# Transition: an inquiry into young people with social, emotional, and mental health difficulties views and experiences of transition to secondary school utilising participatory action research.

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**Abstract**

Primary to secondary transition has been acknowledged as a significant change and rite of passage in a child's education and life. Whilst most children and young people (CYP) adapt to their new school, following a short-term drop in their wellbeing and attainment, a small minority experience longer term negative impact. This research aimed to explore and illuminate factors which support successful transition from primary to secondary education for young people with social, emotional, and mental health needs, in order that positive changes can be made. This research explores the individual and collective experiences of three YP with SEMH difficulties who successfully transitioned into secondary school. A participatory action research design frame was undertaken, which utilised qualitative multi-methods to gather and explore participant experiences. This supported authentic participation, collaboration and involved participants theorising about transition practice (McDonald, 2012). Reflexive Thematic Analysis was used to consider participants' perspectives. Findings suggest that participatory approaches support YP with SEMH difficulties to effectively express their perspectives enabling them to act as agents of change. Findings also suggest that the narrative in relation to an ideal or maladaptive student, significantly impacts on YPs with SEMH difficulties transition experience, alongside other key themes including relationships, inclusive approaches, as well as both emotional and physical safety. The participatory approach enabled the identification of 12 key statements which YP feel enables successful transition. I advocate, therefore, that participatory approaches can be utilised to support the transition of young people with SEMH difficulties, with the ultimate aim of improving experiences and outcomes for young people by promoting inclusion.

**Dedication**

To Bethan and Connie, my amazing girls,

Thank you for making each day joyful, for your smiles, your love and for the compromises you have made. By being your beautiful selves, the hard days were possible. Always believe you can my angels. This thesis is dedicated to you.

To Colleen and Malcolm, my Mom and Dad.

Mom, thank you for your wisdom and our wonderful conversations which instilled in me a deep sense of social justice.  Dad, thank you for always making time for a walk and a talk. Thank you both for your unconditional and endless love, for always being there, for your support, for always believing I can and for your encouragement to be my authentic self.

To Iain, my husband

Thank you for your unfaltering love, encouragement to follow my dreams, for your understanding, tolerance, and unwavering support. Thank you for making me laugh and helping me to see perspective.

To Catherine, my sister

Thank you for listening, for being someone I can trust unconditionally, for your generosity of heart and always helping me consider alternative perspectives. Thanks for always being there through the ups and downs.

To my friends, thanks for your support, love and encouragement and bringing the sunshine on cloudy days.

To you all, I could not have done this without you.

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# List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| AR | *Action Research* |
| BPS | *British Psychological Society* |
| CAMHS | *Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service* |
| CAR | *Collaborative Action Research* |
| CYP | *Children and Young People* |
| DfE | *Department for Education* |
| DoH | *Department of Health* |
| EHCP | *Education, Health, and Care Plan* |
| EP | *Educational Psychologist* |
| EPS | *Educational Psychology Service* |
| LA | *Local Authority* |
| PAR | *Participatory Action Research* |
| SEN | *Special Educational Needs* |
| SENCo | *Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator* |
| SEND | *Special Educational Needs and Disabilities* |
| SEMH | *Social, Emotional, and Mental Health* |
| TA | *Thematic Analysis* |
| TEP | *Trainee Educational Psychologist* |
| YP | *Young people* |

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1    Context

This research forms the first of two volumes which together fulfil the academic requirements for the Applied Educational and Child Psychology Doctorate at the University of Birmingham. This research was conducted over two years (2022-2023) whilst I was on placement as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). This took place at a single local authority (LA) educational psychology service (EPS) in the West Midlands.

## 1.2    Research focus

This research looks at the experiences of young people (YP) identified as having social, emotional, and mental health difficulties (SEMH) when moving to secondary school. In exploring the views of YP through participatory action research (PAR) it was hoped that the process by which they experienced successful transition would be explored in an empowering way.

### 1.2.1  Rationale for the research

#### 1.2.1.1        Personal rationale

##### 1.2.1.1.1        Personal experiences

My interest in what makes a successful transition for YP with SEMH difficulties came to the forefront as I dropped my daughters off each morning to primary school and to a childminder. My eldest daughter, who was transitioning into reception, did so alongside children who ran into school, walked in with friends or alone, and some who struggled to go in. At primary school most were accompanied by parents or carers. This led me to consider how challenging it must be for children and young people (CYP) transitioning to secondary school who must increasingly become independent. I wanted to better understand how CYP experience this

transition, and what supports their success. As I attended an 'all through school' which offered both primary and secondary education, transition was not something I experienced. Therefore, I had no frame of reference for this experience, except at a later stage in education where I transitioned to sixth form.

My mother taught and held a leadership position in a secondary school throughout my adolescence. We often discussed the value and importance of listening to and working with CYP to help them to succeed, both in school and within their wider life. This undoubtedly has influenced my commitment to ensuring those who feel least listened to have this opportunity. Furthermore, over the last 18 years my work in local authorities involved CYP's participation within play, commissioning, and youth services with many CYP utilising their voices to promote positive change within their community. I gained insight into the challenges CYP face in having their perspectives heard and acted upon, especially those experiencing difficulties and disadvantage. I learned that there is limited opportunity for these CYP to influence change, despite them having insight to offer. I therefore felt there was a real opportunity to work with CYP with SEMH difficulties to amplify their voice in relation to transition. That I chose to utilise participatory action research is likely to reflect the high level of personal interest I have in participation theory and practice.

### 1.2.1.1.2    *Personal values*

I value the principles of reflexivity and transparency in research, therefore feel it is appropriate to reflect in brief here on what I may bring to the research. The principles of participation, equity, access to resource, diversity and human rights which underpin social justice (Corporate Finance Institute, 2023) underpin the way I work as both a researcher and practitioner. In recognising the importance of creating an environment where principles of empowerment and advocacy can flourish, I prefer to adopt qualitative approaches to allow for more detailed exploration of human experiences (Hunt, 2014). Therefore, I take an interpretivist theoretical stance where experience is seen as relative and subjective and consideration is given to how humans' worlds are constructed (Thomas, 2013). This

cumulatively resulted in the development of this PAR design and my decision to use Reflexive Thematic Analysis as a methodology.

## 1.2.1.2 Professional rationale

During doctoral studies, my experiences as a TEP influenced my thinking in relation to transition and CYP with SEMH difficulties. For me the starting point for educating any pupil includes an acceptance of diversity, pupils' rights, and the knowledge that all pupils can learn if they receive good teaching (Education Endowment Foundation, 2019). Early in my year two placement, I worked within a secondary school where CYP with SEMH difficulties in year seven were struggling to attend school. Inclusion in schools is a complex process that involves both meeting individual needs and the collective needs of the school community (Thompson et al, 2021). As the rates of absence in secondary schools stands at 9.2%, with 27% of these absences identified as persistent, this suggests significant disparity in experience of pupils (DfE, 2023a). Prioritising presenteeism fails to acknowledge that unless a child's wellbeing, welfare and needs are supported and protected, they will not be able to settle to learn or access the curriculum (Square Peg, 2022). It has been argued that systemic pressures on schools have resulted in CYP with SEMH difficulties missing out on mainstream education. Seeing this in practice I felt hearing CYPs experiences was a way in which their experience could be better understood (Parsons, 2015).

My prior experience of working within secondary schools involved the development of extracurricular and community-based opportunities and internal school-based leadership opportunities for CYP. It provided invaluable insight into the challenges, practically, emotionally, and socially, some CYP face and an opportunity to combine theoretical knowledge with professional practice (Hunt, 2014). Nind et al (2012) indicate that pupils who experience attentive listening can voice strong messages about belonging and not belonging, situating their learning in the context of relationships with the self and others.

There is a small proportion of research which has investigated transition for CYP with special educational needs (SEN) (Evangelou et al, 2008). It is hoped that by exploring the

psychological processes which underpin this educational transition, further understanding will be gained of the specific experiences of CYP with SEMH difficulties.

## 1.3   Definitions and terminology

Throughout this research I will make use of the term CYP with SEMH difficulties. This is the term outlined in current legislation and policy, namely the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice (Department for Education [DfE] and Department for Health [DoH], 2015). The SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) code of practice (Department for Education (DfE) and Department of Health (DH), 2015, pp.15) states "A child or young person has SEN if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her." The term SEMH recognises that underlying mental health and emotional wellbeing needs are linked to behaviour and will be employed throughout this research. In addressing needs rather than focusing on behaviours a more informed, whole child approach is taken (Hickinbotham & Soni, 2021).

Education Data Lab (2018) identified that whilst 44% of pupils had been classified as having SEND during their schooling only around 15% are considered to have had SEND at any one time. The use of these labels is likely to have a differential impact and the YPs experiences will be affected by a range of factors including social and environmental factors (Hickinbotham & Soni, 2021). Therefore, exercising caution when using the expression that YP have SEMH difficulties, classified as SEND, throughout the entirety of their educational journey is necessary. As the terms SEN and SEND are often utilised interchangeably within research, I will use the term used by the author throughout this research.

Within this research the term that will be used to describe the involvement of YP is participation. Participation can be defined as the provision of support (the space, skills, and time) for YP to express their views and ideas, and for these to be acted upon. Participation results in positive change in a situation, organisation, or context that YP are sharing their views about (Dunne, 2022). This definition has been utilised as it acknowledges that practitioners should be striving for 'action based' participation with impact, rather than simply creating space for YP to be heard (Dunne, 2022).

'Transfer' and 'Transition' are used interchangeably to refer both to CYPs move from one school system and into another, or within the same school between different years (Evangelou et al, 2008). It is notable that the transition from primary to secondary is the most significant undertaken by CYP (Dunsmuir & Stringer, 2012). As Mumford and Birchwood (2021) express transition sees CYP moving from one educational institution at the end of their final academic year, to another, following a six-week break. This is often after having spent the previous six years within one setting. In this study the term transition is used to address CYPs movement from one educational institution to another, once a child reaches a certain age, (Mumford & Birchwood, 2021) and incorporates an age graded approach to education (Symonds & Galton, 2014).

## 1.4    Structure of thesis

This volume contains four chapters. Following this introductory chapter, I review the current literature available regarding the participation of YP, YP with SEMH difficulties in education and the educational transition of YP with SEMH. In chapter three I present the methodology including the research design, the underpinning epistemological stance of the research, a description of action research, ethical implications, the methods used and reflexive thematic analysis. The final chapter analyses the findings of this research, discusses these, considers the limitations of this work, and finally considers the implications for educational psychology practice.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides an overview of research in relation to the participation of YP, YP with SEMH difficulties in education, and their educational transition. The chapter is divided into four sections; models of participation and the role of YPs voice, an overview of research detailing CYP with SEMH experiences in education, how educational transition impacts on CYP with SEMH concluding with a rationale for this research, outlining the research aims and research questions.

A scoping literature review was carried out to identify articles which focussed specifically on the lived experiences of young people with SEMH difficulties who have transitioned to secondary school as well as literature in relation to youth voice/ participation. Searches were carried out using PsychINFO 1967 – present, Web of Science, EBSCO, Scopus, Medline & Embase and Proquest, to identify and synthesise the body of literature in relation to these areas. The search terms used across all databases were: 'Secondary students OR secondary pupils OR young people OR adolescen* AND 'transition' AND 'social, emotional and mental health OR social, emotional and behavioural difficulties' AND 'views OR beliefs OR attitudes OR voice' AND 'participation OR active involvement OR participatory approaches'.

## 2.1    YPs participation

This section describes key legislation in relation to participation of CYP, relevant terminology, and participatory models which support YPs voice. Current research, in relation to the factors YP with SEMH identify as influential on their experiences of education, is also considered.

### 2.1.1  Key legislation

Through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF, 1989) CYP have a human right to participate in decision making processes that may be relevant to their lives. The UNCRC was ratified by the UK Government in 1991 giving CYP the right to be listened to regarding their SEN and educational experiences and to influence decisions taken in their regard. It recognised UK's children's right to expression and their ability to enrich decision-

making processes, to share perspectives and to participate as citizens. However, White and Choudhury (2007) indicated that the language within the UNCRC such as CYPs 'developing capabilities' or 'maturity' suggests ambivalence regarding CYPs competence to determine their own fate. Boakye-Boaten (2010) states that the concept of childhood therefore is ambiguous as it is conceived differently across the world, however, Lewis & Lindsey (2000) disagreed. This ambiguity instead can be seen at the heart of the legal principle which the UNCRC endorses, with the best interests of CYP always being first and foremost.

In the UK, legislation such as the Children's Act 2004 enshrine the rights of a child to be heard and to take part in decisions that affect them and requires local authorities and practitioners to give due regard to a child's wishes. This right has been more recently advocated in legislation (Children and Families Act 2014) as well as through the SEND Code of Practice (DfE/ DoH, 2015). This identifies that a clearer focus on the participation of CYP in decision making at both the individual, service and strategic levels is required.  Specifically, the local authority must ensure the child's parents, or the CYP are fully included in the EHC needs assessment process. This includes the opportunity to offer views and information and that they are consulted about the content of the plan (DfE/DoH, 2015). This is a step towards the removal of barriers to learning and successful preparation for adulthood, including independent living and employment for those with complex needs (DfE/ DoH, 2015).

## 2.1.2  Terminology

There are a multitude of terms describing participation activity, such as engagement, youth/pupil/child voice, consultation, empowerment and youth-led practices. Within this thesis the term that will be used is youth participation as Lundy (2007) asserts 'voice' is not enough. Participation here means active participation where the YP can imply empowerment and have reason to believe their involvement will make a difference (Sinclair, 2004). Participation comprises of numerous creative approaches, as well as spoken word, to enable YP to express their views and experiences for example, through photography which has been utilised within this research.

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### 2.1.3 Participatory models

#### 2.1.3.1 Hart's ladder of participation

Hickey and Mohan (2004) discussed the need for participatory approaches to deepen understandings of power and to better engage with structural analysis and issues of governance. Hart (1992), built on Arnstein's (1969) model of participation and utilised a ladder as a metaphor to illustrate the different degrees of initiation and collaboration CYP can have when working with adults (see Figure 1). The model does not mean to imply a child should always be operating at the highest level of the ladder (Hart, 1997). Instead, different forms of participation are appropriate in different circumstances (Botchwey at al, 2019).

Many schools have structures which can offer opportunities for YPs participation. Hart (1997) indicates that the best opportunities for democratic experiences for CYP come from sustained involvement in a group. This enables CYP to develop their own orientations to participation built upon their particular interests. However, Hart (1992) found it challenging to find examples of 'true' youth participation, where CYP engage in participatory exercises that give them full control. This is due to systemic challenges as well as differentiated abilities to participate based on social and emotional development, class, and gender (Hart, 1992). Checkoway (2011) suggests that CYP require a level of facilitation from adult 'allies' which effectively supports CYP to participate in shared decision-making processes.

