanding, even

Table 1 Conceptualisation of primary-secondary transitions in international literature

Conceptualisation	Number of articles	Example
1. Change (organisational, pedagogical approach, routines, etc.)	54	e.g. Mackenzie et al. (2012)
2. Normative life event	41	e.g. Neal et al. (2016)
3. Normative period in educational journey	20	e.g. Weiss and Baker-Smith et al. (2010)
4. Multiple transitions	11	e.g. Lofgran et al. (2015)
5. Disruption and risk	8	e.g. Keay et al. (2015)
6. Discontinuity	6	e.g. Makin et al. (2017)
7. Life course	3	e.g. Fortuna (2014)
8. Rite of passage	3	e.g. West et al. (2010)
9. Turning points	3	e.g. Scanlon et al. (2016)

**There were multiple conceptualisations in some articles

within the same school, with transitions conceptualised as change or move by most participants (Jindal-Snape & Cantali., 2019).

Additionally, discourse about primary-secondary school transitions was unbalanced with 63% studies using a negative discourse, 26% a mixed discourse (of these 16% were more negative than positive), 9% neutral, and only 2% using a predominantly positive discourse (Jindal-Snape et al., 2021). Unbalanced and negative discourse situating primary-secondary school transitions is leading, and likely to yield imprecise estimates of children's experiences during this time, biasing study findings, and could also have adverse impacts on transitions-aged children and their parents/guardians.

This lack of explicit conceptualisation by the researchers (and participants), and consequently the lack of operationalisation of a key concept, is problematic. It can cast doubts about the robustness of the research design, trustworthiness of the data and its interpretation, and usefulness and validity of recommendations made for future research, policy, and practice. Similarly, an unbalanced discourse in research, with a focus on the negative aspects of transitions, is also problematic as it can lead to unnecessary anxiety for children and families, which in itself can then have a detrimental impact on children's emotional wellbeing. Other research, for instance, has suggested that a mismatch in expectation and reality, even when the reality is more positive than expected, can have a detrimental impact on wellbeing (Jindal-Snape 2023); Zhou, 2019).

Conceptualisations of Emotional Wellbeing

Emotional wellbeing is a decidedly nebulous concept (Farrell et al., 2024), with the interdisciplinary nature of research within the field leading to inconsistencies in conceptualisation (with a particular gap between the theoretical assumptions of emotional wellbeing and its associated empirical constructs; of interest to the present concept analysis paper) and measurement (e.g. which psychological aspects of wellbeing to target in research studies, interventions, and/or policy work) (VanderWeele et al., 2020).

Child and adolescent emotional wellbeing is no exception; for example within their concept analysis paper, Courtwright et al. (2020) proposed that emotional wellbeing in youth can operationally be defined as an overall positive state of emotions, self-esteem, and resilience. Antecedents including safe and stable relationships, connectedness, hope, and positive body image, and consequences included self-actualisation, self-efficacy, and health-promoting behaviours. However, within this study, eudaimonia and hedonia were not discussed as part of their conceptualisation, which is surprising given that these concepts have featured heavily as the theoretical background of wellbeing studies. For example, Avedissian and Alayan (2021) reviewed the literature to reach a conceptualisation of broader "adolescent wellbeing", which was broken down into internal (e.g. physical, psychological) and external (e.g. economic, education) antecedents, and "eudaimonia", a word that means "doing well" or "thriving" and is commonly associated with emotional wellbeing alongside "hedonia", or "feeling good" (Huta & Waterman, 2014), as consequences. However,

empirical research into the distinction between them, or whether they do in fact provide a comprehensive idea of what emotional wellbeing, is a relatively new field of research. For example, very recent work by Khanna et al. (2024) found low discriminant validity between eudaimonia and hedonia, and evidence of a singular construct of “wellbeing”. The authors recommend further theoretical work, to improve the clarity of these two ideas, or alternatively, that researchers investigate different ways of dividing the idea of wellbeing.

Moreover, research to advance conceptual understanding of emotional wellbeing is constrained by lack of conceptual clarity, or consensus on how to understand the spectrum of mental health, e.g. from emotional wellbeing to psychopathology. For example, a review by Renwick et al. (2022) uses the phrase “mental health and wellbeing” throughout, treating them, for the most part, as a singular entity. This may in part be explained by widely used definitions (e.g. World Health Organization’s definition of mental health) that use almost identical terminology to define both wellbeing and mental health, despite consistent research which has shown lack of conceptual overlap between measures of wellbeing and mental health (Black et al., 2023).

Feller et al., (2018, p.136) proposed a national public health initiative focusing on emotional wellbeing, defined as “...an umbrella term for psychological concepts such as life satisfaction, life purpose, and positive emotions...”, to organise existing research, and serve as a unifying foundation for future conceptualisation (e.g. defining what is/is not emotional wellbeing to establish shared terms) and operationalisation work (systematic measurement of emotional wellbeing, or identification of the drivers of emotional wellbeing to target within intervention research).

Extending on the above research, we define emotional wellbeing as not synonymous with the absence of mental illness, nor mental health. Instead, it is an umbrella label for several related psychometrically defined concepts, which encompass several psychological dimensions, including affective dimensions, such as positive and negative affect (e.g. moods, emotions, states); cognitive dimensions, such as sense of meaning and purpose (e.g. life satisfaction, social connection), and positive and negative functioning (e.g. feelings of autonomy, competence) (Ryff, 2013). This definition is in line with Park et al. (2023) multi-disciplinary review and concept mapping paper of emotional wellbeing and related concepts: “... an overall positive state of one’s emotions, life satisfaction, sense of meaning and purpose, and ability to pursue self-defined goals”. Emotional wellbeing therefore comprises three components: (1) eudaimonia, characterised by having a sense of meaning and purpose in life; (2) evaluative wellbeing (or life satisfaction), involving reflective, general judgements (or perceptions) of life satisfaction; and (3) hedonic (or experiential) wellbeing, referring to momentary emotional states.

Conceptualisations of Emotional Wellbeing in the Context of Primary-Secondary School Transitions

However, it is important to note that current conceptualisations of both emotional wellbeing and primary-secondary school transitions experiences are limited in that they do not consider the “context” in which thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are

situated. This contextual element is important, to understand how children respond over time to the multiple and multi-dimensional “transitions” they are negotiating, and the specific emotional reactions evoked, to holistically understand their experiences. This was shown in our pilot work, where Year 7 children (first year of secondary school in England) were asked to describe what emotional wellbeing and emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions “look like” and if they thought they were the same, or different, and why. Emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions was defined as “feelings which we’ve not had to understand before” and had an experiential and personal meaning to the children: this concept represented new emotions that children must deal with as a response to new experiences that occur over primary-secondary school transitions. Without this contextual element, emotional wellbeing as a general concept was discussed as not completely representing children’s experiences and feelings during primary-secondary school transitions (Bagnall et al., 2024a).

This missing contextual element has also been raised in Bagnall & Jindal-Snape (2023) international systematic literature review, which explicitly focussed on how researchers’ conceptualisations of emotional wellbeing and primary-secondary school transitions have been operationalised within the field to date, through the child self-report measures that were used within their research studies. It was found that, to date, there is no single measure which assesses children’s emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions. Instead, researchers are using measures which assess (a) solely primary-secondary school transitions experiences, (b) solely emotional wellbeing using one or more measure, or (c) primary-secondary school transitions experiences and emotional wellbeing unrelated measures.

All three of these measure designs are inadequate, as they are unable to holistically assess emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions. This shortcoming consequentially inhibits progress within the field. For example, it was common for authors of studies within the review to use more than one measure to assess emotional wellbeing, given that no measure fully captures the emotional experiences children navigate over primary-secondary school transitions. Also, primary-secondary school transitions experiences were not measured, and instead, primary-secondary school transitions were operationalised in terms of a change in emotional wellbeing between two time points: pre and post, the “move” to secondary school (Bagnall & Jindal-Snape, 2023). This is not only inconsistent with common metrics agenda, which has raised the importance of consistent use of clear and well theorised and conceptualised measures to allow clear benchmarking of outcomes and read-across of measurements between studies (Krause et al., 2021), but it is also problematic for the field, as items included are not specific to the primary-secondary school transitions context. Furthermore, this limitation was not overcome for studies which used a measure to assess emotional wellbeing, plus a separate measure to assess primary-secondary school transitions experiences (Bagnall & Jindal-Snape, 2023). If children are not directly asked about their feelings towards the contextually specific transitions negotiated, it is unclear whether changes in emotional wellbeing are reflective of primary-secondary school transitions, and thus context driven, or reflective of other environmental or personal factors. Thus, as

outlined by Feller et al. (2018), stakeholder engagement is paramount to understand and elucidate the numerous factors that contribute to improvements or declines in emotional wellbeing, to identify shared conceptualisations, inform measurements, and implement interventions to improve outcomes.

Rationale

Drawing on recommendations for the need for more thorough and consistent use of outcome measures within primary-secondary school transitions research (Beatson et al., 2023), it is clear that a singular measure to assess emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school is needed. This could accelerate progress within the field by enabling synthesis, comparison, and integration of evidence across studies and settings to avoid data fragmentation (Petersen et al., 2022). To overcome these limitations, the authors of the present paper are currently designing the *Primary-Secondary School Transitions Emotional Wellbeing Scale (P-S WELLS)*. This will be the first robust, sensitive, and standardised accessible scale, that longitudinally assesses children's emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions. However, prior to developing a scale to measure children's emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions, it is necessary to develop a clear theoretical and conceptual definition of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions, which is the aim of the present concept analysis paper. This draws on recommendations by du Preez and de Klerk (2019), that the "conceptualisation" (finding a definition for a section of reality) and "operationalisation" (attributing measurement to this reality) stages of scale measure development are often erroneously merged.

Furthermore, within both stages, qualitative insights are frequently underutilised and/or poorly reported, thus limiting meaningfulness and personal relevance to those completing the scale (Veloze et al., 2012). Moreover, despite children having first-hand recent insight into the experience of navigating primary-secondary school transitions, conceptualisation and operationalisation of both emotional wellbeing and primary-secondary school transitions have been dominated by "adult agendas" (Jindal-Snape et al., 2021; Bagnall et al., 2019). Uncertainty surrounding what is most important to children during this time has significant negative implications for supporting them. Thus, it is important that our conceptualisation of emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions is not defined by these limitations, and instead developed in partnership with children to ensure that it fully captures their emotional experiences during this time, is relevant to their context, and is age and stage appropriate. To do this, we will include primary data collected from 10 focus group discussions with Year 6 and Year 7 (P7 and S1 in Scotland) children in England and Scotland to obtain their conceptualisations. This is in addition to primary data collected through a UK-wide survey which aggregated expert opinion from a multi-disciplinary panel of 30 educational practitioners, policy influencers and/or makers, and researchers with school transitions and/or emotional wellbeing expertise, and secondary systematic literature review data.

In sum, current conceptualisations of both primary-secondary school transitions experiences and emotional wellbeing are inadequate and inconsistent. This extends to the operationalisation of these concepts, specifically with regard to the child self-report scales used in research studies, as outlined in Bagnall and Jindal-Snape (2023) international systematic literature review. The present concept analysis paper will overcome these limitations, by synthesising inductive and deductive methodological approaches within a concept analysis framework. This is with the purpose of developing a clear theoretical and conceptual definition of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions. This conceptual model of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions will not only demonstrate a vital paradigm shift in conceptualising emotional wellbeing in a specific context (primary-secondary school transitions), but also overcomes the lack of shared understanding pertaining to the conceptualisation of primary-secondary school transitions and emotional wellbeing within research and practice.

Method

The Walker and Avant (2005) method was used as a framework to develop a clear theoretical and conceptual definition of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions. This method involves eight stages: (1) select a concept; (2) determine the aims or purposes of analysis; (3) identify all uses of the concept; (4) determine the defining attributes; (5) construct a model case; (6) identify borderline, related, contrary, inventive, and illegitimate cases; (7) identify antecedents and consequences; and (8) define empirical referents. We have addressed (1) and (2) within our introduction section.

Data Sources

Systematic Literature Review Insights

Due to limitations in conceptualising both primary-secondary transitions and emotional wellbeing in literature, a further systematic literature review was undertaken by Bagnall and Jindal-Snape (2023), to examine whether conceptualisations of both concepts improved in studies which focussed on measuring children's emotional wellbeing quantitatively during primary-secondary transitions. There were three review questions; however, only one will be discussed here:

How have authors conceptualised primary-secondary school transitions and emotional wellbeing during primary-secondary school transitions? Further, are these conceptualisations explicit or implied?

This review is published (Bagnall & Jindal-Snape, 2023) and was based on the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre's (Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating Centres, 2010) method for undertaking systematic literature reviews and followed its seven steps (see Fig. 1),

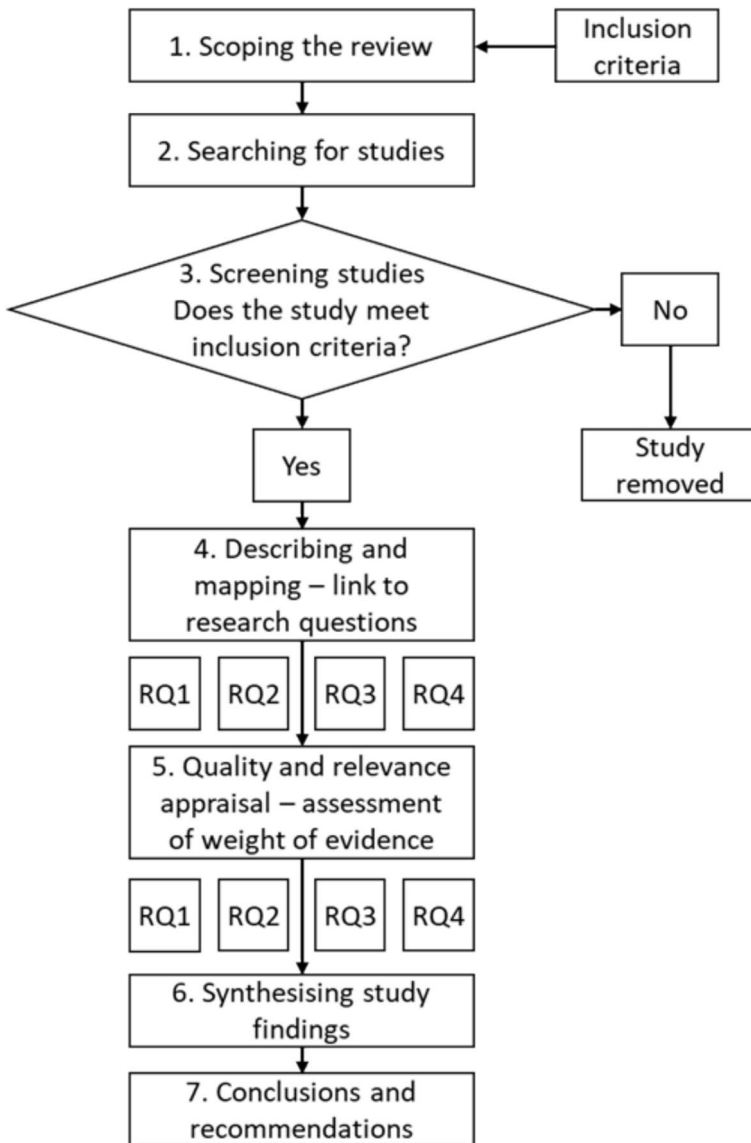


Fig. 1 Our systematic literature review was based on steps of EPPI-Centre Systematic Literature Review (Source:(Bagnall & Jindal-Snape, 2023))

guided by a rigorous inclusion criteria (see Table 2), which we have included for reference of our methodological decision making.

To summarise, of the 60 articles included in the review, 56 conceptualised primary-secondary transitions, either implicitly (no clear statement and deduced through Thematic Analysis of each article [as outlined below]) or explicitly (clear statement). Most of the conceptualisations were similar to Jindal-Snape et al.,

Table 2 Inclusion criteria (Source: (Bagnall & Jindal-Snape, 2023))

Aspect	Criteria
Relevance	1. Relates directly to at least one of the four research questions 2. Used child self-report to assess emotional wellbeing/appraisals/adjustment relating to school transition
Search terms	Transition*, 2. Transfer, 3. Mov* in combination with i. primary school, ii. elementary school, iii. middle school in combination with a. secondary school, b. high school, c. post-primary
Databases	Web of Science (WoS) (Science Citation Index Expanded, Social Sciences Citation Index, Arts & Humanities Citation Index); the Education Resources Education Centre (ERIC; British Education Index (BEI); PsycINFO; and Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA)
Time period	Between 1st January 2008 and 31st March 2021
Age range	10–14 years to include age during transitions from primary to secondary school across international educational systems
Geographical spread	International
Language	English
Research base	1. Empirical research to ensure inclusion of information about scales used: qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods 2. Child self-report 3. Emotional wellbeing/appraisal/adjustment categories to include: a. transition experience; b. general emotional adjustment; c. anxiety symptoms; d. depressive symptoms/low mood; e. coping/resilience; f. self-concept; g. attitudes towards school; h. loneliness
Transparency	Explicit methodology (e.g. sample size, instruments, analysis)
Reliability/validity	As far as can be determined, the child self-report scale used must be valid and reliable

(2021) with one additional one, i.e. Lack of fit between child's development stage and environment (e.g. Booth & Gerard, 2014). This is not surprising due to the overlap of time periods, although the 2023 review screened another 3 years' worth of records.