## Figure 1: Hart's ladder of participation (1992)

| | |
|---|---|
| 8. Child initiated, shared decisions with adults | |
| 7. Child- initiated and directed | |
| 6. Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children | |
| 5. Consulted and informed | |
| 4. Assigned but informed | |
| 3. Tokenism | Non-participation |
| 2. Decoration | |
| 1. Manipulation | |
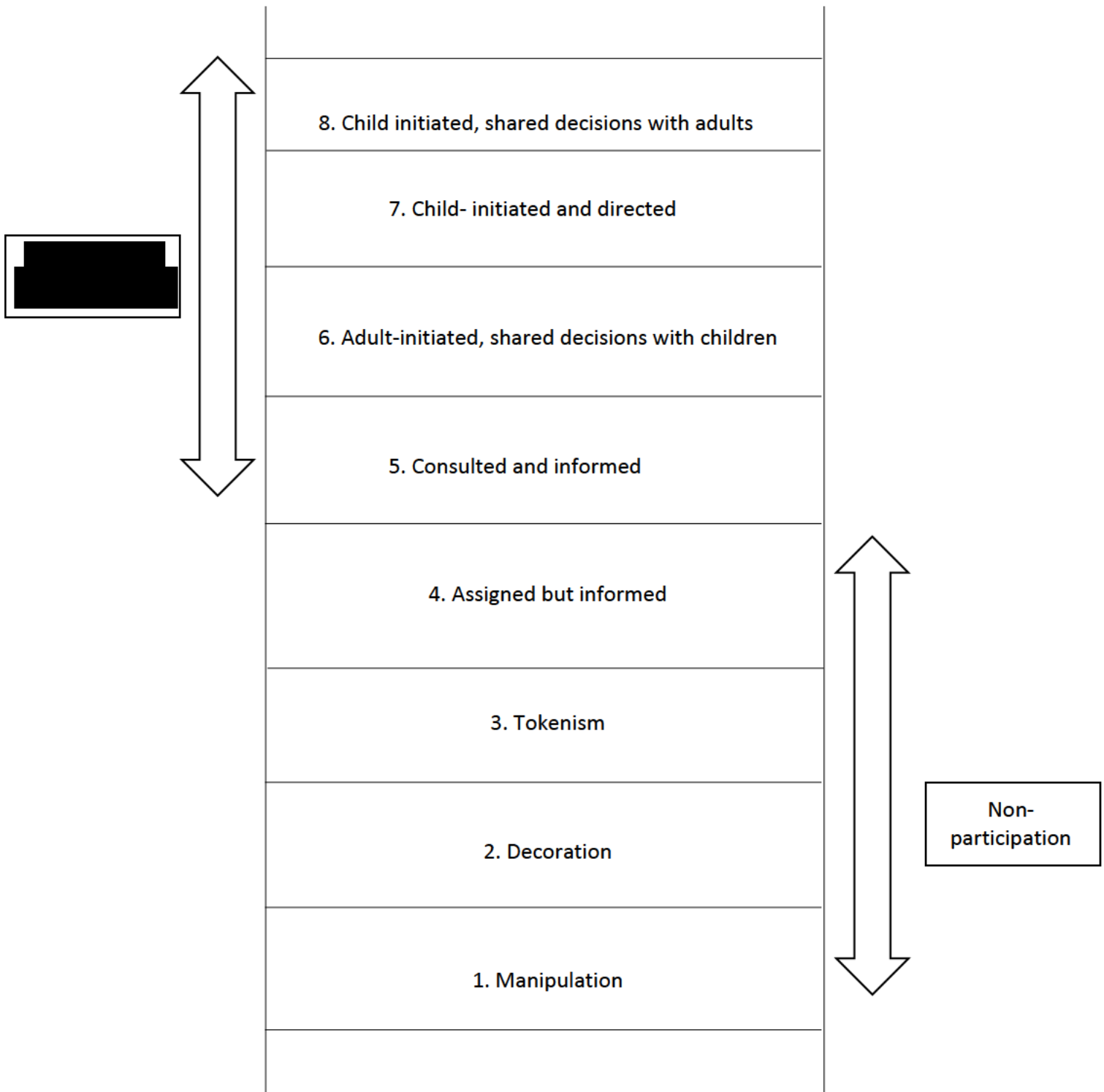
Botchwey et al (2019) suggest further rungs be added to Hart's model (see Figure 2). These new rungs and the consideration of power serve to emphasise that the reality of shared power can never be reached in institutions or democracies (Botchwey et al, 2019) where the

ultimate decision-making power remains with existing authorities (Creighton, 2005). These additional rungs are:

- incorporation (to unite or work into something already existing)
- advocacy (the ability to support, argue or plead in favour of a policy, systems or built environment change)
- consent (approval given from one person to another).

Figure 2: Botchwey et al (2019) revised ladder, indicates a forked structure between approaches that grant participation to young people versus where young people seek participation (page 267).
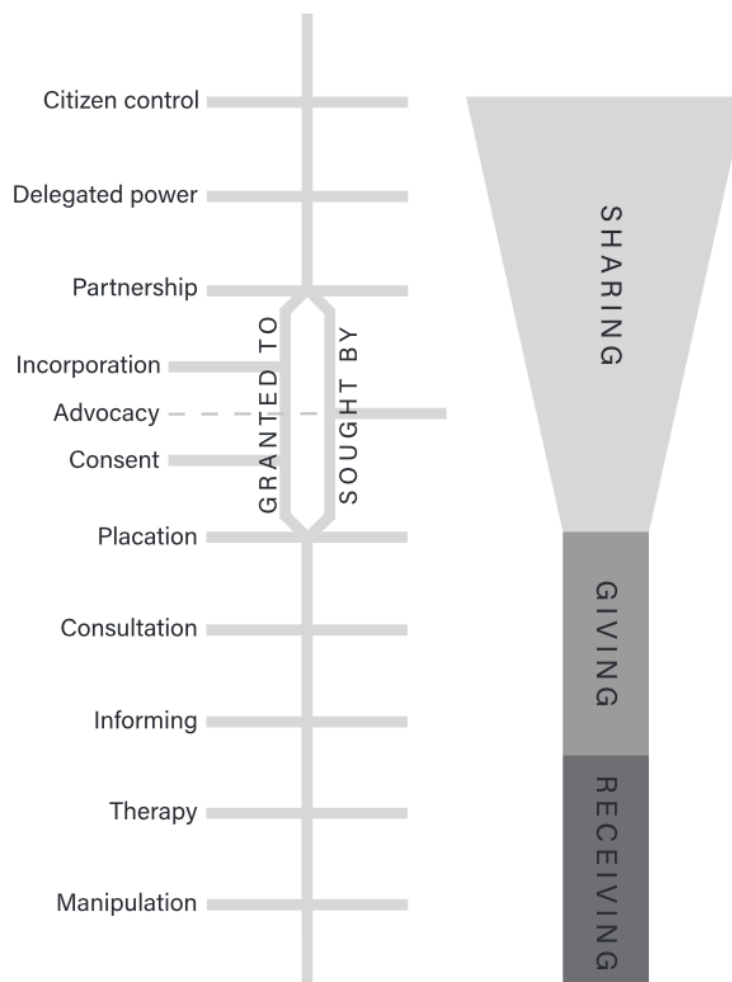
*2.1.3.2 Lundy's model of child participation*

Lundy's (2007) model of child participation underpins Ireland's National Strategy on CYPs Participation in Decision Making (2015-2020). It conceptualises a child's right to participation (Article 12, UNCRC) and highlights the inefficacy of voice operating in a vacuum (Kellett, 2010).

These four elements are:

- Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view
- Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views
- Audience: The view must be listened to
- Influence: The view must be acted upon as appropriate.

This model contains four interrelated elements which enable CYP to have rights to express a view (space/voice) and being given due weight (audience/influence) (Lundy, 2007). Also, CYP have a right to dissent, as not all want to express a view (Kellett, 2010). Where CYP, as a relatively powerless group, set their own agendas and co-construct research their interests are served (Kellett, 2010). Munro (2008) suggests it is not only an ethical requirement, but equally a developmental task to offer CYP with SEMH opportunities to empower them, which Lundy's model recognises. However, Kennan et al (2019) identify that Lundy's model fails to consider the emotional component of CYPs involvement, such as discussing difficult experiences. This raises uncertainty associated with how participation can be practiced (van Bijleveld et al, 2014), with Kennan et al (2019) suggesting that additionality to Lundy's model should ensure emotional safety is considered during CYPs participatory work.

Figure 3: Lundy's (2007) voice model checklist for participation, (Ireland's Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015, pp.21).

| Space | Voice |
|---|---|
| HOW: Provide a safe and inclusive space for children to express their views<br><br>- Have children's views been actively sought?<br>- Was there a safe space in which children can express themselves freely?<br>- Have steps been taken to ensure that all children can take part? | HOW: Provide appropriate information and facilitate the expression of children's views<br><br>- Have children been given the information they need to form a view?<br>- Do children know that they do not have to take part?<br>- Have children been given a range of options as to how they might choose to express themselves? |
| Audience | Influence |
| HOW: Ensure that children's views are communicated to someone with the responsibility to listen.<br><br>- Is there a process for communicating children's views?<br>- Do children know who their views are being communicated to?<br>- Does that person/body have the power to make decisions? | HOW: Ensure that children's views are taken seriously and acted upon, where appropriate.<br><br>- Were the children's views considered by those with the power to affect change?<br>- Are there procedures in place that ensure that the children's views have been taken seriously?<br>- Have the children and young people been provided with feedback explaining the reasons for decisions taken? |

*2.1.3.3 Participation of young people*

Engaging CYP throughout school, and within society, can move CYP to feel more ownership in their lives, where they can demonstrate a more giving role both within school and more widely (Free Child, 2023). This can enable CYP to be seen as social actors who can play active roles in shaping their environment (James et al, 1998). As the lives of CYP are fluid, aiding participation requires consideration, planning, and resource to ensure involvement can be effectively supported and sustained (Free Child, 2023). White and Choudhury (2007) add that age is a fundamental axis of social power and must be questioned. CYPs participation can both challenge existing forms of power and become a means through which power is expressed and experienced by CYP.

CYPs participation supports CYP to have a positive impact and effect change within their own lives, schools, and wider communities (Dunne, 2022). Communities with strong YPs participation discover a greater drive to put ideas into action and have greater intergenerational understanding (Frank, 2006; Botchwey et al, 2019). However, Frank (2006) identifies four interrelated societal views of YP casting doubt within others over whether CYPs participation is beneficial or practicable:

1. The developmental view emphasizes YPs lack of the level of knowledge, skills, and attitudes due to psychosocial growth.
2. the vulnerable view sees YP as less powerful and therefore subject to abuse by adults.
3. the legal view assigns YP to partial citizen status.
4. the romantic view sees YP as having values and capabilities that are distinct, even superior to, adults.

Researchers have adapted what is known from developmental psychology to predict and enable YPs capacity for participation (Hart, 1997). Furthermore, collections of case studies reflecting on the processes of youth participation continue to create an alternative narrative of CYP as resources for community and school development (Driskell, 2002; Finn & Checkoway, 1998). Botchwey et al (2019) systematic literature review identifies how CYPs knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours are significantly positively impacted by

involvement in participatory activity. This includes a better understanding of their physical and social environments, learning how to create community change, developing reflective skills and becoming more confident (Botchwey et al, 2019). However, CYP can become more frustrated by a lack of adult responsiveness and, as Adams and Ingham (1998) highlight, CYP cannot suddenly be involved in ways which demand high levels of skill. Opportunities to gain experience and develop competence and confidence is required (Adams & Ingham, 1998).

### 2.1.4 Participation of young people with SEMH

Enabling voice can be a potential source of empowerment which challenges the hegemony of accounts that privilege certain voices (Nind et al, 2012). As Gray and Woods (2022) assert, research into SEMH and pupil's educational experiences is limited, with the participation of pupils with SEMH largely being overlooked (Sheffield & Morgan, 2017; Caslin, 2019). Realising the power of participation is also less developed in the field of SEMH, where there is arguably no (self-)advocacy movement, unlike other areas of SEN (Nind et al, 2012) such as for CYP with Autism Spectrum Conditions.

Nind et al (2012) further assert it is easier not to hear than to hear the voice of YP with SEMH because their communication is frequently unconventional. Lloyd (2005) identifies that their communications are often in ways that transgress school rules which can lead to further labelling. However, Nind et al (2012) suggest involving YP with SEMH as key informants, they are respected as valid contributors in the generation of knowledge. For many YP with SEMH difficulties who have daily struggles, participation offers an opportunity for critical reflection on their own environment and what it offers or not (Hart, 1997), giving a more complete understanding of their lives.

This is not without difficulty. Tangen (2008) emphasised that listening is an active process of exchange of meaning, involving hearing, reading, interpreting, and constructing meanings using more than the spoken or written word. Cosma and Soni (2019) further identified, to better understand the complexities of pupils' lives, the concepts of space, identity, relationships, community and belonging in schools need also to be better explored. Whilst collaborative conversations might enable pupils to actively construct their own understanding (Delbauve et al, 2017), in practice participatory approaches can be challenging. It requires

attentive listening, as well as spaces and supportive structures for stories to be fully heard (Nind et al, 2012). As White and Choudhury (2007) assert, the challenge is seeking out and working with the social, cultural, and other forms of resource on which marginalised CYP already rely.

YP with SEMH difficulties can be envisioned as collaborative change agents in their settings and contexts of their lives where power relations are carefully considered (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). Positive outcomes of CYPs participation extends beyond their immediate involvement (Hornyak et al, 2022) and can lead to development of interpersonal skills, networking opportunities and development of life skills linked to improved health behaviours (Ferland et al, 2015). This for YP with SEMH difficulties is important given the challenges that transitioning and the increased levels of exclusion these YP frequently experience in secondary education. As Ashton (2008) asserts CYP with SEN can be an invaluable resource and can make their views known in a wide range of ways. YP with SEN are willing and can critically consider the transition process which can ultimately result in school improvement, through direct involvement (Ashton, 2008).

2.1.4.1 Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Participatory Action Research (PAR) has an international history beyond psychology (Langhout & Thomas, 2010) yet there is limited PAR research which has included the role of the child as a collaborator. Therefore, there is the opportunity to consider problem definitions in relation to transition which are more valid and effective through CYP involvement in the process (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). For YP with SEMH difficulties participating in research can help them gain more control of the resources that affect their lives, enabling them to advocate for themselves and others (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). They are experts on the subject, so their participation offers support to YP who may not feel they know much about anything (Hart, 1997).

YP with SEN need regular opportunities to express their opinions and make decisions (Turner, 2001), but this can be challenging due to the attitudes of others in relation to CYPs abilities. Research has indicated that, listening to YP with SEMH difficulties may require using the

communication styles they prefer (Corbett, 1998). Corbett (1998) and Nind et al (2012) identify that putting less emphasis on conventional communication resources and more on imaginative listening activity-based processes to reduce dependence on verbal and written literacy can be beneficial. Once data is collected, graphics can help CYP find ways to express the relationship of many relevant variables (Hart, 1997). PAR offers an opportunity to utilise these less conventional communication resources, where CYP help co-construct their experience.

Trust and partnership become central concerns in PAR (Barnes, 1997). In supporting the development of empowerment, strategies are required to address power inequalities and consider social support systems and concerns which can impact on CYPs participation (Fazil et al, 2004).

### 2.1.5   Summary

The literature indicates that there is a need to establish effective processes to support the participation of YP with SEMH difficulties (Langhout & Thomas, 2010; Lundy, 2007; Kennan et al, 2019). In doing so, the challenges of transition for those with SEMH difficulties can be collaboratively explored. As experts on their experience (Hart, 1997), a participatory approach offers an opportunity for researchers to consider how space, voice, audience, and influence can be applied in practice (Lundy, 2007). This affords the students with SEMH difficulties critical reflection on their own environment and the resources it does or does not offer (Hart, 1997). Offering an opportunity to empower a cohort of students can help to influence change (Hart, 1997) and develop a repertoire of good practice through collaborative conversation (Delbauve et al, 2017). Consideration of the emotional impact of participation must also be considered to ensure that YP with SEMH difficulties feel safe to act as collaborators, in seeking change (Kennan et al, 2019).

## 2.2 CYP with SEMH difficulties and Education.

### 2.2.1 2023: A profile in England of SEMH

Since 2016, the rates of special educational needs in secondary schools have continued to rise (ONS, 2022). In 2022, 16% of the pupil population in England were recognised as having special educational needs and of these 20% were identified as having SEMH difficulties, compared to 17% in 2019 (ONS, 2022).

### 2.2.2 Key legislation

The Children's and Families Act (2014) provides a framework aiming to improve provision and services for CYP with SEND and their families. The subsequent SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) outlined that a stronger focus on high aspirations, and on improving outcomes for CYP with SEND was required. Local Authorities were required to develop a Local Offer, where families could find help, support and information, in relation to SEND and their child.

The duty for equality considerations was also highlighted in relation to significant decisions being made or policies developed in school (DfE, 2014). In relation to disability provisions, a disabled person may, and often must, be treated more favourably than a person who is not disabled (DfE, 2014). The Equality Act (2010) meant that a school must take reasonable steps to try to avoid disadvantage to pupils with disabilities (DfE, 2014). For all pupils, these reasonable steps must be considered in relation to the needs of other pupils and potentially becomes more complex in relation to pupils with SEMH difficulties.

Recently, a greater significance has been placed on improving support for CYP with SEMH difficulties (DfE, 2023b). These include promoting regular attendance for those with mental health needs, promoting pupil's emotional wellbeing, teaching pupils about respectful relationships, and supporting pupils' social and emotional development (DfE, 2023b). Furthermore, the government's programme to boost mental health support for CYP (DfE, 2021) has highlighted the need for interagency work through the development of Mental Health Support Teams. However, Thompson et al (2021) suggest that current policy emphasises reactions to behaviours presented by CYP, rather than proactive preventative

approaches, and the inclination is often to situate these needs within a child, without real consideration of the significant external factors. Whilst initiatives promote educational achievement for CYP with SEMH difficulties, further policy reform may be required to improve the opportunities for educational success.

### 2.2.3   Educational outcomes for CYP with SEMH.

Education has a substantial impact on a person's career prospects, role in society and, by extension, vulnerability to poverty or social exclusion in later life (Atkinson et al, 2004). In 2022, the overall absence rate for pupils with SEN was 12%, and of these pupils 37% were persistently absent from school (ONS, 2023). The attainment gap between pupils with SEND and their peers is twice as big as the gap between pupils eligible for free school meals and their peers (Education Endowment Foundation, 2019). A plethora of research indicates that CYP with SEMH difficulties are more likely to achieve poorer educational outcomes (Nind et al, 2012) and have increased levels of absence from school (ONS, 2023). They are also more likely to experience disproportionate rates of exclusion (Carroll & Hurry, 2018), compared to other learners (Bowman-Perrott et al, 2013; Thompson et al, 2021). Carroll and Hurry (2018) state that one exclusion puts pupils at risk of further multiple school exclusions which negatively impacts on their academic attainment. Daniels and Cole (2010) further assert that exclusion from school as a possible precursor to exclusion from society remains a matter of public concern. As Carrington et al (2007) emphasise the right, the opportunity, and the skills with which to participate and transform one's life path are the essence of social inclusion.