In terms of the conceptualisation of emotional wellbeing, 50 articles did not explicitly conceptualise wellbeing, nor emotional wellbeing. However, as previously discussed in terms of conceptualisation of transitions, we attempted to identify author/s' conceptualisation/s by undertaking a Thematic Analysis of each article and found three main overarching themes: Presence or absence of psychological symptoms, such as stress, depression, and anxiety (cited in 4 articles); Feelings, affective experience and emotional states (cited in 2 articles); and Quality of life, responsiveness to changes in mood and life events (cited in 1 article).

The review also identified seven factors associated with emotional wellbeing across 38 articles, which provides further support for Park et al. (2023) emotional wellbeing psychometrically defined concepts, which encompass several psychological dimensions. These included self-concept factors (e.g. self-efficacy and self-esteem, $n = 7$ articles), depressive symptoms/low mood ($n = 7$), anxiety symptoms including general and school-related anxiety ($n = 5$), resilience/mental

toughness ($n=3$), coping ($n=5$), attitudes towards school (e.g. sense of belonging/connectedness with school) ($n=9$), and loneliness ($n=2$).

Further, the review found that the included articles, *usually implicitly*, either conceptualised (a) primary-secondary school transitions experiences; or (b) emotional wellbeing; *or rarely* (c) both. However, none made the attempt to foreground their conceptualisation of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions despite that being the foci of the empirical studies. Nevertheless, this systematic literature provides a useful starting point for the development of a clearer theoretical and conceptual definition of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions (Fig. 2).

Stakeholder Perspectives

In line with stage three of the Walker and Avant (2005) method, our international systematic literature review identified that within primary-secondary school transitions research to date, there is absent conceptualisation of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions. Furthermore, as shown within Jindal-Snape et al., (2021) systematic mapping review of primary-secondary school transitions researchers' worldviews, theories/models, and frameworks, there is an absence of children's own conceptualisations within the field. Thus, in line with stage four of Walker and Avant's (2005) framework, it was considered paramount that we obtain stakeholder perspectives through consulting with experts by

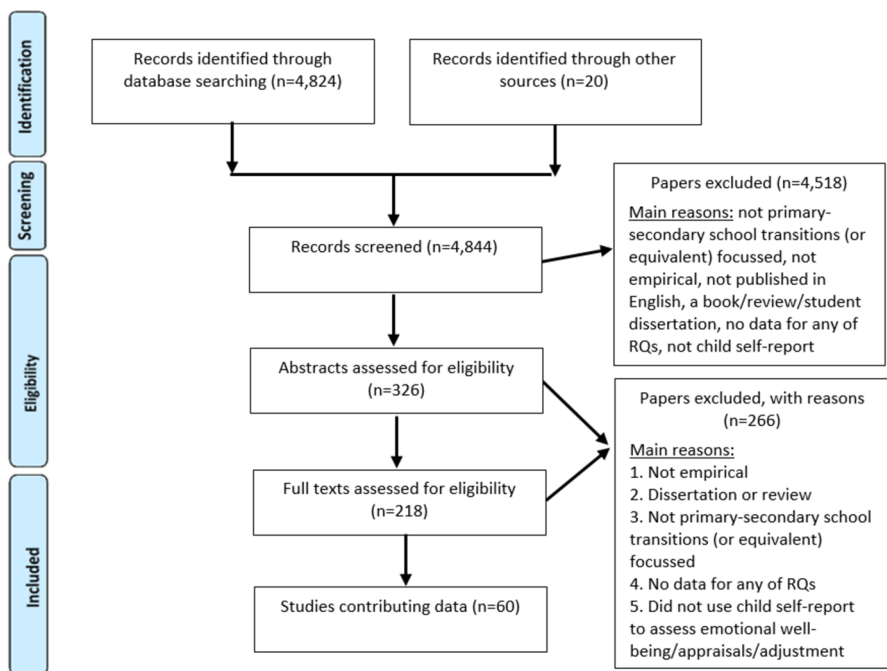


Fig. 2 PRISMA flow diagram of study selection

experience (e.g. children, educational practitioners) as well as by knowledge (e.g. researchers with empirical, theoretical, and psychometrics expertise). This will ensure that our conceptual model of emotional wellbeing is contextually and experientially relevant to stakeholders' lived experience of primary-secondary school transitions, as well as being empirically informed.

In line with this, we conducted a Delphi study; firstly aggregating expert opinion from a multi-disciplinary expert panel of 30 educational practitioners and researchers specialising in primary-secondary school transitions and/or emotional wellbeing, through a UK-wide online survey. Then, we conducted 10 focus groups with Year 6 (P7 in Scotland) and Year 7 (S1 in Scotland) children in mainstream and alternate provision primary and secondary schools in England and Scotland. Within both components of our Delphi study, we asked our stakeholders to conceptualise (a) emotional wellbeing, (b) primary-secondary school transitions experiences, and (c) emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions. As part of this, we asked participants to outline what factors, if any, shape (a), (b), and (c); and to describe a child with good (a), (b), and (c), in line with stage five (construct a model case) and six (identify borderline, related, contrary, inventive, and illegitimate cases) of Walker and Avant's (2005) framework.

Insights from Educational Practitioners and Researchers

Method

Participants We conducted a UK-wide online survey to aggregate expert opinion from a multi-disciplinary expert panel of 30 educational practitioners, primary-secondary school transitions, and emotional wellbeing researchers. Our participants were recruited from our national and international Transitions Network, our existing school networks across the UK (including Initial Teacher Education programmes), in addition to using snowball sampling via Twitter, to ensure that we had a broad and representative sample. Our survey was open for 2 months, until we recruited our target sample size (in line with recommendations from similar research in the field, e.g. Farrell et al. (2024), Symonds et al. (2022), and Author A et al. (2022)). Data collected in the online surveys was anonymous, but we asked some socio-demographic questions (see Appendix 1), and a variety of roles were represented in the sample, as detailed in Table 3. All participants lived and worked in the UK (77%, 13%, 7%, and 3% based in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales respectively). In terms of gender, 80% ($n=24$) indicated they are female, 16.7% ($n=5$) male, and one participant selected "other". Forty percent ($n=12$) were aged ≥ 51 , 6.7% ($n=2$) were aged ≤ 30 , and the 31–40 and 41–50 categories were each represented by 26.7% ($n=8$) of the sample. 66.7% ($n=20$) participants had over 15 years of professional experience, 10% ($n=3$) had between 8 and 14 years, 20% ($n=6$) between 1 and 7, and one participant was newly qualified.

Table 3 Participant characteristics

Research field	Professional practice
School transitions	Teacher $n = 10$ (including primary [$n = 3$]; secondary [$n = 2$]; head [$n = 3$], special education [$n = 2$]; SENCO [$n = 2$])
Mental health and wellbeing	Mental health or wellbeing worker $n = 10$ (including within-school mental health practitioners [$n = 5$]; family or youth workers [$n = 2$]; school pastoral worker [$n = 1$])
Education	Trainer/ advisor/ leader $n = 3$ (including teacher trainer [$n = 2$]; mental health trainer [$n = 1$])
	$n = 7$ (including socio-economic impact [$n = 1$]; COVID-19 impact [$n = 1$])
	$n = 12$ (including explicit mention of children and/or adolescents [$n = 10$]; mental health/wellbeing measurement [$n = 2$]; teacher wellbeing [$n = 1$])
	$n = 7$ (including inclusion/special educational needs [$n = 2$]; pedagogy/teaching practices [$n = 2$]; educational leadership [$n = 2$]; educational psychology [$n = 1$])

Materials All participants completed an open-ended online survey (see Appendix 1); the present study focusses on question 2 which sought stakeholders' conceptualisations of (a) emotional wellbeing, (b) primary-secondary school transitions experiences, and (c) emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions.