The higher exclusion rates of pupils with SEMH difficulties appears to expose challenges faced by schools in both identifying and meeting the needs of these pupils (Graham et al, 2019). Partridge et al (2020) identified that there has been a 60% increase in the number of pupils who have been permanently excluded in the last five years with persistent disruptive behaviour as the most common reason for both suspensions and permanent exclusion (ONS, 2023). The Timpson Review (Timpson, 2019) suggested that of those who are excluded, CYP with SEMH difficulties have the highest rate of exclusion. CYP with SEMH difficulties also experience managed moves and school changes at significantly higher rates than their peers (Social Finance, 2020). For a child or young person with SEMH difficulties, and their families,

the experience of rejection, sometimes repeatedly, in order that the interests of the majority are met can increase vulnerability, and powerlessness (Messeter & Soni, 2017; Hoyle, 2016).

Thomson (2018) identified that 21% of CYP with 'behavioural, social and emotional' difficulties at the end of primary school were either home educated, out of educational provision entirely or educated in alternative provision. This is the highest number of CYP no longer in mainstream settings who have an identified SEN need.

### 2.2.4   Factors influencing educational achievement and outcomes.

CYP identified as having SEMH difficulties are not a homogenous population and have unique experiences (Hickinbotham & Soni, 2021). Research has identified that the social and economic environment in which CYP develop appears to be the most important predictor of their overall well-being (Gizir & Aydin, 2009). Socio-economic hardships put CYP in an underprivileged position, with contextual indicators continuing to be the determining factors for educational attainment (Banerjee & Lamb, 2016). CYP living in the most deprived areas are twice as likely to present to acute services highlighting the significant difference in mental health difficulties (Grimm et al, 2022). Furthermore, mental health difficulties are both the cause and result of exclusion, and not meeting this need undermines the inclusion of pupils with SEMH difficulties (Thompson et al, 2021).

Less than two thirds of YP with mental health problems and their families access professional help for their needs (Sadler et al, 2018). Support for pupils with SEMH difficulties requires inter-professional understanding so that CYP are better able to participate in and achieve optimal academic and social outcomes (Slee, 2018).  Factors which impact on help-seeking behaviours and reduce access to professional support relate to mental health stigma and embarrassment (Sadler et al, 2018), a lack of mental health knowledge (Radez et al, 2021), negative perceptions of help-seeking and YPs preference for self-reliance (Guliver et al, 2010). In England the number of CYP in contact with the specialist Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) rose by 46.6% between 2019 and 2021, however only 27% of CYP who needed support received it (Grimm et al, 2022). Of those who were accepted, long delays were experienced leaving schools without this specialist support (Crenna-Jennings & Hutchinson, 2018). Schools therefore are likely to be working to meet the needs of YP with

SEMH, some of whom are awaiting specialist support or intervention. Subsequently, inclusion in schools is a complex process that involves meeting both individual and collective needs of the school community.

Resilience literature has consistently emphasised the positive influence of caring relations (Gizir & Aydin, 2009), high expectations, and encouragement for participation in meaningful activities (WestEd, 2000) to facilitate academic resilience in CYP (Gizir & Aydin, 2009). Protective qualities associated with individual students (internal protective factors) and their environments (external protective factors) promote academic resilience; these contribute to the adjustment and academic success of students who are at risk (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000). YP place importance on the characteristics of those who help and having adequate emotional support for their academic tasks (Gulliver et al, 2010). As adolescents prefer self-reliance during difficult times, offering YP different ways to access their own help, including digital tools, can facilitate help-seeking behaviour (Sadler et al 2018).

The majority of pupils with SEN are within mainstream schools (ONS, 2022). School staff describe how supporting CYP with SEMH difficulties is a challenging area professionally and welcome evidence to better support their practice (DfE, 2016). Cooper and Jacobs (2011a) suggest the qualities and skills of effective teachers and teaching in relation to SEMH are not often prioritised. Reduced school funding impacts on decisions to buy in specialist support and local authorities' ability to keep up with demand (Davies et al, 2021; Partridge et al, 2020). An increase in need, therefore, is taking place alongside decreasing capacity within schools and local authorities. Whilst pupils with SEMH cover a full range of ability, learning difficulties can also arise for these YP because their difficulties can affect their ability to cope with school routines and relationships (Carr, 2019). Thompson (2020) noted how high stakes testing, designed to hold schools and teachers to account, has led to a narrowing of the curriculum, which further contributes to the rise in school exclusion for pupils with SEMH difficulties. Furthermore, Thompson et al (2021) discuss how pressures on schools to introduce measures for their pupils to pass tests may be at the expense of strategies that assist YPs long-term emotional well-being.

## 2.2 6   Summary

There has been a consistent rise in the numbers of learners with SEMH difficulties in recent years (ONS, 2022). These CYP are more likely to be at risk of exclusion (Carroll & Hurry, 2018), compared to other peers with SEN (Thompson et al, 2021). Whilst there is a governmental focus on wellbeing and mental health (DfE, 2023b), CYP with SEMH difficulties continue to have poorer outcomes and be underrepresented in research. School staff describe this cohort of students to be challenging professionally, (DfE, 2016) and reduced school funding ultimately impacts on decisions to buy in specialist support (Davies et al, 2021). As caring relationships are critical for CYP with SEMH difficulties (Mihalas et al, 2008) there is a significant opportunity to consider these YPs experiences including protective and risk factors for their transition into school.

## 2.3   Educational Transition into Secondary Education for young people with SEMH

This section describes educational transition and the impact this can have on YP of secondary age. It seeks to frame understanding of how YP with SEMH can be affected by transition including the facilitative or inhibitory factors that impact on this process.

### 2.3.1   Transition

Transition has been defined as a period of change requiring situational and psychological adjustment (Dunsmuir & Stringer, 2012). It has been described as a personal journey of development or a rite of passage (Thackeray, 2014) through which students experience a shift in identity, reflecting a sense of growing up (Bailey & Baines, 2012). It incorporates environmental changes, and leads to changing emotions (Mumford and Birchwood, 2021). Whilst many YP adjust and adapt to the new secondary environment quickly (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006), others have significant difficulty. As Keller et al (2007) note whilst transition changes social roles and responsibilities and can create anxiety it also presents an offer of new beginnings and of opportunity.

### 2.3.2 The primary to secondary transition

Transition from primary to secondary school represents one of the key junctions in the educational career of YP (McCoy et al, 2020). Local authority areas have differing transition practices, guidelines, opportunities for training and systems to evaluate training (Evangelou et al, 2008). Research has indicated CYP with SEN like primary school less than their peers (McCoy et al, 2012) and often find transition more challenging than their peers (NASEN, 2014). CYP with SEN also experience greater levels of stress (West et al, 2010) and experience a drop in self-esteem and academic attainment during transition (Galton et al, 2003). Whilst Evangelou et al (2008) states that CYP with SEN do not experience a less successful transition that other CYP, McCoy et al's (2020) research indicates that they do.

At its core transition involves change. Therefore, resilience research can add understanding as to why some individuals can overcome this risk and adversity, and some cannot (Bailey & Baines, 2012). Personal qualities and characteristics, social environments, and other environmental factors such as school and community can be identified as both protective and risk factors (Bailey & Baines, 2012). As YP with SEN difficulties are more likely to experience a negative transition (McCoy et al, 2020), a multifaceted consideration of the factors impacting on transition experience, for YP with SEMH, is required.

### 2.3.3 Transition and adolescence/ emerging adulthood

Rutter (1990) asserts that adolescence is not always a difficult period for most teenagers. Yet Packman & Hall (1998) suggest that for those who have SEND, extra help is required to accomplish developmental tasks effectively. McCoy et al (2020) consider that child's development is the result of a complex interplay between the individual characteristics of a child to their environment at home, family, and school, and to more widely ranging factors such as the community in which they live (Greene et al, 2010).

Blakemore (2012) states that adolescence is a time of change where there are changes to hormones and the body, the social environment and to the brain and mind. This takes place around the age of educational transition where significant relational changes also take place. These include CYP making the move to secondary school with few, or sometimes none of their

peers, many of whom they have been educated with for several years (Mumford & Birchwood, 2021). Research has indicated that friendship quality is a protective factor for CYP, however, CYP with SEN are more likely to be bullied (Stapinski et al, 2015). As peer victimisation during adolescence is related to adverse psychological consequence (Bollmer et al, 2005), this is a significant inhibitor of a successful transition (Evangelou et al, 2008). However, protective factors such as individualised preparation and transfer processes can help ameliorate some of this risk (Evangelou et al, 2008).

West et al (2010) found that primary school plays a small role in accounting for different transition experiences, with individual characteristics being more influential. However, Evangelou et al (2008) and Doyle, McGuckin & Shevlin (2017) identified that school processes are highly significant in enabling successful transition experiences, particularly for vulnerable YP. Therefore, the evidence is somewhat mixed on the relative contribution of school and individual level factors (McCoy et al, 2020) which suggests that consideration of how factors combine and impact on YPs experiences is an area for further research.

### 2.3.4 Increasing chances of successful transition and educational success for YP with SEMH

Evangelou et al (2008) identify five underlying dimensions for successful transition which include development of friendships and confidence, settling into school life, a growing interest in school and schoolwork, getting used to new routines and experiencing curriculum continuity. Evangelou et al (2008) identify case studies of well-settled children, and this research similarly focuses learners who have settled well. Sancho & Cline (2012) assert that positive relationships, including friendships, are important protective factors against the negative effects of transition, alongside a sense of belonging. Furthermore, Rice et al (2015) suggest that whilst there are a range of risk and protective factors which influence the likelihood of a positive or difficult transition, a whole school approach to supporting transition is key. This includes strategies delivered to all pupils to deal with common concerns raised by young people, as well as additional strategies for more vulnerable individuals delivered on a case-by-case basis (Rice et al, 2015).

There are different ways intervention can support CYP with SEMH difficulties during transition to secondary school. It can promote wellbeing (Durlak et al, 2011), reduce peer relationship problems, reduce concern by promoting positive emotions (Le Nguyen & Frederickson, 2018), promote emotional intelligence (Qualter et al, 2007) and promote feelings of belonging and familiarisation (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006). A sense of belonging promotes psychological well-being, positive attitudes to learning and proactive approaches to seeking support (Thackeray, 2014). The links between attachment, emotional development and relational practice has been established within literature, suggesting the attachment experience of YP with SEMH is a key consideration within the classroom and more widely within school (Geddes, 2017). Where CYP have a 'secure enough' attachment experience in the classroom the YP have an increased capacity to adapt to school and to respond to academic learning in a social setting (Geddes, 2017). Where YP have positive social skills or beliefs about their future expected selves (Aikins et al, 2005) as well as greater optimism (Brissette et al, 2002), they cope better with the transition to secondary school.

To support with the social adjustment required for settling into a new school, school staff can use the PSHE curriculum. Evangelou et al (2008) suggest that this helps CYP develop their social and personal skills, friendships, self-esteem, and gain confidence. However, as Pinto et al (2019) assert, pupils with SEN experience lower peer status than their mainstream peers, so meaningful social contact in the classroom plays a crucial role in improving social involvement, as well as enhancing academic outcomes.

Evangelou et al (2008) suggest that the main features affecting a successful transition include how CYP receive help from their secondary school. This includes supplementary teaching or being placed in a class specifically for those with particular needs (McCoy et al, 2012). Schools who arrange prior induction or taster visits to school, help students to get to know their way around the school, relax rules in the early weeks, and provide support and assistance with lessons and homework positively impact on pupils' transition experiences (Evangelou et al, 2008).

Ashton (2008) highlighted the importance of the voice of YP in supporting a successful transition into secondary school, which can be planned and facilitated with limited resource.

This research identified how all YP can inform the transition process and contribute to ongoing improvement. Rose et al (2016) suggests that whilst YP with SEMH difficulties are less likely to have the opportunity to voice their experiences, the opportunity to be more engaged in the transition process can result in reduced anxieties. Rice et at (2015) found that there is not a single set of factors that increase the possibility of a poor transition. They further asserted that some characteristics such as a children's self-control, learning motivation and psychological adjustment abilities were associated with transition success. Evangelou et al (2008) assert that successful transition takes a proactive approach to both social and institutional adjustment, continuity, and curriculum interest. However, a key challenge is to consider how this is planned, in a co-constructed way which draws on the perspectives of the YP where multiple factors interconnect and impact.

### 2.3.5 Challenges of successful transition and educational success for YP with SEMH

Students with SEMH difficulties could be considered some of the most vulnerable in society, as this population are associated with poor educational attainment (Cefai & Cooper, 2009), poorer life prospects and mental health problems in adulthood (Thackeray, 2014). Characteristics including SEN, poor emotional regulation, low self-esteem, disengagement, and victimisation, all predict poorer transition experiences and difficulties with school adjustment (Thackeray, 2014). Sheffield and Morgan (2017) identified that the perceived quality of teacher–pupil relationships was found to be highly significant for YP with SEMH. Cosma and Soni (2019) also assert that relationships, belongingness, and consideration of how the curriculum is delivered are significant factors affecting educational success for CYP with SEMH difficulties. Harding et al (2019) found better teacher wellbeing has been found to be associated with better student wellbeing and lower student psychological distress. Thackeray (2014) further asserts that where YP experienced an absence of quality emotional support in the build-up to transition, they felt distress and desired emotional support. Consequently, key considerations for transition are how positive relationships are built and how support is offered in a non-intrusive way (McCoy et al, 2020).

McCoy et al (2020) and Ashton (2008) suggest that pre and post transition support is critical for YP with SEMH difficulties. Thackeray (2014) found that YP who experience the least successful transitions highlighted the importance of schools gradually supporting students to

settle in, whilst offering additional emotional support in a safe space. Primary schools often offer high levels of consistent support for CYP with SEMH difficulties. Subsequently, these CYP may be less prepared for the significant changes they face in their new schools where these relational and practical protective factors may not be in place (Bailey & Baines, 2012).

### 2.3.6  Summary

Literature indicates that many CYP adjust and adapt to the new secondary environment in a short space of time (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006). However, YP with SEMH difficulties are more likely to have a negative transition experience (McCoy et al, 2020) and a drop in self-esteem and academic attainment (Galton et al, 2003) as well as experiencing increased levels of transitional stress, in comparison to peers (West et al, 2010). Positive relationships with peers and teachers, has been found to be a significant protective factor (Comsa & Soni, 2019). There is therefore an opportunity to build on the small research base which considers how, from CYPs perspective, these factors impact on YP with SEMH's transition.

## 2.4  Conclusion of literature review

Eliciting YPs experiences of the primary to secondary transition, in order that support is made available for CYP vulnerable to negative psychological and academic outcomes, can promote positive wellbeing of students (Thackeray, 2014). Transition, a period of change requiring situational and psychological adjustment (Dunsmuir & Stringer, 2012), can afford significant challenges and opportunities for YP with SEMH. As Bailey and Baines (2012) state little is known about the combination of effects of different risks on transition experience. This suggests there is a need for better understanding of the experiences, characteristics and factors impacting on CYP with SEMH during transitions. CYP with SEMH difficulties have an increased likelihood of poorer transition experiences (McCoy et al, 2020), poorer educational outcomes and increased risk of school exclusion (Carroll & Hurry, 2018). Daniels and Cole (2010) found that YP with SEMH difficulties also have poorer life outcomes. Despite this trajectory, some YP with SEMH difficulties are successful. Therefore, there is an opportunity to reframe the narrative and consider the factors which have enabled successful transition, such as quality relationships (Cosma & Soni, 2019). The research in relation to transition

suggests little is known about the combined effect of factors impacting on YP with SEMH difficulties during educational transition. Subsequently, there is an opportunity to collaboratively consider this, with YP who are experts in their own experience (Hart, 1997).

## 2.5   Rationale

To date there is limited research and practice which explores how to improve emotional well-being from primary to secondary transition (Bagnall et al, 2021).  The voice and participation of YP with SEMH difficulties are also heavily underrepresented in research (Bagnall et al, 2022; Botchwey et al, 2019). Therefore, consideration of how CYP with SEMH difficulties have experienced educational transition gave rise to this study and taking a PAR approach which enables and gives voice to the YPs experiences, seemed timely and appropriate.

Although previous studies identify parental perspectives on successful transition for YP with identified SEN (Peters & Brooks, 2016; Stack et al, 2020), less is known about young people's perceptions, experiences, and views. Children have much to tell about their own voice-related quality of life, and their own self-assessment offers additional insight (Cohen & Wynne (2015). Therefore, this research focuses on bringing to the fore the perspectives of YP with SEMH difficulties.

Both the Timpson Review (2019), and Social Finance (2020) demonstrated that whilst exclusion rates vary by type of SEN, the highest rate of exclusion is reported for CYP with SEMH difficulties without EHCPs. Educators have also requested more evidence-based information as to how they may better support their students with SEMH difficulties (DfE, 2016) as supporting these children is challenging (Carroll & Hurry, 2018). Consequently, I have drawn upon Lundy's (2007) participatory theoretical model which identifies four elements for consideration when involving YP. This approach perceives YP with SEMH as social actors within their environment, who collaboratively can promote positive change. This research therefore aims to understand from the perspectives of YP the facilitating factors which aid transition. It also considers how to enable a participatory approach, in order to better understand early opportunities to promote inclusion for YP with SEMH difficulties.

### 2.5.1 Research aims and research questions.

This research attempts to address some of the gaps and limitations in existing research by offering further consideration of the facilitative factors for CYP with SEMH difficulties when transitioning into secondary school. It also seeks to consider how PAR can promote inclusion and emotional wellbeing of YP with SEMH difficulties.

### 2.5.2 Research aim and questions.

The research aim is to explore how YP with SEMH difficulties experience transition.

As a result, the following research questions were formulated:

- How can researchers utilise Lundy's model within PAR with YP with SEMH difficulties?
- What are the experiences during transition to secondary school of YP with SEMH difficulties?
- What are the most important factors associated with successful transition from YP with SEMH difficulties perspectives?

Whilst the first research question could be perceived as simply a reflection on the application of Lundy's model, which to some degree it is, the model was a central aspect of the thesis. Therefore, consideration of the application of the model has been foregrounded as there is currently limited research into the applicability of the model. Previous research has focused in a social care environment (Kennan et al, 2019), primary school (Harmon, 2020) or early years setting (Correira & Aguiar, 2022). This thesis focuses on its application within a secondary school environment.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter begins with the philosophical underpinnings of the research, including my own ontological and epistemological positioning and the influence of this. The rationale for using PAR and more specific details of this study including the research design, data collection procedures and the analytical process will then be detailed. The chapter closes by reflecting on ethical considerations.

## 3.1    Design frame and superordinate methodology

### 3.1.1    Philosophical underpinnings

Positivist philosophy asserts that science should only describe facts in order to be objective and to generalise findings (Montuschi, 2014). However, Weber (1949) asserts that within social research allowing value relevance enables significant, complex social phenomena to be investigated in a scientific manner. Furthermore, Montuschi (2014) states that it impossible to separate facts from values in order to make factual descriptions. An interprevist approach asserts that the world is not straightforwardly perceivable; it is constructed by each of us in a different way; the ideas of truth or reality are influenced by personal experiences, social conventions and are historically based (Robson, 2011; Thomas, 2013).

As I am aiming to understand the particular experience of YP with SEMH difficulties and their transition experiences to illuminate their voice, this research is inductive in nature. It is, therefore, interpretative in its theoretical drive asking, 'what is going on here?' (Thomas, 2013). Understanding and utilising transition experience of YP with SEMH difficulties helps to contribute to building a framework of multiple realities which lends itself to an exploratory research design (Morse & Nihaus, 2009; Thomas, 2013). Consequently, PAR (described in section 3.1.3) was considered philosophically appropriate. The principles of holism suggest that the only real elements of the world are wholes, not the individual parts that comprise the whole (Smuts, 1936) which aligns well with a PAR approach. The importance of shared understanding of the local, specific, and unique changing contexts in which people work

together to facilitate change (Taylor, 2018) through PAR underpins the way I have approached this research.

### 3.1.2 Action Research (AR)

Action research (AR) can be broadly defined as a process that enables improvement of learning and practice and is flexible in design (Sagor, 1992; Thomas, 2013). As Hart (1997) suggests ARs goal is to improve a social situation through developing an understanding of it, thereby changing the perspectives of those involved. Its central aim is change with the emphasis on problem solving in the most appropriate way (Thomas, 2013). It develops sophisticated understanding of issues and practices in authentic settings, such as schools, by bridging the theory-practice gap (Mitchell et al, 2009).

AR brings about educational improvements by locating research in practice which leads to social action (McNiff, 2002; Thomas, 2013). Whilst AR models are utilised widely to bring about systemic change to improve outcomes for CYP, there are limited examples of published research by Educational Psychologists (Peters, 2012). AR models are beneficial because they enable practical solutions to be identified utilising participatory inquiry underpinned by reflective practice. This is especially valuable in the changing environment of a secondary school for YP with SEMH difficulties (Jacobs, 2016).

Figure 4: The action-research process, as outlined by Hart (1997, pg.92)
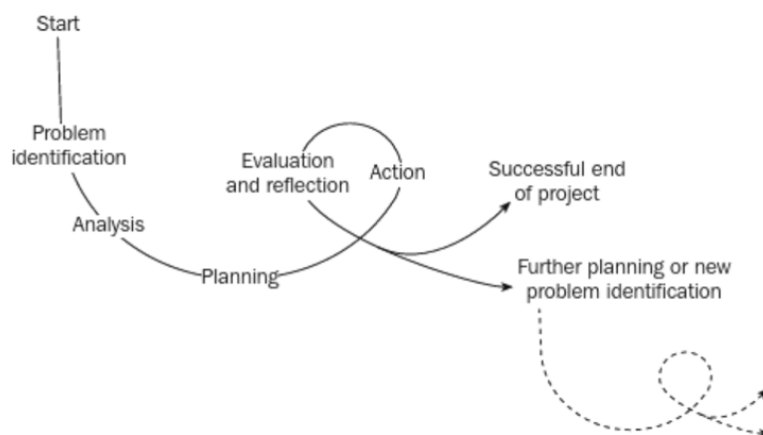
Educational AR explores the dialogue between research and practice in educational settings (Peters, 2012), as a form of ethical inquiry (Elliott, 2015) with a focus on how the process brings about change through action occurring (Stenhouse, 1975). AR can be described as a form of dialogue where individuals think for themselves, make their own choices and accept the consequences of their actions (McNiff et al, 2003; Thomas, 2013). As Ledwith (2017) explores, AR involves critical consciousness which leads to the exposure of structural discrimination by challenging dominant narratives. It can support young people whose voices are not always heard within an educational setting to consider aspects of their environment to bring about improvement. By utilising a spiral process, AR can generate solutions which ultimately improve organisational systems and cultures, positively impacting on CYP they serve (Thomas, 2013). In this context, AR can improve transition for CYP with SEMH difficulties, through their active participation.

There are potential tensions between power and authority within AR which can undermine equity (Mitchell et al, 2009). Key concepts of AR include a commitment to change, action based on reflection and building on what is being discovered. For this to take place, a process of planning, reflection and re-planning with senior leadership support is fundamental (Thomas, 2013).

### 3.1.3   Participatory Action Research (PAR)

The research was conducted utilising a PAR design with the focus on a process of participatory inquiry, done with participants rather than to them. The pupils are envisioned as active participants in constructing their own learning (Stringer, 2019) which promotes ethical research (BPS, 2021). The researcher and pupils explore what is to be learned, what is already known and how to learn what is not known (Stringer, 2019).

I used PAR within this research for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it validates practice, offers an ethical framework and considers the complexities of conducting real-world research (Stoker & Figg, 1998). Secondly as Bergold and Thomas (2012) suggest, PAR works as a process of investigating communities, such as a community of young people with SEMH difficulties, to understand and bring about change. As participants play an active role and research is carried

out with them, this leads to more established change and improved practice in schools (British Psychological Society (BPS), 2021; Taylor, 2018). Thirdly, the ongoing and cyclical nature of PAR allows for intervention to be customised to suit the specific context (Taylor, 2018), which enables the YP to take ownership of the outcomes of the research and have an equal role in determining these. Finally, PAR also has the potential to improve student learning and enables participants to make sense of evidence gathered to offer new insights for school leadership (Education Scotland, 2015).

### 3.1.3.1 Participatory action research procedure

Thomas (2013) describes AR as non-linear, like a coil: with continual movement forward up the coil reflecting on action and changes that have been made. Thomas' (2013) ten step model of AR can be applied to educational contexts to bring about positive change, with steps revisited in an iterative manner to encourage ongoing development and dialogue, and to better understand the complexity of the life-worlds that participants inhabit (Stringer, 2019).

Table 1: Steps of Action Research, adapted from Thomas (2013).

| Action cycle 1 | Action cycle 2 |
|---|---|
| 1. Have an idea or see a problem | 6. Have a revised idea |
| 2. Examine the idea or problem and gather information about it | 7. Examine and gather information about the (revised) idea or problem |
| 3. Plan action | 8. Plan action |
| 4. Take action | 9. Take action |
| 5. Reflect on the consequences | 10. Reflect on the consequences |

In taking a participatory approach within this research, the aim is to find out, make sense of what is found and act on that knowledge (Ospina et al, 2020). In engaging participants in a process that enhances social awareness, self-efficacy and agency, PAR develops social change leadership capabilities that can be transformative for the person and groups (Ospina et al, 2022). There is the opportunity for those involved to co-construct understanding of their

experiences, building new knowledge which can inform change in practice. As Freire (1970) states education can be a cultural action for freedom, where people find their right to a voice and where silenced cultures begin to find a voice of their own. Utilising Freire's original principles, detailed by Campos and Anderson's (2022) work about how this translates to PAR, allowed me to consider how I was working to these principles (see Table 2).

Table 2: Freire's influence on Participatory Action Research adapted from Campos and Anderson (2022) to include how it has been considered within this research design.

| Freire's original principle | How it translates to PAR | How it relates in this context |
|---|---|---|
| **Conscientizaca**o: Developing critical consciousness. A reflective and critical process that leads individuals to a state of full humanity and emancipation (Freire, 1970) | An expected result of PAR is the systematic consciousness raising in its participants (Gajardo, 1982). | The YP within this research reflected and engaged in creating alternative transition models through considering bringing factors which impact on their success in school. |
| **Culture of Science:** the 'state of being' of marginalised individuals who accept detrimental images of themselves and lack the ability or confidence to critically analyse their realities. May develop a fear of freedom (Friere, 1970). | Acquiring a voice means gaining more power. PAR gives the opportunity for YP to acquire the tools to activate their 'right to speak'. | The YP had the opportunity to voice their experiences about their transition and school experiences, and aspects that hinder or help this. This was through imagery and verbally. |
| **Thematic research:** situated de-codification and creative re-codification of existential situations. Communities' needs are used as a primary material for education practice (Shor & Sykes, 2002). | Through a highly inductive process, PAR researchers gain access to the socio-historical and cultural universe of participants by understanding their local ways of knowing (Lykes and Mallona, 2001) | Utilising an inductive process, I gained insight and access to YPs knowledge about how transition is experienced, and the local knowledge that was shared. |
| **Praxis**: reflection and action are fused and directed at the structures to be transformed. The learning process is not neutral but geared towards acquiring knowledge and tools for interventions into reality (Freire, 1970) | The purpose of PAR research is to make positive change in society by developing local knowledge through reflection and participation (Ospina et al, 2008). | By the participatory approach taken, local knowledge was created which can be utilised to improve transition experiences of YP with SEMH difficulties. A document was created which aids educators to consider how YP with SEMH difficulties experience secondary school transition. |
| **Banking education**: the anti-dialogue model of education that views learning as the depositing of | PAR advocates socially constructed knowledge and moves away from positivist research orientation when objectivity and | The YP were construed as the co-producers of knowledge in relation to the research topic. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| knowledge onto students as blank slates. | generalisability reign (Ospina et al, 2008). | |
| **Dialogical epistemology:** Education is an inquiry process in which learning occurs through culturally situated and participatory dialogue. (Freire, 1970). | Researcher and participants positionalities are interchangeable and may be organised horizontally (Herr and Anderson, 2014). Mutual inquiry happens between members of an 'insider/outsider team'. (Ospina et al, 2008). | I questioned/checked understanding in order to mutually inquire about transition experiences. This helped to develop a reciprocal collaboration between myself and the YP. |

As the cyclical nature of AR design frame is time consuming, I utilised and followed first eight steps of AR (Thomas, 2013). The structure and timeframe of the PAR project is detailed in table 3. The second cycle of AR was not fully completed within this research due to time restraints, however, initial ideas for further action were discussed, as detailed below. Whilst details of some actions for a further cycle are presented, the implementation of this and any further cycles would take place beyond this research.

Table 3: Structure and timeframe of the PAR project

| Action research cycle | AR Stage, taken from Thomas, 2013, p147. | Description of actions taken |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Have an idea or see a problem<br><br>*June 2022* | On placement, I met pupils (with SEMH difficulties who were in year 7), in several secondary schools identified as requiring support. Some shared that they felt they had positively transitioned into secondary school, whilst others not. The YP who had positively transitioned are the intended focus of the research as they had powerful perspectives on what helped or hindered their success within secondary school. Consultation meetings with a school, and parents, took place. YP with SEMH difficulties were also invited to collaboratively identify what could support success in school as they wanted to be heard and involved in discussions around inclusive practice. In planning meetings, I realised other schools may be interested in the findings of the research which could support the development of inclusive practice. |
| 1 | Examine the idea/ problem and gather information about it<br>*June 2022* | I gathered data on the number of pupils with SEN who had SEMH difficulties identified as their primary area of need, and who had successfully transitioned into the target secondary school. I talked with pupils with SEMH difficulties to help them to begin to consider what had impacted on their transition. I discussed the transition arrangements within school and the needs of the Year 7 learners. |
| 1 | Plan action<br><br>July 2022 | I met the SENCo and shared with the head teacher the details and structure of the research to identify YP who could be potentially involved. Initially the SENCo, and then I, had a telephone conversation with parents to gain verbal consent for their child to be involved. I then met with the identified YP to discuss the research, answer any questions and to discuss any support required to aid involvement. Three participants were recruited, and I obtained written consent from both the YP and their parents. |

| 1 | Take action. July 2022 *September 2022* | I invited the YP to complete a photo voice activity which highlighted the places, spaces, resources, and people (anonymously) within school who supported their transition. Participants took part in an individual semi-structured interview to express their views about their transition experiences. I developed a themed presentation of the photo voice activity for consideration within a focus group. |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Reflect on the consequences. *February 2023* | I facilitated a collaborative focus group where YP considered the findings of the photo voice activity. Together we explored what factors may help or hinder transition and began to identify shared themes which impact on YP with SEMH difficulties. This allowed the YP to share experiences and to consider what might be significant for them, and other YP when experiencing transition. |
| 2 | Have a revised idea. *March 2023* | The YP and I agreed that following the focus group and analysis of semi-structured interviews, I would develop a young person friendly transition document for consideration by the YP at a feedback workshop. I developed a young person friendly transition document for pupils with SEMH after consideration of all data, in readiness for exploration and discussion by the YP. |
| 2 | Examine and gather information about the (revised) ideas or problem. *March 2023* | A feedback workshop took place where the YP and I together considered the young person friendly transition document, and the 11 statements created within this. Collectively it was discussed whether these captured the participant's lived experiences and the factors which helped aid transition. The YP suggested amendments, additions and changes to the statements based on their experiences and views. |
| 2 | Plan action *March 2023* | I amended the document to encompass the expressed changes and additions agreed by the YP. We discussed how this document could be shared with senior leadership in order to help the YP to consider how transition could be better experienced by YP with SEMH difficulties. The YP wanted this to take place, if the opportunity presented itself outside the realms of this research project. |

## 3.2    Research context

### 3.2.1    Local authority

This research took place in a LA in the West Midlands, UK. As of January 2023, this LA has 19 mainstream secondary schools, including academies and maintained schools. Of the compulsory school age pupils attending secondary schools in the LA, CYP with SEN are higher than the England and West Midlands average. Behavioural difficulty in CYP aged 25 and below is increasing in this LA, with eight in ten on GP disability register with this categorisation. (Integrated Commissioning, Performance and Partnership Team, 2020). There are more CYP under the age of 16 living in absolute low-income families than the England averages (Intelligence Team, 2019).

### 3.2.2    The school

The research took place in an average sized secondary school for CYP aged 11-16 years which is part of an academy trust. The school has higher levels of pupils with SEN support than the national average. It has a significantly higher level of pupils eligible for free school meals than the national average (44% during the past 6 years). The schools most recent Ofsted rating is 'good' and the report states the school has high expectations for everyone, and pupils access a wide and rich set of experiences. Ofsted listed ensuring that staff receive appropriate and specific information about subject-specific strategies for individual pupils with SEN as a key development area. A second development area noted that development of teachers' specialist knowledge about the curriculum for personal development was required.