Procedure The research was approved by the University of Manchester and University of Dundee Research Ethics Committee's (UREC) standards for research governance, ethics, and integrity (Ref: 2023–16477-29,233). Following ethical approval, an information sheet providing a brief overview of the study, with the survey links, was sent out to participants (see above). At the start of the survey, participants indicated that they had read the information sheet and gave consent, and following completion of the survey, were debriefed.

Results

Findings were analysed using Thematic Framework Analysis, which is a flexible analytical approach, designed to support researchers to systematically reduce data whilst making comparisons across codes and participants. Thematic Framework Analysis also balances depth with breadth, which was also needed for this study, and the five stages outlined by Ritchie and Lewis (2003) were followed. At stage 1 (familiarisation), all data were read, and re-read in full, and an inductive, rigorous line-by-line open coding approach was taken by the first author. For confidence in the relevance and meaningfulness of codes, the third author checked the generated codes against the verbatim data for agreement as to whether the code represented the data clearly and sufficiently, establishing credibility. Similar codes were then grouped by the first author into categories, which formed the analytical framework, indicative of stage 2 (identifying a framework), to organise data in a meaningful and manageable way. Then through a process of indexing (stage 3) codes were systematically organised into the framework categories, and then summarised into a chart form (stage 4). An inter-rater reliability exercise was completed by the third author, to check the placement of each code within the framework categories, to establish dependability. During the charting stage, it became clear that the categories were too broad, and thus the indexed data for each category was also organised by sub-category, to reflect the complexity of the data, see Table 4. Identified categories and sub-categories during this stage were also triangulated for congruence through discussion between all authors, establishing confirmability.

The thematic framework categories and sub-categories for participants' conceptualisations of Emotional wellbeing, Primary-secondary school transitions experiences, and Emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions are presented in Table 4. Given the papers' foci on emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions, the analysis below focusses on the category *Emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions conceptualisations*, and corresponding sub-categories.

Table 4 A table of the Thematic Framework Analysis categories and corresponding sub-categories for each conceptualisation

Emotional wellbeing conceptualisations	
<p>1. Affective state</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Functional experience of being “emotionally well” b. Feeling attuned with emotions c. Experiencing positive and negative states <p>Primary-secondary school transitions experience conceptualisations</p> <p>1. Physical move between educational phases</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Changes associated with moving schools 	<p>2. Emotional management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Managing “ups and downs of life” b. Emotional literacy (e.g. recognising, understanding and regulating emotions) <p>3. Life satisfaction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Feeling capable (actualisation) b. Feeling significant (belonging) c. Feeling content with life/self/health
<p>Emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions conceptualisations</p> <p>1. Affective state in the context of primary-secondary school transitions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Feeling a broad range of emotions b. Emotionally stable c. No long-standing impact on mental health 	<p>2. Tangible signs of adjustment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Settling in time b. Demonstrable social, academic, personal, and environment adaptation c. Traits/behaviours <p>3. Mechanisms to maintain stable affective state</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Recognition that is it normal to experience a mixture of emotions b. Specific strategies to maintain a stable affective state
<p>2. Experiential process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Affective experience b. Length of adjustment time c. Experience of coping with multiple changes d. Individual differences <p>3. Nested social experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Change in social support b. Social influence of others c. Impact on significant others (e.g. parents/carers, peers) 	

Conceptualisations of Emotional Wellbeing *in the Context of Primary-Secondary School Transitions*

1. Affective State in the Context of Primary-Secondary School Transitions

Emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions was described as children's affective state when managing this period: "The emotional state of the individual during primary-secondary school transitions" (Researcher [emotional wellbeing], P27). Children described as having good emotional wellbeing were discussed as being emotionally stable during this time: "Stability of wellbeing across the transition" (Researcher [transitions], P21), and able to feel a broad range of balanced emotions, which are distinct from mental health complaints: "Feeling a normal healthy range of emotion and not tipping at any point beyond that into hyper arousal" (Primary school teacher, P6).

2. Tangible Signs of Adjustment

Conceptualisations also included discussion of tangible behavioural signs of how well the child is settling into secondary school. This included the amount of time it took children to settle into the secondary school environment: "Someone who will find the new school difficult as all transition is difficult but will start to adjust within six months" (Mental health practitioner, P20), and demonstrable social, academic, personal, and environmental adaptation: "A child who has experienced a positive transition experience will present positive emotional wellbeing as well as strong socio-emotional and academic outcomes i.e. lots of friends" (Researcher [emotional wellbeing], P24). Traits and behaviours, specifically optimism and confidence, were discussed as tangible signs of adjustment, and were often linked to specific aspects of adaptation, e.g. a "child that can develop new friendships, has good self-esteem and shows an interest in the school. A child that easily adapts to the new routine and is confident to express how they are feeling about things" (Wellbeing practitioner, P22), and children's ability to manage associated feelings: "The ability to handle the change without a negative impact upon wellbeing, behaviours or presentation" (Primary school teacher, P8).

3. Mechanisms to Maintain Stable Affective State

Finally, conceptualisations of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions also included discussion of mechanisms to maintain a stable affective state: "the ability to manage a range of situations and recognise, be in tune and manage those feelings that are associated with transition" (Primary school teacher, P5). Factors underpinning this included an ability to "recognise that it is normal to have a mixture of excitement and worries at a time of change" (Primary school teacher, P13), as well as specific strategies to maintain a stable affective state, which included resilience and/or coping skills: "having strategies available to be able to cope with the new challenges. Being resilient in the face of change" (Mental

health practitioner, P17); expectation management: “hearing positive things about secondary; benefitted from transition activities” (Researcher [transitions], P9); personal experience and social support: “have awareness of personal experiences and how to use their skills and external resources to seek support and maintain a positive wellbeing” (Researcher [Mental health], P23). For example, one researcher outlined: “To me, having a positive school transition and positive emotional wellbeing are one and the same thing though; the latter may arise from the care and preparation to ensure that the transition is as smooth as possible as well as other factors” (researcher [Emotional wellbeing], P12), demonstrating the significance of transition provision in supporting children to recognise that it is normal to experience a mixture of emotions, and to help scaffold resilience and/or coping skills in the context of primary-secondary school transitions.

Insights from Children

Method

Participants

We carried out ten focus groups, each with approximately six primary-secondary transitions-aged children per focus group (59 children in total). Five of these focus groups were conducted with Year 6 pupils in England, three of which were mainstream schools and two of which were alternative provision. The remaining five focus groups were with pupils in their first year of secondary school: three in Year 7 in England and two in S1 in Scotland. Recruiting a stratified sample was purposeful to enhance the representation and diversity of our primary and secondary school focus groups. Schools were recruited through our existing school networks across the UK (including Initial Teacher Education programmes) and were selected based on geographical and socio-demographic factors. Children were nominated by their teachers based upon their ability to assent to, and to meaningfully contribute to, a discussion about primary-secondary transitions, and we asked teachers to provide us with a sample representative of cognitive ability, demographic characteristics, and socio-economic status.

Materials

A schedule of questions was prepared in advance (see Appendix 2), although a semi-structured design was followed to allow us to probe further into the issues that the children raised. The present study examines questions 1a, 1b, 2a, and 2b which included asking the children about the key emotions that they expect to/or did feel during primary-secondary school transitions, how they think adults might be able to help them, and what their conceptualisation of “wellbeing” in general, and during this time entailed.

Procedure

Full ethical approval was obtained from the University of XX and University of YY Research Ethics Committees (UREC) (Ref: 2023–16477-29,233). Parents/carers and children were given information sheets a week before data collection, and parents/carers provided written informed consent, and children gave informed assent. Two members of the research team visited the schools to carry out the focus groups in-person, and prior to participating in the focus groups, the children were asked to adhere to key ground rules and reminded of the confidentiality agreements outlined in the information sheet (e.g. the need to maintain privacy during and following the focus groups). One researcher facilitated the conversation, which was recorded using a Dictaphone, whilst the other made notes of the children's speaking order to aid transcription, and of the key points made by each group. The children mostly answered the questions in a voluntary manner by raising their hand; however, the quieter members of the groups were asked if they would like to add anything, which ensured that all voices were represented.