## 3.3    Recruitment of participants

### 3.3.1  Target pupils

The school SENCo was asked to identify pupils who had an identified SEN in relation to SEMH, who were in year 7 and were considered to have made a positive transition. This is detailed in the inclusion criteria in Table 5. The YP identified for involvement within this research was derived purposefully (Ezzy, 2002).

Table 4: Criteria utilised for pupil recruitment.

| Inclusion criteria | Justification |
| --- | --- |
| The participants should have an identified SEN in relation to SEMH. They should not have an EHCP plan or be currently receiving support from CAMHS. | As a TEP working within secondary schools, the YP without EHCPs yet have SEN needs for SEMH are a cohort which I noted as having limited opportunity for their views to be heard. Research literature identifies that children with a SEMH difficulty (who are not reviewed annually) are a group of children most at risk of exclusion. If participants had current CAHMS involvement, significant need would have been identified. Taking part in the research would have placed additional stressors on these young people making these cases inappropriate for this research. |
| The participants should be Year 7 pupils when the research started. | As the research focus was transition from primary to secondary school, the views of those who had current experience of this transition was required, so the data was trustworthy. |
| Participants should be able to comfortably communicate in English | Due to the use of semi-structured interviews, focus groups and feedback workshop as data collection methods, YP must be able to understand and answer questions. For YP where English is an additional language, interpreter use would be a barrier to their genuine participation. |
| Have attended school during year 7 for 85% of the time or more, indicating success in transition. | Pupil attendance is a significant measure of how well pupils are accessing educational opportunities available to them. Below 85% attendance means a child's non-attendance (missing close to 1 day a week) will have a significant impact on their learning. |
| Participants should be accessing and be known to the pastoral and/or SEN team support. | This allows for consideration of the SENCo and supporting staff to refer participants to the research opportunity. |
| Participants should not live in the care of the local authority. | These cases are likely to have been atypical experiences, and therefore would not be appropriate for this study. |

Within this research, successful transition was defined as pupils who consistently attended school (Joyce-Gibbons et al, 2018), are involved academically (Rice et al, 2015), who had developed positive relationships with some school staff and peers (Mumford & Birchwood, 2021), which supports positive behaviour in school (Rice et al, 2015). Successful transition in this context also meant that the participants had not received any suspensions in the first term (up to the end of the first term) of year 7, so historically had made a transition into the secondary school.

The SENCO identified 4 YP aged 11-12 (in Year 7) and introduced the research project to their parents who were invited to take part in an informal conversation with me to gauge their views, and for verbal consent to be obtained. I then invited the YP to take part in an individual informal in-person discussion in school with myself to gauge their interest and obtain their consent. Three students gave consent and took part in the research, with one declining to take part, following the introductory discussion.

## 3.4    Data collection

Multiple qualitative data collection strategies were utilised to gather the data and the timeline can be found in Table 3 and appendix 5. As introduced by the Mosaic Approach (Clark & Moss, 2011), utilising multiple distinct modes through which YP can be facilitated to respond to a research question provides a broader, more textured picture of a complex phenomenon, such as transition (Stokes, 2020; Harrison et al, 2021).

Photo voice was combined with semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and a subsequent feedback workshop to develop a rich and detailed picture of how YP with SEMH experienced transition. I carried out interviews individually in a quiet room. To create a relaxed atmosphere, I had snacks and spent time to develop rapport. I used an activity to promote participants' recall of their experiences in primary school and starting in secondary school. Here, the pupils were invited to think about what the important experiences for them were (appendix 4). These served to promote recall and were not analysed. Two YP were in a heightened emotional state at the start of their respective interviews, due to behaviour sanctions they had received. I spent time to help the participants to feel calmer, and then

gave the choice to continue to the interview or to rearrange it with no fear of sanction. The participants wanted to continue to interview.

The multiple methods used aided exploration of the YPs perceptions of the facilitating and hindering factors of their transition experience as well as success and enabled triangulation. It explored their lived experiences, through emphasising the importance of everyday life in the school they attend, as members of communities (Clark & Moss, 2011). The focus group and subsequent workshop took place in order that participants could co-construct issues which they believe enables or disables pupils with SEMH difficulties during transition. Any conflicts could be aired, and ruptures within relationships repaired during the process, enabling the opportunity for differing perspectives (BPS, 2021). The focus group was rearranged with participants, due to clashes with curriculum activity important to the participants. This enabled that the 'space' created for the participants was conducive to their participation and enabled them to 'voice' their experiences (Lundy, 2007).  This resulted in identifying practical ways to support and improve the transition experience.

## 3.4.1   Data collection methods

The data collection methods utilised within this research were photo voice, semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and a feedback workshop which are subsequently detailed.

As there were several steps undertaken to involve the participants in the research, to increase the likelihood that participants may feel comfortable to take part this is detailed below in table 5.

Table 5: Steps undertaken to involve young people within research

| Step | Activity | Who was involved |
|------|----------|------------------|
| 1 | SENCo discussion with parents<br>- Project outlined and introduced the research, asking for consent to pass on contact details of parents.<br>- SENCo spoke with young people to let the young people know I would be contacting their parents about an opportunity for them to take part in some research. | SENCO<br>Researcher |
| 2 | Discussion with parents<br>- Shared information with parents about research<br>- Some parents put call on loudspeaker for YP to listen to information. | Researcher<br>Parent |
| 3 | Individual meeting with YP<br>- Outlined research, possible activities, and their involvement. Within this meeting relationship building activities were prioritised which included:<br>   o Would you rather discussions: for example, would you rather an Oreo or Custard Cream? The YP then asked the researcher 'would you rather' questions if they wanted to.<br>   o What was the thing you most enjoyed in the summer? The YP then could ask me what I had most enjoyed.<br>- Following relationship building activity, a focus on the research and consent took place.<br>- The time for the YP to complete the photo voice activity around school, if YP consented to take part, was negotiated. | Researcher<br>Individual young person |
| 4 | Photo voice<br>- Prior to the photo voice activity, YP were welcomed, given space to talk about their day, and asked if they had any questions about the research.<br>- The photo equipment was introduced to the YP and they were given time to explore the school environment to photograph areas, spaces and places important to their transition.<br>- The YP took 'trial' pictures to ensure they were aware of how to use the equipment effectively before they independently walked and photographed areas of the school.<br>- Once they had completed these, a date was negotiated with the YP for their individual interviews, which avoided lessons which they most enjoyed. | Researcher Individual Young Person |
| 5 | The interview<br>- The interview took place in a space that is used for meetings in school, so was private and a space where YP could not be seen or overheard. Two were in the main school and one was in the wellbeing area of the school. | Researcher<br><br>Individual Young Person |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | - Prior to the interview space was created to carry out further relational activities before the interview started.<br>- The interview questions were based on topic areas related to the individual, school, community, and other factors impacting on transition. Prior to the interview the YP were encouraged to consider factors which helped or hindered effective transition through an introductory activity.<br>- Interviews were paused for movement and toilet breaks.<br>- Two interviews were delayed in their start as the young people arrived upset, due to a challenging day for them. Giving space for them to talk through what had occurred, how they felt, next steps and the choice of continuing to interview or not was given to enable them to have control of their involvement. | |
| 6 | Focus Group<br>- Flexibility in dates was key to supporting involvement. The focus group date was rearranged with participants due to a clash on the day of a much-loved sporting activity and as another was out of school and moving house. I used this time to talk to the one participant who was free, spoke to them about how they felt about rearranging the meeting and undertook further rapport building.<br>- The subsequent date, which took place at the beginning of the next academic year, enabled the YP to reflect on their experiences collectively by looking at the photos they had taken.<br>- The space used was private, was not overlooked and the students could not be overheard.<br>- A group agreement took place based on 'good experiences' they had had of working with others. This was agreed as a group.<br>- Snacks were shared with the YP, which they had previously shared with me as their 'favourite'.<br>- I followed the pace of the group, as some photos resulted in more discussion and interest by the YP<br>- Following the focus group, the group agreed a time for me to bring back themes to them based on the discussion and interviews. | Researcher<br><br>All Young People |
| 7 | Workshop<br>- 'Favourite' snacks were provided.<br>- Relational activities took place for the first 15 minutes of the workshop where YP shared aspects of their week as well as some 'favourite' things/places/songs/food. This helped the YP to get to know each other a little more.<br>- Each of the statements which had been developed from the interviews and focus group were discussed with the YP. They had access to post it notes for their thoughts, however all chose to verbally express their thoughts in relation to the statements and I noted these. This led to amendments to the themes and an additional statement being added.<br>- Letters of thanks and voucher of thanks were shared with the participants. Vouchers were not offered originally, however, due to the time invested I felt a voucher for the local shopping centre to thank them for their time was important. | Researcher<br><br>All Young People |

*3.4.1.1        Photo voice*

Participants used photovoice as the first research method. Photovoice, a visual research method, is participants taking photos of aspects of their environment that were significant to their transition to secondary school. Photovoice builds on Freire's theory of critical consciousness which seeks to engage individuals in the questioning of their historical-social situation (Castleden et al, 2008). This method therefore supports the values embedded in the PAR design taken which aims to empower vulnerable populations and to recognise local expertise that cannot be fully realised from the outside (Castleden et al, 2008).

The benefits of photovoice include:

-   Enabling pupils to examine their perceptions of the school environment and create opportunities for discussion on issues that might have been unrecognised/ unsaid (Davison et al, 2011).
-   Supporting empowerment of pupils with SEMH who typically have less power, to engage in group dialogue for social change (Castleden et al, 2008).
-   Gaining powerful insights that describe pupils' experience and creating an immersive context for idea generation (Institute of Design, 2023).
-   Offering opportunity for a pupil to remain socially safe when raising an issue (Davison et al, 2011).

Utilising photos helped pupils to capture places and spaces and consider how these impacted on student experience and their sense of belonging. As photography can be an intrusive activity, anonymity and confidentiality as aligned with ethical issues were considered. It is also important to recognise that photos alone cannot cover the multiple perspectives on transition (Budig et al, 2018). Therefore, this activity was followed by a focus group to reduce this limitation (Castleden, 2008).

I introduced the participants to ethical use of the equipment for this research which included not photographing people and outlining the process of taking photographs. I supported the YP to take 'trial' pictures to ensure they were aware of how to use the equipment effectively

before they independently walked and photographed areas of the school. In not photographing people this may have resulted in limited discussion in the interviews or focus group yet enabled anonymity of school staff (Gregory, 1994). Whilst participants may have struggled with the challenge of how to photograph non-tangible items, it presented opportunities for creativity by enabling a certain depth of critical reflection and introduced opportunities for empowerment (Castleden, 2008).

*3.4.1.2        Semi- structured interviews with participants*

Semi-structured interviews combine the structure with the freedom to follow up points as necessary (Thomas, 2013) allowing the CYP to answer more on their own terms (May, 2011). Qualitative interviewing requires asking open-ended questions, as well as probes and pauses (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). It also requires the use of active listening skills such as reflecting back and paraphrasing to allow space for emotional expression. This helps foster a positive rapport and facilitate open and honest communication (Taylor, 2018).

There are clear limitations to this approach, including the time-consuming nature of conducting, transcribing and analysing interviews, the skill of the interviewer, and the possibility of social desirability effects (Taylor, 2018). However, the focus group and subsequent workshop acted to reduce these limitations.

I gathered YPs views using semi-structured interviews (see appendix 6) so we, myself and the participant, could work collaboratively to uncover and interpret their meaning-making of transition. The questions were based on topic areas related to the individual, school, community, and other factors which may impact on transition which helped or hindered effective transition. I undertook a pilot interview to test the interview schedule and guide to strengthen the interview protocols (Majid et al, 2017). Following the pilot interview, no amendments were made to the interview schedule, as prompt questions enabled participants to discuss their thoughts, relevant to each question.

### 3.4.1.3 Focus group with participants

A focus group was used to gather and triangulate the views of the participants (see appendix 7). The photographs taken by the participants around school were used to promote and develop the discussion around their secondary school transition experiences. Participants were explicitly encouraged to talk to one another, as opposed to each person answering questions in turn (May, 2011).

I judged that a focus group would be more participatory and enjoyable as it helped the participants to feel they had shared similar experiences and characteristics to others in school (Acocella, 2011). It helped reduce the pressure on each pupil individually, whilst giving space for individual views and stimulation of discussion where the YP felt free to express their opinions (Acocella, 2011). I encouraged interaction between the participants during the focus group, as well as cohesion and confrontations of opinions within the group.

I was aware I had limited control over anonymity and confidentiality as the participants could communicate experiences outside of the group (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). As the pupils were in the same year group, and had pre-existing relationships, anonymity was not possible, and I was aware the focus groups could have a negative effect on participant's/ future relationships (Hofmeyer & Scott, 2007). Therefore, I checked that all the YP understood how the focus group would work and each gave informed consent. I was aware that participants may express socially desirable and stereotypical answers due to the pressures of social conformity, which may have limited the potentiality of the focus group (Acocella, 2011). Therefore, I triangulated through individual interviews which highlighted the similarity as well as differences in views (Sim & Waterfield, 2019).

### 3.4.1.4 Feedback workshop

I arranged a feedback workshop after I analysed the data from the semi-structured interviews and focus group and had identified subordinate themes. I developed a one-page document accessible for YP (see appendix 10 for initial version). The purpose of this workshop was to feedback to the participants the key findings of the analysis and for the participants to revise

the ideas for action cycle 2 of the research. This workshop enabled trustworthiness, refinement of thinking, built upon a foundation of reflection about successful transition, and consideration of ways to improve transition experiences for all (Thomas, 2013).

The initial one-page feedback document consisted of 11 points which were identified as integral from the participants perspectives to successful transition for YP with SEMH difficulties. I facilitated a discussion where each statement within the document was shared with the participants, which prompted further reflection, enabling revision of the ideas, and development of what was discovered within the first action research cycle (Thomas, 2013). During the meeting, participants agreed with all of the themes that had been included and gave 'voice' to many of the themes they felt strongly that school did not yet fully enact. Participants elaborated on their experiences and how they felt practice in relation to pupils with SEMH difficulties could be developed. This resulted in the wording of statements being amended (see appendix 11 for revised version) and a further statement being added to the document (Thomas, 2013). The participants were forthcoming in offering challenge to the wording of statement, suggesting they felt able to express their views and opinions freely in the context of the workshop.

## 3.5    Data analysis procedure: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) can be used for developing, analysing, and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset (Fugard & Potts, 2020). It involves systematic processing of data coding to develop themes, which are its ultimate analytic purpose (Braun & Clark, 2022). TA approaches typically acknowledge the potential for data driven (inductive) and theory-driven (deductive) approaches to coding. These can be categorised into three broad types: coding reliability approaches, reflexive approaches, and codebook approaches (Braun & Clark, 2020).

I used reflexive Thematic Analysis within this study, which recognises the value of a subjective, situated, aware and questioning researcher, which differentiates it from other versions of TA (Braun & Clark, 2019). Reflexive approaches involve later theme development, with themes developed from codes, and conceptualised as patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organising concept (Braun & Clarke, 2020). My reflexive approach involved critical

reflection on my role and research practice (research values, skills, experience, and training) and what this bought to the process (Braun & Clark, 2022). I identified reflexive TA as more useful than other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches as the sample was relatively small. I made a number of choices which were explicitly considered before beginning data analysis, including identification of what counts as a theme and the type and level of analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Firstly, I considered what counts as a pattern or theme. Whilst ideally there may be several instances of a theme across the data set, prevalence doesn't necessarily mean the theme is more important than another (Braun & Clark, 2006). I therefore determined what a theme is and used word descriptors to identify shared concepts, meanings, or ideas. This helped to identify if a theme really existed in the data and may need focus.

Secondly, I considered the type of analysis to undertake and decided whether the findings would focus on a single prominent part or whether the entire data would be reflected on. I chose that the analysis would reflect the entire data, so that a rich overall description could be maintained, as this research explores an under-researched area (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Thirdly, I needed to consider whether an inductive (code from the data) or deductive (theory-driven) approach would be taken. I undertook an inductive or data driven analysis which involved a process of data coding without trying to explicitly fit it into my analytical preconceptions (Braun & Clark, 2006). However, I recognised that I held preconceptions, and acknowledge that my own values, experiences, and constructs will have impacted on the identification of codes throughout the analysis.

Fourthly I considered the level at which themes are to be identified, that is at a semantic level or a latent level (Boyatzis, 1998). Braun & Clark (2006) define a semantic approach as the identification of themes within the explicit or surface meanings of the data. This includes some interpretation which attempts to theorise the broader meaning of the patterns. The latent level, by contrast, goes beyond the semantic content, and examines underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisation. In this research, I have chosen to take the semantic

approach to theme development as I do not seek to explore underpinning values or language, as within discourse analysis (Braun & Clark, 2020)

Finally, I considered the epistemology of the research, which is interpretivist. Braun & Clark (2006) suggest this fundamentally impacts on how themes can be discussed, and how meaning can be derived. As was discussed earlier within this chapter, the aim of this research is to seek practical wisdom, rather than to develop generalisable findings.

After working through these decision points, Braun & Clark's six stage process was utilised, which aligns with the research purpose, theoretical assumptions, research questions and overall research design outlined (Willig, 2013). The analytic process is described as one of six phases, revised by Braun & Clark (2022). Please refer to figure 5 below.

Figure 5: The thematic analysis process taken, adapted from Braun and Clarke (2022).

| Phase | Description of the process |
|---|---|
| Familiarising yourself with your data | During transcription, I became deeply and intimately familiar with the data, through a process of immersion. I read, re-read, listened to and re-listened to audio files and made notes about insights. |
| Generating initial codes | I coded the whole dataset systematically and thoroughly. I identified potentially relevant or meaningful segments and labelled them with multiple codes. |
| Generating initial themes | I identified shared meaning across the whole dataset starts, and clusters of codes which shared a core idea or concept. I actively developed themes based on the data, my research questions, and my knowledge/insights (appendix 8). |
| Developing and reviewing themes | I checked that themes made sense in relation to both the coded extracts and the full data set. I collapsed together themes, split others into new themes, and retained or discarded others. I considered core ideas to identify central organising concepts. I also considered the relationship between themes, as well as existing knowledge and practice in the research field. |
| Refining, defining, and naming themes | I refined and identified the essence of the strong core concept which allowed others to understand what the theme was about. I write a brief synopsis of each theme and continued to refine the working of the developed themes, for clarity. |
| Writing up | I utilised both extracts of the data set and the analytic narrative to share the story of the data in a clear, coherent manner which could be shared with others. I further edited the themes to ensure this clarity was understandable for an audience. |

## 3.6 Access and ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this research was sought and granted by the University of Birmingham's Ethical Review Committee. This project's ethical considerations are largely covered in guidelines outlined by the BPS (2021), and the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). These include the participants' right to give fully informed consent, to have their data kept confidentially and the right to withdraw without penalty. Research 'with' as opposed to

'on' CYP (with a focus on building research relationships with CYP to seek their perspective) is becoming a more prevalent practice (Stokes, 2020). However, as CYP, particularly those with SEMH difficulties, are vulnerable as a research population (BPS, 2021), table four outlines the variety and numerous access and ethical considerations that were taken prior to the undertaking of the research.

Table 6: Ethical considerations and steps taken to manage these within this research.

| Feature of ethical guidance | Steps taken to address this feature |
|---|---|
| Informed consent: Participants have the right to be fully informed prior to giving their voluntary consent to join any research (BERA, 2018; BPS, 2021) | Senior leadership gave written consent for the study to take part (appendix 1). Parents of participants received an introductory telephone conversation from SENCo followed by a telephone conversation with myself. Project information sheet (appendix 2) and a consent form was then shared with parents. Participants consented to taking part, following an introductory meeting with me, with the opportunity to ask questions (appendix 3). The participants then signed a consent form or opted out of the research. |
| Transparency: Participants are aware of the purpose of the research and recruitment methods (BERA, 2018). | As participants were identified by school, an individual meeting was held with identified YP to explain the purposes of the study before seeking their consent to avoid any sense of coercion the YP may have felt. To avoid pupils with SEMH difficulties feeling 'singled out' it was made clear to participants and their parents that the purpose of this study is to give a voice to participants of an under researched group. |
| Harm arising from participation: Participants should not be at risk of harm (BERA, 2018; BPS, 2021) | As the research could raise sensitive issues with participants, they were informed that the school's designated safeguarding lead would be informed if any sensitive issues arose. This was explained when written consent was gained. Following the focus group, al the YP knew others who were involved had SEMH difficulties, sensitivity and confidentiality was discussed with participants and was agreed as part of focus group ground rules collaboratively agreed. |
| Confidentiality and privacy: Participants in research have a right | All participants were notified that their data including photos and interviews would be securely stored on an encrypted storage device for 10 years, and that only the researcher or a transcription service would be able to |

| | |
|---|---|
| to expect that information they provide will be treated confidentially, and that participants are entitled to privacy (BERA, 2018; BPS, 2021) | access to the original interview recordings. Participants chose a pseudonym name. All data referred to the participants with this name and any information (such as names, people or places) was anonymised during transcription. The exception to interview confidentiality was in the event of a child safeguarding concern. Participants received a verbal briefing for the photovoice to explain that images taken should not include signage, unique landmarks, the school logo or any person. Recordings and images were initially stored on school GDPR compliant devices then on the university network. Ground rules were set regarding confidentiality during the focus group, which took place in a space which was not overheard. Written notes were stored in a locked filing cabinet and shredded when they were no longer needed.

In order to protect against deductive disclosure, careful description of the participants, without individual identifiable characteristics was considered as the most appropriate approach to ensure that their anonymity was maintained. |
| Right to withdraw: Participants should be aware of their right to withdraw and explicitly be given the opportunity to do so (BERA, 2018, BPS, 2021). | Participants were informed both verbally and in writing through participant briefing sheet (appendix 3) of their right to withdraw up to 7 days following the focus group. Due to the nature of the research, in which participants would come together within a focus group, anonymity could not be guaranteed within the research. Participants were informed that, whilst they would not be named, others within their year might be able to identify them, and their right to withdraw was repeated. As quotes from their interviews would be included within the final write up, participants were also informed of this. It was made clear that there would be no consequences for participants if they chose to withdraw from the research. |

| Power imbalance: Where there is an unequal relationship or a power dynamic at play appropriate consent from any gatekeepers (BERA, 2018; BPS, 2021) | As there is a power imbalance within the research relationship when utilising participatory methods which can impact, I reflected on my personal behaviour and the treatment of others throughout the research process particularly prior to direct work with YP. A pilot interview took place, and it was made clear to all participants involved that the focus of the research was on their experience and thoughts. One young person decided not to take part which identified that they felt comfortable to say no to taking part, and that the power dynamic had been alleviated for them. |
|---|---|

## 3.7 Quality assurance: Rigour, quality and phronesis

All aspects of this research take a qualitative inquiry approach which amasses information from research undertaken (Grix, 2010). Therefore, utilising concepts such as reliability, validity, replicability and generalisation were less relevant, as these are aligned to a quantitative research approach. Instead, I sought quality and rigour by the methods used.

### 3.7.1 Triangulation

Sagor (2000) suggested that observing a phenomenon through multiple perspectives can help a researcher compare and contrast what is being seen and should take precedence over ease of evidence gathering (Gerring, 2004). I returned to the data searching for different codes or themes which could be applied (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and took the data back to the participants, as part of the second action research cycle to check my interpretation.

### 3.7.2 Positionality

As Makepeace (2022) discusses awareness of one's positionality and how it affects the surrounding power dynamics is crucial for any researcher, but especially for those where emotional and social risk on the part of the participant, and/or researcher is likely. Thomas (2013) highlights that the researcher's reflexive consideration of their own views and perspectives needs to be recognised. I needed to be mindful of biases I held that might lead to identification of themes that did not occur in the raw data. This included my own preconceptions around transition for students with SEMH difficulties into secondary school.

As such, it's important to explicitly consider my own perspectives on themes or areas that are highlighted within this research. I am a middle class, cisgender, straight, non-disabled female of White Irish and English descent, who attended a faith school for the entirety of my primary and secondary school years. I did not experience transition from a primary to different secondary school site. I perceive therefore that my experience of secondary education and transition is dissimilar to

those who have moved from one school to another during transition. As a mother of two children who have undergone transition into early years and primary education settings, I perceive that transition can be a variable experience for CYP due to the considerable changes occurring. This coupled with my experiences as a TEP working in secondary schools where YP were presenting with various degrees of success in terms of transition resulted in my interest in this area. For example, I perceived that students had differing experiences to myself throughout their first year of secondary school, especially those with SEMH difficulties. Therefore, a better understanding of the support given by schools from a young person's perspective would further add to the literature in this area.

A key aspect of my working life, within local authority commissioning, as well as youth and community services prior to embarking on the doctoral programme, focused on how active participation can create opportunities for people to further develop their sense of agency. I hold values around the importance of successful transition, social inclusion, and social justice. As a reflexive researcher I acknowledge that my pre-existing knowledge, as well as values, are likely to influence the interpretations and decisions made with this research. In order to ameliorate some of this, I shared the themes within supervision to support my reflexivity and offered other perspectives for consideration in relation to the data.

### 3.7.3 Phronesis

Within this research a phronetic approach is taken. Its purpose is to add to society's capacity for value-rational deliberation and action, rather than to develop theory (Cochrane, 2016). Originating with Aristotle, Kodama (2021) expresses that the term phronesis is the practical wisdom, or practical knowledge possessed by people that can be gained by research. It illuminates where we are, where we want to go and what is desirable according to a diverse set of rules and interests (Flyvberg, 2016). In relation to this research this concept is usefully applied given the subjective nature undertaken. In utilising this practical knowledge benefits from the research may include:

- A potential change in the participants sense of belonging and attitude to school as their views are valued.
- An overview of positive practice as a set of developed statements identified by participants which when implemented might improve the transition experience of students with SEMH difficulties.

- An opportunity for YP to voice differing perspectives to their peers, in a safe and facilitated way.
- Increased research base which identifies the lived experiences of YP with SEMH during transition.
- Identification of themes could be utilised to influence pupil outcomes in a similar context.
- Key findings of the research will be shared with all stakeholders and presented in a brief and accessible summary to the school, as well as within a child friendly version to the YP who took part. All stakeholders (on request) can gain access to the final write up of the research as it appears in the Volume 1 section of the final thesis.

Through considering the identified practical wisdom, it may prove useful to leads for transition in primary and secondary schools, as well as educational psychologists as discussed in the final chapter.

# Chapter 4: Analysis

The research aimed to explore stories of successful transition to develop a deeper understanding of how pupils with SEMH difficulties experience and make sense of their educational transition. This chapter presents the findings from this study including the themes identified inductively in relation to two of the three research questions. The qualitative sample is identified, before an integrated approach to findings and discussion is taken. This highlights and draws upon the strong connections between existing literature and findings (Braun & Clark, 2022).

## 4.1    Participants

The participants were selected based on criteria, as outlined in Chapter 4, which was utilised by the SENCo to aid decision making. All three participants are in Year 7, have SEND in relation to SEMH, and attend the same mainstream secondary school in a West Midlands LA. Transition information that came from primary school, which included being named on the SEN register, identified two participants as having SEMH difficulties. The final participant has been identified on transition by the SENCo due to presenting behaviours which had subsequently been shared and discussed with parents. None of the participants had clinical diagnoses.

The amount of demographic information gathered about the participants was intentional. A limitation of this may be that readers lack additional information about the participants. However, this was a conscious decision as the research focus was the young people's experience of transition and how the participatory approach enabled positive factors to be identified by these participants.

### 4.1.1  Bob

Bob appeared to be outgoing and friendly. He mentioned that he has a close friendship group which he made through the summer school at the secondary school. Bob enjoys basketball, going fishing, and going to the park with friends. Bob seemed to value Black History Month. He spoke about how he has a close and supportive family consisting of him, his Mum, Dad, and brother. Bob received additional support in primary and secondary school for SEMH difficulties, in relation to 'outbursts, frustration, and anger'. They are identified as having SEN in relation to these SEMH difficulties. At secondary school the adaptations and provision for them include a time out card, being placed in

internal exclusion, being placed on report, attending the behaviour support provision, participating in individual intervention and access to external agency support.

### 4.1.2  Red

Red appeared thoughtful, hardworking, and reserved. Red was engaged throughout and appeared to be honest in their reflections. Red enjoys creative opportunities, the independence that secondary school affords and the opportunity to reflect on school experiences. Red appeared to value her relationship with her Mum and holidays she went on with her family. Red received additional support in primary school for SEMH in particular for 'anxiety' and is identified as having SEN in relation to their SEMH difficulties. They have not received any additional support in secondary school, due to their successful transition, however, are monitored by school.

### 4.1.3  Sam

Sam appeared to be friendly, talkative, and open. Sam was very reflective and honest about his experiences both at school, and at home. Sam spoke about how his friendships group were evolving and how they were a real source of support to him. Sexuality and consideration of how this can impact on school experiences was important to Sam. Sam received additional support in both primary and secondary school in relation to their SEMH difficulties. A central aspect of the support received in secondary school was counselling in relation to a change in family dynamics and subsequent difficulties with peer relationships. Adaptations and provision at secondary school includes attending the behaviour support provision, participating in individual intervention and being in internal exclusion.

## 4.2    Presentation of findings.

For research question one, consideration is given to the process of utilising Lundy's (2007) model of participation within AR when involving YP. For research question two key, themes and subthemes are shared. The final phase of the reflexive TA, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022) is writing to tell an overall story, with conclusions drawn across the whole analysis.  For research question three, key findings from AR cycle 1 and 2 are shared, including an overview of key recommendations collaboratively identified with the participants. Due to the potential complexity of the findings, this

chapter includes quotes from the interviews and focus groups to provide as transparent and clear account of the findings as possible. Further supporting quotes are detailed within appendix 12.

Throughout the findings, I have foregrounded Lundy (2007) model within my explanation of the data. Whilst Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006) has explanatory power that can explain and focuses on the systems around the child, Lundy (2007) focuses on participation, and what supports participation which in an integral aspect of this thesis. Self-determination theory gives insight into the impact of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of learners and has explanatory power for the data, however Lundy (2007) focuses on the empowering approach which can be taken to support a young person's sense of being an agent of change themselves. Lundy (2007) fits with the methodological decision making made for this thesis and therefore has been emphasised.

### 4.2.1 Findings and discussion in relation to research question 1: How can Lundy's model be utilised to support participatory action research with YP with SEMH difficulties?

I consider and explore the support required to enable participation of YP with SEMH difficulties to enable their full, informed participation. I used the four elements of Lundy's (2007) model, namely space, voice, audience, and influence in turn. I utilised Lundy's questions, the literature on CYPs participation and my own actions to support my reflections. This includes all aspects of the research process, from seeking consent, engagement in the methods of data collection, within the AR cycles and how I would support CYP to ultimately have influence.

#### 4.2.1.1          Space

I utilised Lundy's (2007) questions as a prompt to aid my thinking around 'space' namely:

- Have children's views been actively sought?
- Was there a safe space in which children can express themselves freely?
- Have steps been taken to ensure that all children can take part?

Space was considered in a number of ways.  As Gray and Manning (2022) assert space is more than where interaction takes place and is deeply implicated in the production of individual identities

(Nind et al, 2012). Therefore, Lundy's (2007) concept of space was extended to include how individual identities may be transformed and perceived. Creating an emotional and physical space whereby the young people could consider their involvement in this study was the first step.

As YP with SEMH difficulties views appear more consistent with a social model of viewing SEMH, (Cosma & Soni, 2019), social and environmental factors were considered to promote space and safety for YP taking part. Initially, I introduced the research through familiar relationships both in school and home and through the process sought consent (BPS, 2021) and sought to create an inclusive space for them to consider participation. I drew on the strategic alliances which the YP already had in place in school (White & Choudhury, 2007), namely with the SENCO and Pastoral Leads. Quality of relationships underpin successful engagement for YP with SEMH (Nind et al, 2012; Sheffield & Morgan, 2017), therefore creating space for this at the recruitment stage of the research was fundamental to success.

For YP with SEMH feeling understood, listened to and supported by adults is a prominent factor which promotes success (Cefai & Cooper, 2009). Therefore, I explained to the YP that I was actively seeking their views, in a way in which could be discussed with them and through methods they felt comfortable with. In briefings for each YP, I discussed the research and explained that by participating there would be no negative reprisals for their involvement in school (Lundy, 2007), thereby creating a safe space in which they could freely express themselves.

During the focus groups and feedback workshop I was aware there was the potential for the YP to feel uncomfortable about sharing their views due to the risk to relationships with peers, a protective factor for young people with SEMH (Evangelou, 2008). In response, ground rules were collaboratively created. Each participant chose sweets which were available consistently during each interaction with the YP to help them to feel that the environment was relaxed and informal. Everyday foods can be a powerful way to alleviate social divisions (Parsons, 2015). Furthermore, when YP were asked to give views, fun and informal approaches were used as these are more motivating and increase the likelihood of authenticity (Lundy, 2007; Kennan et al, 2019; Street, 2019).

As Kennan et al (2019) highlighted Lundy's (2007) model overlooks the need for emotional safety in the spaces created for research to take place. Mindful of this, when the research was taking place,

I briefed the SENCo to safeguard their emotional wellbeing following their involvement. Their involvement bought about challenges, and I found there were times when the YP weren't in an emotionally safe space, upset by events in school or at home, and so were unable to give voice in relation to transition and to fully participate and responded accordingly.