Results

Findings were analysed using Hybrid Thematic Analysis, which combines a blended inductive, data-driven approach with a deductive, empirically, and theory-driven approach to interpret raw data (Xu & Zammit, 2020) and is becoming an increasingly popular analysis within the field (Bagnall et al., 2024b; Ozturk et al., under review). In the present research study, each transcript was analysed deductively by the fourth author, and inductively by the third author. These analyses were conducted independently in parallel, to ensure that knowledge of one set of themes did not influence the other. For the deductive coding, a deductive framework, which included predefined codes that were developed a priori by the first author based on a content analysis of items extracted from measures included in the systematic literature review (Bagnall & Jindal-Snape, 2023), and from prior qualitative research with children, was applied to the data to identify codes. In addition, the deductive coder also noted new units of meaning not confined, by the preliminary codes, within the coding framework, which served as a data management tool for organising segments of similar or related data and provided a clear trail of evidence for the credibility of the study. Inductive coding was conducted blind, and inductive codes assigned to segments of data were found to expand upon a code from the deductive framework (e.g. by meaning or sentiment). Inductive and deductive codes were then connected, corroborated, and combined at a broader level to develop themes, by an independent coder. Themes' external homogeneity and internal homogeneity were then reviewed and refined for congruence by all authors to ensure that they were accurate and valid representations of the data set and cohered meaningfully.

Sub-themes for children's discussions of what Emotional wellbeing, Primary-secondary school transitions experiences, and Emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions mean to them are detailed in Table 5.

Children's Conceptualisations of Primary-Secondary School Transitions

Several children felt that compared to primary school, secondary school life would be more complicated, with more responsibilities and demands on time: “if you're really under pressure [...] you're going to get really, really stressed” (FG10 [primary school, England]), and that everything would be bigger: “(it) feels like a maze in a school sometimes” (FG2 [secondary school, Scotland]). Influencing these ideas, children discussed hearing information from older relatives, and this either helped to reassure and prepare them during transitions: “because my mum works there, she's telling me the good and bad teachers” (FG4 [primary school, alternative provision]), or were sources of worry: “if you've got older siblings and they're coming and saying, ‘oh, that was so hard...’ that might get to you” (FG9 [primary school, England]). Regardless, many children saw the move from primary to secondary school as a positive fresh start: “it's basically like a new life, a new beginning in school” (FG8 [primary school, England]), and a key milestone in growing up: “[...] two months of summer holidays, you've only grown up by two months but school-wise, you've grown up a lot” (FG5 [secondary school, Scotland]).

Children's Conceptualisations of Emotional Wellbeing

Children generally had a broad view of what “emotional wellbeing” meant, and they appreciated the complex interplay between the mental and physical aspects of wellbeing: “mental, physical...status of your body and brain” (FG2 [secondary school, Scotland]). They also recognised the distinction between mental health and everyday emotions and feelings, and that there is both a positive: “I think positive wellbeing is when you're happy, and if you're feeling comfortable around people and you're just, like, not shy” (FG8 [primary school, England]) and a negative: “negative wellbeing is like when you're frustrated, nervous, sad, and scared” (FG8 [primary school, England]) component to the concept. Some children also acknowledged that wellbeing often becomes visible through interactions with others, whether this is positive: “They're going to be saying ‘thank you’, ‘you're welcome’ and all those stuff to the teachers and pupils”, or negative: “Some people can start hitting others and like being really rude” (FG8 [primary school, England]),

Children's Conceptualisations of Emotional Wellbeing in the Context of Primary-Secondary School Transitions

Bringing the two above conceptualisations together, children described a range of emotional wellbeing considerations associated with primary-secondary school transitions. One's ability to adapt can impact wellbeing: “How you experience the change, because it's quite a shock to the system” (FG6 [secondary school, England]), and that knowing what to expect can help with this: “You've got to be aware of what is going to happen really” (FG10 [primary school, England]). The requirement for social adaptation was a frequently mentioned concern: “You've got to fit in with other people, say I went to a different school [...] and there's people I want to

Table 5 A table of the Hybrid Thematic Analysis categories and corresponding sub-categories for each conceptualisation

Children's conceptualisations of primary-secondary school transitions	<p>1. Perception of things becoming harder, more complicated, and bigger</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> More people Bigger school Harder work, and more responsibilities <p>2. Ideas and information passed down from others</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Help with reassurance Adds worry to the transition process <p>3. New beginnings and changes</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Transition to secondary school as a marker point of growing up Concerns about social, academic, personal, and environmental changes Looking forward to social, academic, personal, and environmental changes
Children's conceptualisations of emotional wellbeing	<p>1. Current mental health and 'how you feel'</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Negative wellbeing: nervous, overwhelmed, sad, scared, etc Positive wellbeing: social, happy, motivated by personal growth, etc <p>2. Wellbeing is broad yet complex</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> There are mental and physical aspects of wellbeing 'Wellbeing' and 'mental health' are different but linked <p>3. How emotional wellbeing is conveyed</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Your wellbeing is conveyed by how you treat others Being, and feeling like you can be, your normal self
Children's conceptualisations of emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions	<p>1. Adapting to the unknown</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Being prepared for what is going to happen Building resilience to change Coping with new expectations, standards, and rules Worries about inadequacy <p>2. Fitting in</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Being accepted The importance of fitting in and making friends Changing identity and behaviour to fit in <p>3. Signs of positive wellbeing around transitions</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Feeling comfortable with the school Having stable self-esteem Showing resilience to the changes

be friends with, but I've got to be like them, so you might have to change personality a bit" (FG9 [primary school, England]), as was wondering whether they could meet new academic standards: "I do think people worry that they're not actually smart enough to go into high school yet" (FG8 [primary school, England]). When asked how a pupil would demonstrate positive wellbeing when they have settled into secondary school, several reported feelings of comfort and resilience. For example: "Maybe they're more comfortable with their surroundings and all that, and know their way about the school" (FG2 [secondary school, Scotland]).

Results

The Defining Attributes

According to Walker and Avant (2005), the defining attributes (stage 4) of a concept are the unique characteristics that differentiate it from other related concepts. Synthesising our three data sources (international systematic literature review [obtaining researchers conceptualisations], UK-wide survey [multi-disciplinary panel of educational practitioners, policy influencers and/or makers, and researchers], and focus groups [Year 6 and 7 children]), our conceptual domain, emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions, is unique and differentiated from conceptualisations of both emotional wellbeing, and primary-secondary school transitions (N.B. both of which are poorly and inconsistently conceptualised and theorised). Our conceptualisation demonstrates a vital paradigm shift in conceptualising emotional wellbeing in a specific context (primary-secondary school transitions) to holistically capture how children emotionally respond in negotiating the complex, multi-dimensional changes primary-secondary school transitions, and the specific emotional experiences, states, and reactions evoked. In other words, emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions represents the new emotions children are required to deal with as a response to new experiences over primary-secondary school transitions, and without this contextual element, emotional wellbeing or transitions appraisals/experiences as general concepts are not fully representing children's unique experiences and feelings during this time, which is reflected within the defining attributes.

Firstly, foregrounded in the perspectives of hedonia (e.g. experiencing emotional [positive and negative] affect and feelings of life satisfaction), the defining attributes of emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions include (1) children's affective experience of navigating primary-secondary school transitions, in the here-and-now (e.g. presence of both positive and negative emotions in the here-and-now). Secondly, representing perspectives of eudaimonia (e.g. flourishing and functioning, "doing well"), a second defining attribute of our conceptualisation of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions pertains to (2) children's perceptions, or evaluations of their emotional functioning (2a) globally and in the context of (2b) specific social, academic, environmental, and personal primary-secondary school transitions domains outlined within Jindal-Snape et al (2023b) *Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions*

Theory. Finally, integral to these defining attributes are (3) children's perceptions of their (3a) internal and (3b) external resources to manage the demands of primary-secondary school transitions to maintain a stable affective state and flourish.

Model Case

Walker and Avant (2005) use the term "model case" to describe a scenario where all the defining attributes, provided above (and indicated below using the above numbering), are present. In the context of the present concept analysis, a model case would be a child (in this case, James) who shows positive emotional wellbeing across their primary-secondary school transitions. Please note that "James" and his story are fictional and composed from our research findings.

James is 12 years old and is currently in the summer term of Year 7 at a large comprehensive secondary school in the North-West of England. He first started thinking about what it would be like to leave primary school (defining attribute 2a) when he was in Year 5, and although he had heard a lot of scary stories from his older brother about what secondary school was like, he knew that he and his friends would all look out for each other (defining attribute 3b). He knew that the work would be harder, but after all, this is just part of growing up. Towards the end of Year 6, although he felt a little nervous, he was generally excited and confident (defining attribute 3a) for this next step (defining attribute 1). Now that he has been at secondary school for nearly a year, James would say that although being one of the smallest kids in such a big school was a bit daunting at first, it does not bother him too much now (defining attribute 2b). His family is supportive, and he knows that if something was worrying him at school, he could talk to them (defining attribute 3b). He is well liked by his new peers and teachers alike, and he is a focussed pupil who is meeting or exceeding all his academic targets (defining attribute 2b). These factors all contribute towards James feeling happy and relaxed at secondary school (defining attribute 1).