Throughout the AR, I had to be highly responsive to the needs of the YP and to change when, where and how we met. Two participants throughout the research experienced sanctions due to the unconventional nature of their communication in school (Nind et al, 2012) and arrived highly dysregulated at times. They were offered alternative times to take part, once calmer, however both wanted to proceed with taking part. This suggests that creating space for YP to feel listened to, validated and understood is critical to effective participation in order for them to feel free to express their views. For other sessions, participants shared that they did not want to miss motivating elements of school or found school challenging due to family changes, so meetings times were changed to ensure the emotional environment was positive for all participants to be able to take part. Consideration of the participants mood and feelings and offering alternative times or meetings was key to the space being provided enabling voice. Giving the YP space to share what was most important for them at a particular time were critical steps I took which enabled them to be motivated to later voice their experiences in relation to transition.

### 4.2.1.2 Voice

I utilised Lundy's (2007) questions as a prompt to aid my thinking around 'voice' namely:

- Have children been given the information they need to form a view?
- Do children know that they do not have to take part?
- Have children been given a range of options as to how they might choose to express themselves?

Within this research, I briefed family, relevant school staff and YP where each party could give informed consent to enable the YP to participate. Letters of invitation were sent to those participants who had been selected to take part highlighting participation was a choice (Thackeray, 2014), rather than an expectation (appendix 3). During the data collection, time was allocated reiterating this (Thackeray, 2014). Indeed, one young person voiced that they did not want to take

part which I respected, indicating space to voice an informed decision about their participation/non-participation.

Further mechanisms employed to achieve voice was to ask the pupils to pick pseudonyms that would be employed throughout the research, allowing anonymity (Caslin, 2021). In addition, 'process consent' was utilised which sees consent as being an on-going concern to be negotiated throughout the research process (Heath et al., 2004) rather than just at the beginning. This enabled the YP to see they had power and had on-going opportunities to continue or withdraw at any stage (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017). I positioned myself as an outsider to the school environment to highlight that their participation/non-participation would have no bearing upon their schooling (Thackeray, 2014). The YP were aware that a member of staff was available in school with whom they could speak to after and during their involvement in the research should they have further queries, yet otherwise were anonymous in the school environment and could therefore share their views freely. Child Protection and Safeguarding procedures were adhered to and explained to the participants (Thackeray, 2014; BPS, 2021). As participants at times were dysregulated before the formal research activity started, I confirmed with the YP that I would pass on why they were upset, if they wanted, so that this could be resolved within school effectively to safeguard their wellbeing.

A range of options for voice were offered to the YP including photo voice, starter activities, individual interviews, focus groups and feedback meetings. YP require sufficient time to understand the issue of transition as well as capacity building opportunities (Woodhouse, 2004) for meaningful participation. As Flutter & Rudduck (2004) discuss, mechanisms are required to enable the participation of those who may not feel comfortable to articulate their views, or where literacy may be challenging.

Relationship building activities also took place to enable the participation of YP with SEMH difficulties (Thomspon et al, 2021; Turner, 2001). Building trust and partnership appeared to be a significant factor in supporting the development of empowerment, to enable participants to express their views (Barnes, 1997). The YP in this research had histories of communicating through verbal and occasional physical behaviours (Caslin, 2021). The digital visual method and narrative methods offered a way for the YP to consider their transition experience and bring out themes and views that might not otherwise have been easily expressed (Davison et al, 2011). Within the focus groups YP were given a series of collated photos they had taken within photovoice, and written literacy

activities were reduced to help to emphasise less conventional communication resources in relation to transitional experience (Corbett, 1998).

At times, the YPs voices became loud and challenging in relation to some of the statements created as they felt that elements of transition could be improved and they had been treated unfairly or unjustly. The level of their voice indicates the strength of feeling in relation to particular themes identified. This is a critical consideration when working within PAR as part of the development of the themes, in this case in relation to transition experiences. For example, the YP raised their voices in relation to needing time when they are struggling, and when reflecting on whether school staff understood their difficulties, and in 'voicing' the importance of school staff keeping an open mind and a respectful attitude towards them.

### 4.2.1.3        Audience

I utilised Lundy's (2007) questions as a prompt to aid my thinking around 'audience' namely:

- Is there a process for communicating children's views?
- Do children know who their views are being communicated to?
- Does that person/body have the power to make decisions?

Within this research, I sought to listen carefully to the YP, offering them an audience (Lundy, 2007). Whilst adults have a right to express their views too, they do not have the right to have them given additional weight, according to Lundy (2007). I met each of the participants between four and five times as YP who attend more than one meeting are more likely to result in effective participation (Kennan et al, 2019; Cashmore, 2002). Alderson (2000) stated that YP are unhappy when their views are not communicated to those who have ultimate decision making and that as a result change doesn't happen. Therefore, within this research it was important to ensure the YPs views reached those people, namely the SENCo and senior leader responsible for transition. I discussed and agreed with the YP that their views would be shared with decision makers responsible for transition in school when the research was completed, and a summary document of findings could be shared. To reduce the risk that my personal biases impacted the outcomes, the second research cycle enabled participants to collaboratively re-shape the 'recommendations' (UKEssays, 2018). I also have a training background and history in participation and skills in working with adolescents which is likely to have enabled YP to be able to voice and feel listened to (Dolton et al, 2020).

In order to ensure that the YP had more than just the right to be heard (Lundy, 2007), I spent time explaining to the YP, individually and collectively what research is, what publishing research means, how this information might be shared with the Senior Leadership of their own school as well as possibly other schools.

There are personal and professional opportunities in my role as an T/EP to utilise the collaboratively produced recommendations to suggest ways in which transition may be improved for YP with SEMH moving to secondary school. However, the power lies within schools to make changes to the transition processes so enabling a more formal channel of communication with decision makers in school was an intended outcome of this research. The use of Botchwey et al (2019) concept of partnership offered an opportunity for YP with SEMH to partner with adults where the YP could engage in planning and facilitating change within their school environment.

With a view to building communication channels with YP, it was also discussed how these recommendations for transition could also be directly shared with the Senior Leadership of their school and those responsible for transition. As Byrne and Lundy (2019) express the extent to which YPs rights-based approach is applied is very much down to the commitment of individuals within a school, and requires time and persistence. Audience is a significant factor to consider in ensuring that there is an opportunity for YPs views to be given due weight which can be challenging due to time constraints and pressures school face.

## 4.2.1.4          Influence

I utilised Lundy's (2007) questions as a prompt to aid my thinking around 'influence' namely:

- Were the children's views considered by those with the power to affect change?
- Are there procedures in place that ensure that the children's views have been taken seriously?
- Have the children and young people been provided with feedback explaining the reasons for decisions taken?

Through the development of recommendations which YP with SEMH difficulties identified as enabling successful transition, their views were taken into account in order to effect change (Lundy, 2007). Listening to YP has great potential to inform educational practice, enabling practitioners to

work holistically with the YP they support (Dolton et al, 2020). Whilst the infrastructure of current funding for schools is pertinent in the current economic climate (Byrne & Lundy, 2019), the recommendations developed through PAR offer consideration for the resourcing of support in relation to transition. Throughout the PAR, there was member checking in order to ensure that the developed recommendations represented the YPs experiences and views which showed that the views of the YP were being taken seriously. In doing so YP were involved in the development of plans which might aid the successful transition of other YP with SEMH, however infrastructure which facilitates ongoing opportunities for YP with SEMH involvement requires consideration.

The concept of influence can be understood as feedback which makes it uncomfortable for adults to solicit YPs views and then ignore them (Lundy, 2007). In relation to the views of YP with SEMH difficulties, this is particularly poignant given the significant body of research which outlines negative long term life outcomes. Given that YP make sense of their social worlds and constitute their identities through narratives, offering an opportunity to influence a change in narrative can be highly empowering (Somers 1994). As Weedon (2004) expresses cultural practices offer new forms of identify and can subvert dominant forms of identity. Alternative media for voice and opportunity for influence can disrupt the identity held by the YP and disrupt the traditional lens (Nind et al, 2012) by which YP with SEMH difficulties are viewed.

4.2.1.5    Conclusions to RQ1: YP with SEMH participation and Lundy's (2007) model.

PAR, utilising Lundy's (2007) model affords the opportunity to meet with YP more than once in order to establish their authentic views (Archard & Skivens, 2009). In doing so an increased sense of emotional safety (Kennan et al, 2019) is *more* likely to enable YP to talk about issues that are emotionally important to them or they find challenging to consider. As a TEP, reflexivity is key (BPS, 2021; HCPC, 2015) and is highly significant when taking a PAR approach with YP with SEMH to ensure consideration of my own biases and appropriateness of approach (Thackeray, 2014). This is important for further research which takes a participatory approach with YP. It would support better understanding of the challenges posed in meeting their needs, the issues involved with successful transition and might enable the YP to consider atypical and typical behaviours (Dolton et al, 2020). In doing so YP may experience higher levels of inclusion and understanding of their social world, and themselves.

In eliciting YPs views utilising the four areas of Lundy's model, YP with SEMH difficulties are co-producers of plans and practice that will be of benefit not only to the pupils with SEMH difficulties, but more widely for those experiencing transition. In seeking to bring together the findings to interpret the YPs multi-modal narratives of transition and better understand the complexities of their lives (Hickinbotham & Soni, 2021) key themes which will subsequently be discussed can support the successful transition of YP with SEMH.  Offering motivating, engaging and enjoyable communication tools for the YP to express their views through both digital technology and narrative methods enabled and supported self-expression (Nind et al, 2012; Walker, 2005).

## 4.2.2  Findings and discussion in relation to research question 2: Experiences during transition to secondary school of young people with SEMH difficulties.

Participants discussed and generated a wide range of experiences during transition, related to the process of change, relationships, attitudes, and behaviours of others within their macrosystem, and conceptions of YP education in their exosystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The following thematic map depicts the seven themes, and subthemes identified through analysis.

Figure 6: Thematic Map for Research Question 1

|  | Theme | Sub-theme |
|---|---|---|
| RQ1 What are young people with social, emotional, and mental health needs experiences during transition in | 1: The ideal school child and conformity | 1: Maladaptive or non-ideal school child<br>2: Adaptive or ideal school child |
|  | 2: Familiarisation | 1: Preparation and planning in pre and post transition.<br>2: Opportunities to know the environment |
|  | 3: Moving towards adulthood | 1: Personal skills development<br>2: Inspiring future aspirations, and career opportunities<br>3: Targeted support and interventions |
|  | 4: Relationships | 1: School staff-pupil relationships<br>2: Friendships<br>3: Family relationships<br>4: Relationship between adults at home and at school |
|  | 5: Safety | 1: Promotion of emotional and physical safety<br>2: Demotion of emotional and physical safety |
|  | 6: Social inclusion | 1: Access to learning opportunities and activities, through varied curriculum and community. |

| secondary school? | | 2: Knowing students holistically: connecting home, school, and community. |
| | | 3: Belonging |
| | 7: The role of teachers | 1: Values and attitudes |
| | | 2: Teaching methods |

4.2.2.1 Findings for Theme 1: The adaptive or ideal school student and conformity

The concept of an adaptative or ideal school student and the need for conformity to an ideal was identified as key for all participants. All highlighted the impact of receiving sanctions, exclusions or merits depending on whether they were able to conform to the espoused values which create the conception of 'the compliant or adaptive school students' and 'non-ideal/ non-adaptive school students'.

- **Subtheme: Adaptive or ideal student**

Participants recognised that there was an 'Ideal' way for students to behave and act within school, which resulted in positive recognition from adults. The YP wanted to 'do better', receive merits and recognition for their efforts, and then felt more motivated to focus on their behaviour within school. The participants placed emphasis on how their efforts being recognised and celebrated resulted in them feeling more motivated.

> *"So like merits they are a good thing, and then it makes you feel good when you get some. And then it makes you want to get more [..], and then you get like people praising you, which feels nice." Red.*

Each participant emphasised that opportunities for YP to experience success, and for these to be shared with their families was motivating. Participants shared the importance of having access to different opportunities including experiences outside of school.

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*"The more merits you get, you go and do different trips.. like Alton Towers or you get to go like ice skating [..] you get bigger rewards, the more merits you get."* Bob.

- **Subtheme: Maladaptive or non-ideal student**

Each participant felt that the sanctions and internal school exclusions, increased negative feelings and thoughts and increased pressure at home.

*"Teachers are all like […] if you do summat bad [..]an SLT person, so that's for like naughty people.. [..] comes for you […] so you really expect to get yelled at. [..] You know the consequences […] you're going to have detention […] it will result in arguments at home because your parents won't be too happy."* Bob.

Each participant placed emphasis on exclusionary practices they had experienced or observed. This resulted in decreased levels of motivation and an increased focus on a 'maladaptive' narrative within their life. Participants expressed that following sanctions they began to care less, became less worried about the possibility of being sanctioned and completed less work.

*"So SE (internal exclusion) does help but then it starts to wear off.. […] because I don't really care [..] anymore.. I guess I wasn't shocked when she says she was putting me in there […] I just went in there and sat there".* Sam.

## 4.2.2.2    Discussion of theme 1

A positive relationship between individual's beliefs about their abilities and their perceptions of task importance, alongside factors such as aptitude, cultural norms, experiences, and personal beliefs were notable (Rosenenzweig et al 2019). As Spaaij (2012) further asserts, access to social and cultural capital resources varies considerably between YPs. This theme highlights the importance of consideration of these factors, and the role schools can play to promote a positive perception of students with SEMH difficulties. A relational focus and approach to their needs is likely to be beneficial for these young people (Mihalas et al, 2008), who may otherwise experience limits on their outcomes. Each participant highlighted both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017) and finding quiet ways to praise YP's positive behaviour builds self-esteem, as well as

motivation (Barlow, 2019). As YP with SEMH difficulties are likely to experience disproportionate rates of exclusions, compared to their peers (Bowman-Perrott et al, 2013), this results in feelings of increased stress and anxiety and feelings of not being good enough. As expectancy value theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020) asserts individuals' expectancies for success in future achievement and the role of situationally specific factors in shaping these beliefs is significant. After experiencing exclusions pupils are at risk of further and multiple school exclusions impacting on academic attainment (Carroll & Hurry, 2018). A deficit focus on YP with SEMH difficulties may reflect some SEN processes (DfE/DoH, 2015), where needs and difficulties are often the focus for accessing additional resource.

## 4.2.3.1 Findings for Theme 2: Familiarisation

This theme identified the role familiarisation played in the experiences YP with SEMH difficulties have during transition. Participants raised effective planning by primary and secondary schools, opportunities to know the school, and the role of allies who already attend or work in the school develops familiarity which decreases anxiety.

- **Subtheme: Preparation and planning in pre and post transition.**

Each of the participants highlighted high levels of physical symptoms in relation to worry, noting that accessible information about the school, as well as planning in relation to pre-transition helped to decrease this. Expectation management was discussed by two participants who felt that mixed messages were given by primary schools.

Each of the participants felt that preparation in primary school pre-transition supported them to feel better prepared. Participants expressed that discussing how secondary school differs to primary school and planned transition curriculum activity helps to develop the skills needed.

> *"…in school, they would do some of the subjects we do now. So like got us prepared, and they was telling us about what things you can do and what things you can't do in there. And that it's, it's different from primary school, because you won't be in the same classroom […] you'll be moving around a lot more." Red.*

Each of the participants discussed post transition expectation. One participant discussed the importance of having photographs of teachers accessible in school as new students can see what their teachers look like, building familiarity, and confidence to approach them.

*"Well, sometimes [...] we go into a new classroom, they let us look around first and see how everything was and then, they gave us, like, worksheet. They gave us like, a map of what we'd be learning and then what was coming up next. So I knew what we was doing next."* Red.

- **Subtheme: Opportunities to know the environment**

Each of the participants discussed the key experience of going on a school tour (virtual or in person) as it enabled them to visualise the physical environment and supported preparation for it. All participants expressed that a summer school (located at the new secondary school and run by members of school staff) supported their transition even if they did not attend themselves. As

*"Well, in year six before we left, we all went on to social media, and we made a group chat [...] and then some of my friends went to summer school [...] so they like, took pictures and sent it to me and it was like, it's really good here. There's nothing to be nervous about."* Red.

Each of the participants expressed that support with emotion management and preparation for the start was key for them. On reflecting on the reality of secondary school, each participant described the challenges of the impact of new surroundings where they got lost and disorientate, and also a sense of pride when they were able to navigate the changes successfully.

## 4.2.3.2        Discussion of theme 2

Topics raised within this theme highlighted a key area for consideration in relation to transition, as transition planning is not currently statutory for schools within England. There are currently differing levels of focus on transition within the UK, with the Welsh government's Education (Transition from Primary to Secondary School) Regulations 2022 outlining legal requirements on governing bodies of both secondary schools, and their feeder primary schools. These requirements outline the need to

plan for continuity of learning and recognise the impact planning and preparation has for YP with SEHM needs.