Contrary Case

A contrary case, according to Walker and Avant (2005), is, essentially, the opposite of the model case. A child who does *not* show positive emotional wellbeing across their primary-secondary school transitions is described below. As with "James", "Thomas" is a fictional child, and his story is purely an example developed to highlight our research findings.

Thomas is 12 years old and is currently in the summer term of Year 7 at a large comprehensive secondary school in the North-West of England. Thomas lives in an economically deprived area, and often goes to school hungry. This means that he finds it hard to concentrate in class, and he performed below what was expected in his reading and mathematics SATs (defining attribute 2b). Thomas lives with his mum, who is often emotionally distant and snappy, meaning that he keeps a lot of his worries inside (defining attribute 3b). In Year 6, he was really worried about going to secondary school (defining attribute 1) and struggled to see anything to

look forward to about secondary school (defining attribute 2a). Although he has never loved school, the familiarity of primary school was a source of comfort, stability, and a sense of belonging to Thomas (defining attribute 3b). Now, at the end of Year 7, Thomas's form tutor says that he has not settled in particularly well. Although he is not disruptive in class, she would describe him as a 'loner', and a target for teasing by his peers (defining attribute 2b). His one close friend was unfortunately assigned to a different secondary school, and the two have slowly lost contact (defining attribute 3b). Thomas has struggled to adapt to the demands of secondary school (defining attribute 3a) and often arrives late without having completed his homework (defining attribute 2b). Overall, he is frequently upset and stressed, and has become progressively more frustrated with school life (defining attribute 1). As a result, his absences have increased as the year has gone by (defining attribute 2a).

Antecedents and Consequences of Emotional Wellbeing in the Context Of Primary-Secondary School Transitions

Antecedents

In a concept analysis, antecedents are factors, features, or events that are in place, or happen, *before* the concept (Walker & Avant, 2005), e.g. what predicts positive/negative emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions. The below analysis outlines findings from our three data sources: the systematic review (Bagnall & Jindal-Snape, 2023), the insights from educational practitioners and researchers, and the insights from children.

The present concept analysis revealed that children who have good emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions maintain a stable affective state. This does not mean that these children do not experience worry or stress, but even though a broad spectrum of emotions is felt, none of these reaches a threshold of extremity for concern to be warranted, e.g. "not tipping at any point beyond that into hyper arousal" as outlined by a primary school teacher, within our survey research. Such a child demonstrates self-efficacy, whereby they can draw on their internal resources, such as personal coping strategies or memories of past experiences of successful transitions (e.g. moving house), or external sources of support from parents/carers and peers, to recognise and manage their emotions, which was discussed by all stakeholders. This means that they can adapt, in a mentally healthy way, to the changes associated with primary-secondary school transitions. Children's attitudes to school were also found to be important antecedents. These attitudes include feelings of connectedness and belonging at primary school, which they can use as a template and translate to feelings about the secondary school environment. Another is the level of work at secondary school and/or academic anxiety, and whether a child views the transitions as an exciting part of growing up, as outlined by a Year 6 child within our focus groups: "it's basically like a new life, a new beginning in school".

All three stakeholders discussed the significance of children's personal characteristics (internal antecedents) in addition to external antecedents, such as effective

school-facilitated transition activities, the valence of transition discourse from teachers, family, and peers (especially by children within the focus groups), and social support. This suggests how transition antecedents are deeply multi-faceted.

Consequences

Consequences are described by Walker and Avant (2005) as the *outcomes* of the concept. In the context of the present concept analysis, this represents the impact of having positive or negative emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions. Our sources revealed short-term impacts on academic attainment, social outcomes and behaviours (for example how easy it is for a child to make and/or maintain friendships at secondary school, and whether they treat peers and school staff politely and kindly), and school (mis)behaviour more generally.

We did not ask participants to directly comment on the long-term consequences of having positive or negative emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions in the present concept analysis; however, it is worth describing how the short-term consequences have been found to predict these in the wider literature. For example, short-term consequences, such as lower attainment, conduct issues, and school disengagement, are demonstrably linked to negative mental and physical health outcomes, poorer employment prospects, and crime involvement in the long-term (Allen, 2014; Pape et al., 2011; Roberts, 2015).

Empirical Referents of Emotional Wellbeing in the Context of Primary-Secondary School Transitions

Empirical referents show evidence of the concept, by detailing how the concept and defining attributes can be measured, i.e. how a concept can be identified, and distinguished, by measuring phenomena that are either direct or associated (Avedissian & Alayan, 2021; Walker & Avant, 2005). In line with best practice, it is recommended that a robust and comprehensive understanding of empirical referents includes both subjective assessment through qualitative statements of lived experiences and perceptions, in addition to objective assessment through reliable and valid standardised instruments (Ahanonu & Jooste, 2016; Avedissian & Alayan, 2021).

As outlined in the background section of this concept analysis paper, there is an absence of key stakeholders' conceptualisations, perceptions, and experiences of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions represented in the literature. Furthermore, existing measures have failed to fully capture the concept of emotional wellbeing within the specific context of primary-secondary school transitions. This presents the need to develop an innovative measure which is qualitatively different and novel in its approach (i.e. asking children about their feelings towards the changes they are negotiating in context), and in its longitudinal design and operationalisation. We will now explore the defining attributes of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions in turn, and then suggest how empirical evidence of these should be harnessed through a contextualised measure.

The first defining attribute refers to children's affective experience of navigating primary-secondary school transitions, in the here-and-now. Bagnall and Jindal-Snape (2023) review found that many measures only examined emotional wellbeing before and immediately after the "move" to secondary school, conceptualising primary-secondary school transitions as a singular event, rather than an ongoing process that occurs over a number of years, that should be measured longitudinally (to capture the complex changes negotiated during this time) to understand transitions across secondary school. Also, such measures were not specific to the primary-secondary school transitions context, and capture the unique, context-specific changes children negotiate during this time, and the specific emotional reactions evoked. In line with findings from our three data sources, our concept and defining attributes should be measured by asking children how they feel in the present moment. In line with this, the measure that we are designing (*P-S WELLS*) will neither be a reflection scale (e.g. looking back at feelings once at secondary school, or looking forward at primary school what secondary be like) nor an identification scale for children who *might* struggle when they move to secondary school. The aim is for *P-S WELLS* to sensitively assess children's present concerns in primary school or secondary school, to identify who is currently struggling, and their specific concerns. This "in the moment" consideration is paramount when used to estimate models where parameters are expected to vary over time, such as emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions, which was recognised within our three data sources conceptualisations, to fully capture changes in the "stability of wellbeing across the transition" as outlined by a participant within our survey study.

The second defining attribute pertains to children's perceptions or evaluations of their emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions globally and in the context of specific transitions-related domains (social, academic, personal, and environmental). There is need for meticulous co-design of contextually relevant items within instruments (such as *P-S WELLS*), that reflect children's evaluation/judgements of their affective state during this time, both globally and at a domain-specific level. To date, primary-secondary school transitions research has relied on qualitative descriptors of school concerns about transition (Zeedyk et al., 2003), or quantitative ratings of concern towards a list of changes navigated over primary-secondary school transitions (Rice et al., 2011). Whilst these measures are useful for initial identification of children's transition-related school concerns, these measures are limited in that they (a) align with a negative discourse, presenting primary-secondary school transitions as a time of threat, and (b) do not provide a holistic understanding of children's perceptions or evaluations of their emotional wellbeing *in the context of* specific primary-secondary school transitions domains (social, academic, personal, and environmental). To overcome this, there is need for sensitive scales which align with a balanced discourse that are co-produced with children, as well as adult stakeholders, to draw on their valuable lived experience, and conceptualisations. We aim to operationalise both through the item content, wording, and format of *P-S WELLS* (see Bagnall et al., 2024b).

Our third defining attribute, children's perceptions of their internal and external resources to maintain stable affect during transitions, should also be assessed within scale items to ensure the scale holistically measures children's appraisals across

specific primary-secondary school transitions domains (e.g. environmental, social, and academic changes associated with primary-secondary school transitions) and known resources (e.g. autonomy, competence, coping, relatedness), over time.

The design, validation, and operationalisation of *P-S WELLS* in research and practice, alongside this concept analysis paper, will seek to provide evidence on the extent to which emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary transitions is a tangible concept that is distinct (e.g. has external validity), and not simply a sum of its constituent parts “emotional wellbeing” and “primary-secondary school transitions”, which are two distinct concepts.

Discussion

In sum, despite clearly defined constructs serving as building blocks in accelerating empirical and practical work within educational psychology, conceptual clarification of key constructs often plays a marginal role within research (Bringmann et al., 2022). Primary-secondary school transitions research is no exception, and as shown in our systematic literature review, which unpacked transitions researchers’ conceptualisations of emotional wellbeing, and primary-secondary school transitions experiences, conceptual understanding within the field is inadequate and inconsistent (Bagnall & Jindal-Snape, 2023). This is likely to have negative implications for research designs (e.g. conceptualising transitions as an “event” as opposed to a “process” could lead to greater preference in using snapshot or cross-sectional as opposed to longitudinal approaches), study findings, and their interpretation (e.g. considering transition as an isolated event could mean support is only offered prior to the “move” to secondary school, as opposed to over a longer period).

Together, this conceptual opacity is limiting our understanding of (a) *how* primary-secondary school transitions affect children’s emotional wellbeing, and specifically *which* aspects of these transitions children are excited or concerned about; (b) *who* might be particularly vulnerable during primary-secondary school transitions and *how* can these children be identified; and (c) *what* universal and targeted support could be useful. Overcoming these limitations, the present concept analysis paper has made a first step in synthesising inductive and deductive methodological approaches, within a conceptual analysis framework, to develop a clear theoretical and conceptual definition of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions. This conceptual model offers theoretical novelty by demonstrating a vital paradigm shift in conceptualising and operationalising emotional wellbeing in a specific context (primary-secondary school transitions), to holistically understand how children emotionally respond to the context of primary-secondary school transitions and the specific emotional reactions evoked. This contextual component is important, to inform the generation of new knowledge and strategies to improve children’s adjustment over primary-secondary school transitions. For example, to date conceptualising and operationalising changes in children’s emotional wellbeing between two time points (usually pre- and post the “move” to secondary school) means that it is unclear whether changes in emotional wellbeing shown over primary-secondary school transitions are reflective of primary-secondary school

transitions, and thus context driven, or reflective of other environmental or personal factors. Our conceptualisation of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions, as a dynamic construct that fluctuates over time, reflecting children's feelings towards the changes they are negotiating, overcomes these limitations and extends VanderWeele et al.'s (2020) recommendation that despite the proliferation of wellbeing measures in the last decade, what is missing is consideration of "context" in selecting appropriate measures.

VanderWeele et al. (2020) also outlined that recommending a set of validated items, to overcome this consideration, is not comparable to the process of developing and validating a new measure, which operationalises a well-informed, evidence-based conceptual model. Within this paper, we have outlined an operational definition of our conceptual framework of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions. This has made the first step in narrowing the gap between theoretical assumptions and known antecedents, consequents, and associated empirical constructs, shown within the body of quantitative research in the field (Donaldson et al., 2023; Moore et al., 2020), and establishes a foundation for well-informed meta-analysis research, which is limited in the field (Beatson et al., 2023). It is hoped that in future primary research, attention is paid to these known antecedents, consequents, and associated empirical constructs, in the selection of instruments to measure children's affective experiences during this time; however, there is also need to test our operational definition of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions, on measurement grounds. In other words, as outlined by Du Preez and de Klerk (2019), this paper has "found a definition for a section of reality", and the next stage of scale development research is to "attribute measurement to that reality", through concept mapping. As outlined in the introduction section, we intend to do this through the design and validation of the *Primary-Secondary School Transitions Emotional Wellbeing Scale (P-S WELLS)*, see Bagnall et al., 2024a). This scale will operationalise the defining attributes of our conceptual model, as outlined within the "Empirical referents" section of this paper and could accelerate progress within the field by enabling synthesis, comparison and integration of evidence across studies and settings to avoid data fragmentation (Petersen et al., 2021).

It is also important to note that advancing understanding of known antecedents, consequents, and associated empirical constructs of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions has significant implications for educational practice and policy, to improve this period. For example, our conceptual framework has methodological utility for researcher's to (a) evaluate the efficacy of pre-existing primary-secondary school transition interventions; (b) refine the content and delivery of pre-existing universal and targeted programmes, by strengthening the methodological and conceptual foundations that underpin primary-secondary school transitions research, and (c) provide the means for sensitive identification of "at risk" children to participate in targeted interventions. This will support development of norms pertaining to what protective and risk factors (or antecedents) predict outcomes (or consequences) relating to primary-secondary school transitions (e.g. attainment, social adjustment, poor mental health) over time, and how they can be best maximised through the design and implementation of a primary-secondary

school transitions interventions, to support children universally and on a more targeted basis. This extends recommendations for the need to synthesise and evaluate available evidence pertaining to primary-secondary school transitions interventions, so that educators, policy makers, and researchers can make evidence-informed decisions about which interventions are most efficacious, feasible to deliver, and suitable for universal and targeted populations within schools (Donaldson et al., 2023; Dunnnett et al., 2025). Thus, the operational definition of our conceptual framework has useful implications in facilitating high quality replication studies across different educational systems (Beatson et al., 2023).

Furthermore, despite children having first-hand recent insight into the experience of navigating primary-secondary school transitions, there is an absence of their conceptualisations, perceptions, and experiences of these key constructs represented in the literature which instead have “adult reasons” and “adult agendas” (Kim, 2016). Overcoming these limitations, our conceptual model is experientially relevant to stakeholders’ lived experience of this time, and sensitive to their ongoing and dynamic experiences, which draws on recommendations in previous research (Demkowicz et al., 2023; Garner & Bagnall, 2024). The same inductive and deductive methodological approach used in the present paper, where insights from multiple stakeholders (including the lived experiences of children) are mapped, is needed when operationalising the concept of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions, in future research and practice. This will ensure that instruments and interventions continue to be sensitive to children’s changing experiences. For example, in line with the latter, a defining attribute of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions was understanding children’s affective experience of navigating primary-secondary school transitions, in the here-and-now. In operationalising this defining attribute, e.g. within-school transition support provision, focus should be placed on supporting children’s affective experiences (drawing on both internal and external protective resources) in that moment, either in primary school and/or secondary school. This extends findings from previous qualitative research which has shown the importance of the timing of transition provision, with too much too soon, or too little too late, causing feelings of overwhelm and anxiety, and the need to take a gradual child-centred approach (Bagnall et al., 2021b; Hammond, 2016).

Finally, our conceptual model also has implications for educational practice and policy, in best supporting children over primary-secondary school transitions, by ensuring that provisions are aimed at identifying, monitoring, and improving known antecedents of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions, and are sensitive to children’s individual needs. To realise a regional, national, and even international initiative in supporting children’s emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions, work is needed to identify a feasible measurement strategy, consisting of termly monitoring, to obtain immediate insight into the emotional wellbeing of Year 5, 6, and 7 children in the context of primary-secondary school transitions. Through examination of scores across specific transitions-related domains (social, academic, personal, and environmental), educational practitioners will be able to identify what universal and targeted support (including the key ingredients of this support underpinned by the empirically

informed referents outlined above) may be useful to support children during this time (Bagnall et al., 2024b). However, following identification of universal and targeted needs, schools need evidence-based resources, that are underpinned by clear conceptualisation, and consistent empirically informed referents to best support children, and address disparities. This is a clear direction for further research and has the potential to improve the mental health and educational trajectories of children across the life course, reducing long-term inequalities (Garner & Bagnall, 2024; Petersen et al., 2022).

Limitations

Owing to time and resource constraints, this research is not without limitations. One notable limitation is that the primary data collected (adult online survey and child focus groups) were UK-based, which limits the generalisability of our findings to other educational contexts. However, as others have noted (Beatson et al., 2023), educational systems and structures vary considerably across the world, and comparisons across different educational contexts were beyond the scope of the primary research. It is worth noting that our systematic literature review examined the conceptualisations of researchers from an international perspective, and our stratified focus group sample purposefully represents mainstream and alternate provision primary and secondary school systems and provides diversity in terms of socio-economic status, ethnicity, urbanicity to ensure that our research setting reflects the heterogeneity across England and Scotland. It is also worth noting that the nature of our online survey being anonymous did not allow for further follow-up discussion; thus, there is an opportunity for further research (e.g. cognitive interviews) to strengthen the confidence in the credibility and robustness of the present findings. All the participants self-selected to take part in the survey research and children were selected by teachers; however, the findings show a range of positive and negative perspectives and experiences, which gives us some confidence in the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, to enhance the representation and diversity of our primary and secondary school focus groups, we asked teachers to provide us with a sample representative of cognitive ability, demographic characteristics, and socio-economic status. Full limitations of our international systematic literature review are outlined here (Bagnall & Jindal-Snape, 2023). Despite these limitations, we believe that our process in developing a conceptual framework of emotional wellbeing *in the context of primary-secondary school transitions* has identified critical conceptual, methodological, and empirical considerations that should inform future research seeking to advance the field of primary-secondary school transitions and emotional wellbeing.

Conclusion

In sum, primary-secondary school transitions are a critical period for children, that pose heightened risk for the development of poor emotional wellbeing and mental health. This concept analysis provides a foundation to inform generation of new

knowledge, tools, and strategies to enhance children's emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions. Future research can now be conducted, underpinned by a clear evidence-informed and standardised conceptual definition, generated from synthesising inductive and deductive methodological approaches, mapping insights from multiple stakeholders. Insights are also presented into how our conceptual definition can be operationalised to assess known antecedents of emotional wellbeing *in the context of* primary-secondary school transitions, and innovate the design, implementation, and evaluation of existing intervention research.

Appendix 1. Survey questions

1 Demographic questions

- a **Gender** (*Male, Female, Prefer to self-describe*)
- b **Age** (*30 and under, 31-40, 41-50, 51+*)
- c **Location** (*Greater London/South East/South West/West Midlands/North West/North East/Yorkshire and the Humber/East Midlands/East Anglia/Scotland/Northern Ireland/ Wales*)
- d **Career stage** (*early, mid, late*)
- e **Please summarize your research area in a sentence**

2 Conceptualizations

Emotional well-being

- a How do you define "emotional wellbeing"?
- b Are there any factors that underpin emotional wellbeing?
- c How would you describe a child with good emotional wellbeing?

Primary-secondary school transitions experiences

- iv. How do you define "primary-secondary school transitions experiences"?
- v. Are there any factors that underpin "primary-secondary school transitions experiences"?
- vi. How would you describe a child who has positive "primary-secondary school transitions experiences"?

Emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions experiences

- g How do you define emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions?
- h Is emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions, distinct from emotional well-being? Please explain

- i Are there any factors that underpin emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions?
- j How would you describe a child who has positive emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions?

Measure content

- 3 **Should a measure to assess children's emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions experiences, include domains (e.g. specific categories to classify and provide a framework for the measure; domains could form sub-scales within the measure)? If YES what could these be? If NO why?**
- 4 **Here are a few domains we have considered for our measure, do you think we have missed one, or could remove one? Please explain.**
 - a Social domain (e.g. relationships with peers and teachers)
 - b Environmental domain (e.g. size, structure and ethos of the school)
 - c Academic domain (e.g. classwork, homework)
 - d Personal domain (e.g. identity)
- 5 **Should a measure to assess children's emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions experiences, include dimensions (e.g. an aspect, feature or facet, that underpins how we conceptualize emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions) ? If YES what could these be? If NO why?**
- 6 **Here are a few dimensions we have considered, do you think we have missed one, or could remove one? Please explain.**
 - a Self-esteem and self-efficacy dimensions
 - b Coping dimensions
 - c School belonging dimensions
 - d Emotional affect dimensions
- 7 **Can you name some specific items which could be useful to include in a measure to assess children's emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transitions?**

If you would like to, draw on the domains (social, environmental, academic and personal) and dimensions (self-esteem and self-efficacy, coping, school belonging, emotional affect) discussed above.

- 8 **Formatting**
 - a What should our measure look like?
 - Would a visual scale work? For example, using a comic style or illustrations? If you have come across one, please can you share it with us.
 - Would a closed scale with response options work? If so, what response scale should be used?
 - How could our measure be formatted to help you with your practice?

- b How many questions should our measure have?
- c How should instructions be presented?

9 Scoring

- a How should the measure be scored?
- b How could scoring help you with your research?
- c When should the measure be used over primary-secondary school transitions?
 - How many times in primary school?
 - How many times in secondary school?

10 Are there any challenges that you consider to the format, content or scoring of the measure?

11 Is there anything you would like to share which could be useful?

Appendix 2. Focus group questions

Child focus group questions

1. Primary-secondary school transitions

- a) Year 6 pupils will be moving from primary school to secondary school in September, how would we know if they are excited about this? (*e.g. how would they think, feel and behave*)
 - i. How would a teacher know at primary school
 - ii. How would their classmates know
- b) How would we know if a Year 6 pupil is sad or worried about primary-secondary school transition? (*e.g. how would they think, feel and behave*)
 - i. How would a teacher know at primary school
 - ii. How would their classmates know
- c) Do you think there is anything else that could help primary school teachers identify/know how pupils are feeling?
- d) Do you think it is useful for a primary school teacher to know how pupils feel about moving to secondary school? How come?
- e) How would we know if a Year 7 pupil has settled into secondary school?
 - i. How would a secondary school teacher know
 - ii. How would their classmates know
- f) Do you think there is anything else that could help secondary school teachers identify/know how pupils are feeling?
- g) Do you think it would be useful for a secondary school teacher to know how pupils feel about moving to secondary school? How come?

2. Wellbeing

- a If we say I have a positive/negative wellbeing, what do we mean by this?
 - i. What do we mean by emotional wellbeing?
 - ii. How would you describe a pupil with good emotional wellbeing? (*e.g. how would they think, feel and behave*)
- b What do we mean by emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transition?
 - i. Is this different from general emotional wellbeing?

3. P-S WELLS Measure

We want to develop a questionnaire/survey to measure how pupils are feeling in Year 6 (P6) and Year 7 (S1) about moving to secondary school, specifically we want to measure pupils' emotional wellbeing relating to primary-secondary school transition. We are keen to hear your thoughts about how we should design this questionnaire, as experts in having the most up-to-date understanding of what it is like to move from primary school to secondary school for pupils today.

4. **What topics should be used in a questionnaire which measures pupils' emotional wellbeing in the context of primary-secondary school transition?**(*e.g. how pupils are feeling towards the move to secondary school*)
 - i. What about the different things that are important over primary-secondary school transition? (*e.g. social, environmental, academic and personal changes*)
 - What is it about changes in relationships with teachers and pupils that is important to pupils moving to secondary school?
 - What is it about changes in learning that is important to pupils moving to secondary school?
 - What is it about changes in the physical secondary school, so the school building and size, that is important to pupils moving to secondary school?
 - What is it about personal changes, maybe in your identity as a secondary school pupil that is important to pupils moving to secondary school?
 - ii. **What about the different things that are important for pupils' emotional wellbeing when thinking about primary-secondary school transition?**(*e.g. coping skills, feelings of school belonging, self-esteem, confidence, being in control*)
 - Are coping skills important during this time? Why? What specifically about coping skills is important? Are there specific aspects of secondary school that these skills are more important for?
 - Are feelings of belonging important during this time? Why? What specifically about feelings of being part of the school is important?

- What about self-esteem? What do pupils mean by this? Is it important during primary-secondary school transition? Why? Are there specific aspects of secondary school that having a high self-esteem is important for?
 - Is having confidence important? What about confidence is important? Are there specific aspects of secondary school that confidence is important for?
 - What about feeling in control? Why? Are there specific aspects of secondary school that feeling in control of is important?
5. **What should our questionnaire look like?** (*would a visual scale work? For example, using a comic style or illustrations?; What about a written scale; What about a scale with response options to tick, what could these be*)
- a How many questions should we include?
6. **What type of questions would help us understand someone's emotional well-being during this time?**
- a Do we need to understand what is happening at home/club/school
 - b What things are important (e.g. success in academic work, socially, personally, emotionally)
7. **When should the questionnaire be used within schools?**
- a How many times in primary school?
 - b How many times in secondary school?
8. **Is there anything you would like to share which could be useful?**

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Data Availability Materials associated with the publication are available from: <https://osf.io/ukv7b/>.

Declarations

Consent to Participate Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the schools' Head Teachers, opt-in consent was obtained from the children's parents/carers, and children gave written assent to participate in the study.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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