Marsh et al (2009) and McCoy et al (2020) highlighted that perceptions of secondary school need to be demystified as transitional challenges are likely to increase anxiety (Mumford & Birchwood, 2021), reduce attainment and increase social difficulties for pupils with SEN (Neal et al, 2016).. Summer schools, which not a school requirement, were identified as a facilitative factor in supporting relationship development for YP with SEMH difficulties who may experience heightened emotions during transition.  As relationships are highly significant for YP with SEMH difficulties, the challenging first days and weeks of transitioning to secondary can be better supported where some relationships are already in place (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013).

Systemic support systems can facilitate communication between primary and secondary schools during transition which positively impacts on YP with SEMH difficulties (Jidnal Snape & Foggie, 2008).  This may suggest that closer working relationships in transition programmes between secondary schools and primary school might be beneficial both before, during and following the transitional period. Planning and preparation can offer opportunities for independence and a growth in confidence where YP with SEMH difficulties feel a sense of pride in their newfound ability to navigate changes successfully. Furthermore, a pedagogical change could enable teaching to continue to be organised around a whole person, rather than the specialised notion of a subject within secondary school, taught by different teachers, in different classrooms (Shaw, 1995; Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008).

## 4.2.4.1         Findings for Theme 3: Moving towards adulthood.

Thirdly, each of the participants identified the idea that transition experiences involve moving towards adulthood including personal skill development, inspiring future aspiration and access to targeted support and intervention.

- **Subtheme:     Personal skills development**

Each of the participants discussed personal skill development, which underpinned their experience of transition. The YP highlighted that the ability to self-reflect, tolerate distress, be aware of their

physical environment, develop organisational skills, interact with others, and recognise and manage emotions were important:

> *"When everyone's trying [..] to get inside, it's just like really crowded. And then it's like hard to get in because [..] people push and shove to try get their way in. [..] Since it's not like a very big space [..] people get just shoved up against the door [..] so if that happens to me, I just take a step back and then wait." Bob.*

Participants expressed that help-seeking can be hard. However, one participant recognised that self-regulation skills and emotional literacy development were required to promote successful transition.

> *"I don't really speak to people about problems [..] bottling things up can make things worse,[..] so teachers can help [..] it is nerve wracking sometimes, because you're scared you're gonna say the wrong thing [..] but you just got to be brave." Sam.*

- **Subtheme:     Inspiring future aspirations, and career opportunities**

Each participant discussed how secondary schools can promote hope, inspiration, and access to information about future careers. The participants reflected on how through visual stimuli, as well as through written information the school environment inspired them:

> *"If you're in year 7 […]  art is like inspiration to say that if you want you to become an artist […] that it's possible to do it. And […] I think in some of the rooms there's even like instructions on how to like make origami or stuff like that so it like inspires children to be what they want to be." Red.*

Two participants expressed that in moving to secondary school they began to consider their interests and futures.

> *"Some of my friends, they didn't know what they want to be until, they came to the school. And then there was like, looking at all the career boards, and some [..] want to become mechanics and other one of the photography because of all the pictures in the art rooms" Red.*

- **Subtheme:     Targeted support and interventions**

Each participant discussed access to targeted support and/or intervention helped them within school:

> *"If you're like you're struggling, like if you feel sad or angry, or you're just not very happy. you can go speak to someone in there. [..], they'll do activities and they'll like tell you how to act and not act. [..] You can talk to them, and you can trust them." Sam.*

Two participants perceived that literacy intervention supported the development of their reading skills:

> *"They'll give you certain amount of pages that you have to read up to, or you can read past it. [..]And when you'd go into school, you talk about it like... you're given questions by the year 8's." Sam.*

In addition, each participant discussed how specific support from staff within school felt beneficial. Each participant expressed that having differentiated support (universal provision) in the classroom helped their transition. One YP felt that universal support within the classroom from teachers who took a humanistic approach enabled them to be more successful in school.

> *"If you're in class, [..] and you're struggling, you could like, tell the teacher and they could figure out a way to make you feel more comfortable in class and support you more in class." Red.*

## 4.2.3.2          Discussion of theme 3

This theme revealed interesting insights into how YP with SEMH difficulties perceive school, and the opportunity for building intrinsic motivation. The YP within this research position school as a place where there is an opportunity to enable them to be hopeful and inspired for the future.  Through whole school as well as targeted support in secondary school, YP gained additional freedom, autonomy, and independence (Mumford and Birchwood, 2021). The YPs experiences echo Sadler et

al (2018) and Radez et al (2021) research which found that YP preferred self-reliance to help-seeking and find talking about mental health difficult. This suggests that targeted support and/or intervention for the development of self-regulation strategies (which can be effective for increasing academic achievement for young people with SEMH) reduces the likelihood of exclusion (Popham et al, 2018). Furthermore, literacy intervention supported the development of reading skills, outlining the benefit that small group tuition through reading of good quality texts can have for YP with SEMH difficulties (Carroll et al, 2017; Bowyer-Crane et al., 2008). This, however, is not always generalisable (Harackiewicz & Priniski, 2018; Mikami et al, 2014).

The YPs perspectives reflected how intrinsic motivation can be enhanced within school through the effects of their social environment, as suggested by Ryan and Deci (2017). As Harackiewicz et al (2016) assert, interest is a powerful motivational process that energises learning, guides academic and career trajectories. Furthermore, it can develop self-efficacy beliefs which are essential to academic success (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2022) and creates interest in potential employment opportunities in the future for pupils with SEMH difficulties (Clements & Kamau, 2018).

As Cooper and Jacobs (2011b) and Breeman et al (2015) emphasise, the adoption of non-coercive and humanistic approaches to teaching is likely to lead to higher levels of teacher-child closeness and subsequently better behavioural adjustments. Carroll et al (2017) assert that consistent school-wide approaches to behavioural support helps to ensure YP with SEMH both achieve and develop a healthy sense of self. Where a humanistic approach is taken at the universal level in school towards young people with SEMH, rather than a deficit approach, these YP can thrive (Carroll & Hurry, 2018).

## 4.2.4.1 Findings for Theme 4: Relationships

The importance of relationships, the fourth theme, was discussed by each participant, as found by McCoy et al (2020) and Mumford & Birchwood (2021). This included friendships, family relationships, relationships with school staff and the interactions between these relationships.

- **Sub theme: School staff-pupil relationships**

Each participant noted the importance of teacher-pupil relationships, the importance of trust, positive reciprocal conversations, and the impact of these on transition.

*"Miss C's just like, very understanding [..] but you try to say something to Miss B. She's not having any of it.. I know this might sound a bit rude, but I just don't like the way she speaks. [..] I just don't like her in general because she just always gives me lines." Bob.*

Each participant discussed supportive, caring relationships with pastoral staff who put time aside to help them settle into secondary school aiding their transition and enabling them to raise any ongoing difficulties.

*"You get a nice conversation with them [..] and when they take a certain person in, [..], well, they'd keep an eye on them basically, because that's what they did for me. They kept an eye on me to make sure I wasn't getting up to no good." Sam.*

- **Sub theme: Friendships**

Mutual and stable friendships were noted by each participant as an important part of their transition experience yet articulated that friendships during transition can be challenging and result in social embarrassment. Reassurance, emotional and practical support, fun, humour, and comradery were all aspects of healthy positive friendships articulated by participants. Each participant felt accepted, valued and more attuned to the feelings of others where friendships in school had formed:

*"Like, I am really similar to people in my in my friend group because we all love our sports and we all just like are very talkative and we all, like, have a mischievous side." Bob.*

Two participants discussed the challenge of navigating the changing nature of friendships as well as maintaining or restructuring existing friendships, including the impact of social media (Mumford & Birchwood, 2021; Curson et al, 2019). Participants expressed some anxiety in relation to this, however all participants felt positive about making new friendships following transition (Pratt & George, 2005). Each participant also expressed how quality friendships buffers negative experiences:

*"It can affect the way I feel sometimes because some people will say stuff. [..] I just go and speak to my friends [..] and I just forgot [..] all of it. [..] and if anything concerns me, I tell them. [..]it's nice to have someone to speak to."* Sam.

- **Sub theme: Family relationships**

Each participant discussed how supportive parents and families were a protective factor during transition. YP with SEMH difficulties valued when parents recognise their effort and gave practical and emotional support:

*"My mom got all my stuff ready. So on the first day, I had all my stationery, and everything I needed."* Red.

Two participants expressed that having siblings or extended family members at school was positive.

*"High school is not so bad [..]… you possibly have family in there.. [..] so you'll have someone to look out for you [..] someone who can protect and [..] you feel like you're meant to be there."* Sam.

Where families support friendships, participants felt this positively impacted on their transition experience:

*"Because sometimes I don't speak [..] to my parents, any family [..] I find it awkward I get nervous so I'll tell my friends and then they say can I tell your Mom and I say feel free, because I can't tell them."* Sam.

- **Sub theme: Relationship between adults at home and at school**

Each participant discussed the relationship between home and school at the mesosystem level of their ecological system (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Each participant noted that positive interaction between their families and school staff enabled them to feel supported:

*"It can help sometimes, speaking to your parents. Because then your parents can go to school if you don't want to [..] and go and speak to the teachers. And say this, that and the other and say what I've said, and then they'll pull you out of class, and [..] talk to you in a meeting." Sam.*

## 4.2.4.2    Discussion of theme 4

Interpersonal relationships are a pre-requisite for learning relationships, therefore relationship formation at the point of transition is, as noted by participants, highly significant (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). This includes relationships with school staff as well as peers. Trotman et al (2015) discuss the potential for disconnect between teacher-pupil relationships in secondary, compared to primary school.  Breeman et al (2015) further assert that the teacher-pupil relationship plays an important role when it comes to CYPs social, emotional, and behavioural adjustment.

Mutual and stable friendships are an important part of a YPs transition experience (Mumford & Birchwood, 2021, Hazel et al, 2014, Markovic & Bowker, 2017). As Cotterell (2007) suggests the relationship with someone of the same age offers a route into a social network (fitting in), and secondly that relationship offers validation and reassurance of worth by peers (feeling accepted). Where friendships based on acceptance had been formed in school, a sense of belonging had been enabled, which allowed the YP to be more attuned to the feelings of others (Bollmer et al, 2005; Evans et al, 2018);

YP with SEMH difficulties valued when parents recognise their effort and gave practical and emotional support (Mumford & Birchwood, 2021; Bagnall et al, 2019). Furthermore, where there were family members already in school a familiarity with the school, behaviour management strategies and emotional support were faciliative for transition (Mumford & Birchwood, 2021; Curson et al, 2019). Socialising with "deviant friends" can be a risk factor for adolescent problem behaviour (Crosnoe et al, 2002), yet characteristics of the family environment can also provide important sources of protection. Gibbs et al (1998) suggest that parental monitoring and supervision promotes self-restraint resulting in YP becoming more sensitive to their parents' opinions and reactions.

Positive relationships between parents, and school staff, significantly protects YP with SEMH difficulties against the effect of stress and problematic developmental outcomes (Evans et al, 2007).

Where good relationships were in place, YP valued the emotional support and experienced positive effects pre, during and after transition (Bagnall et al, 2021). These relationships have been found to promote YPs psychosocial adjustment in school (Buyse et al, 2008).

## 4.2.5.1 Findings for Theme 5: Safety

Safety, that is psychological and physical safety, was perceived to be integral to successful transition to secondary school by each participant. YP shared experiences that demote and promote wellbeing (McDonald & O'Hara, 1998).

- **Subtheme: Promotion of psychological safety.**

Each participant discussed psychological safety, noting that safety was promoted by nurturing adults. These adults helped YP to feel safe and enabled them to access calm physical spaces in the school environment (e.g., the classroom, confidential spaces, or other designated areas). Here they could talk to school or external staff about matters affecting their lives helping them in the challenges of transition and in accessing learning.

> *"They've got a little room. [..] Its where say there's something you don't want everyone else to hear, summats gone on.. the teacher will take you in there for you to speak.[..] There's blinds and everything on the door so no one can see into the room. " Sam.*

Each participant stated that consideration of the physical environment by school staff when planning promotes safety, as they are learning how long it takes to move through a building and the challenges this can entail.

> *"So like my maths teacher and the other maths teacher, made like summat so they let out the year nines before us so they go first into the door and then we get let out, like two minutes after. That helps." Bob.*

- **Subtheme: Demotion of psychological safety**

Participants consistently expressed experiences which demoted their sense of psychological safety and noted the impact on their school success. Consideration of the physical environment, busyness of the corridors due to timetabling and the ability to move safely around were discussed by all participants who felt more at risk due to their age and size.

*"Sometimes it gets hard to just even walk around people. We have lessons then everyone comes out of lessons at once so when people are outside having their break, people are walking through trying to get to their lesson which makes them late which gets them into trouble." Bob.*

Each participant expressed anxiety in relation to physical threat or physical assaults. There was a perception that older YP posed a threat to participants, whether intentional or non-intentional which suggests consideration is required in relation to transition planning.

*"So like, when people have loads of fights at school. It just makes me feel bad for the person who's getting hurt. [..] And that makes me just so scared [..] like if that happens to me." Bob.*

Participants also expressed fear in relation to how social media can be used in school in relation to physical assaults, which can result in humiliation and embarrassment. Therefore, consideration of how social media posts are responded to during transition is significant to safeguard both psychological and physical security:

*"It can be embarrassing because like my cousin she sent a video of me to one of her friends and she sent it around. And [..] when I got beat up in school someone recorded it and put it on Tik Tok. And you get made fun of in the comments." Sam.*

## 4.2.5.1 Discussion of theme 5

Safety was a significantly prevalent theme which participants expressed, in considering their experiences of transition. Participants expressed the need for safe physical spaces when moving around the school (Curson et al, 2019) as well as identified spaces where they experience

relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). These spaces enabled effective support to develop personal skills and support wellbeing especially when emotional regulation is challenging (Hughes & Schlosser, 2014). Participants also expressed that the fear of physical assault from peers, and punishment for mistakes made during transition in relation to navigating their environment resulted in a decreased sense of psychological safety. As Carter (2023)'s applied trauma responsive classroom model (ATRCM) asserts, physical, emotional, and interpersonal safety are the starting point for creating environments in which YP can build connection, and in turn consider their future. Each participant discussed how psychological security plays a fundamental role in well-being and mental health and is integral to their successful transition to secondary school (Zotova & Karapetyan, 2019). Transition can increase psychological security and physical safety, however as participants expressed there are environmental (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013), timetabling (Karagiannopoulou, 1999; Curson et al, 2019), and relational considerations which need to be carefully cumulatively considered to promote this.

This theme echoes the relatedness aspect of Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory, namely the need to have close relationships with others and experience a sense of belonging. Their theory suggests that this is a critical factor in creating intrinsic motivation and self-determination which fosters adaptability and creativity to change (Han et al, 2022). As Han et al (2022) further discuss low psychological safety makes it less likely for YP to express their reflections and learn from failures, which will lead to lower self-confidence and even a vicious circle of mistakes-low self-efficacy-repeated mistakes (Hirak et al, 2012):

### 4.2.6.1 Findings for Theme 6: Social Inclusion

Inclusion was perceived to be fundamental to successful transition to secondary school by all participants. YP discussed the importance of being understood as a whole and who is afforded access to opportunities that widen their experience which promotes their sense of belonging.

- **Subtheme: Knowing students holistically: interconnection between home, school, and community.**

Each participant expressed the importance of school staff working closely with external agencies, such as Children's Services, CAMHS and community-based youth provision in order to better understand their whole life and subsequently provide holistic support.

> *"My family support worker, she's supporting me, she's helping [..] about my sexuality [..] and issues like anger management. If you need to speak to somebody coz something is going on at home, [..] then they'll get you a counsellor or support worker [..] and then if something is really bad, we have like school police." Sam.*

Each participant discussed the positive impact of youth and community-based activities, although it was noted that conflicts between peers in school impacted on activities outside of school. The role of youth workers as well as sports coaches in the community was significant in supporting YP to navigate challenging and risky social situations, experience exciting opportunities and to support YPs involvement within their local community:

> *"So the youth club, and it being close to school in one respect is a good thing. But on the other hand, if you've got something happening in school [..] whoever's involved in that fight at the youth club they will get banned. [..] Its nice, because if something happens [..] they inform the school." Bob.*

Two participants expressed the importance of school staff understanding challenges taking place for YP out of school and the impact of this. One participant expressed that conflict within their home, impacted on their ability to focus and respond to stresses within school.

> *"Say your house is really unorganised [..} there's no space to put anything.. [..]so when you wake up in a morning to get changed for school, you know, where it is straightaway. [..] Otherwise everything just goes missing or gets lost, like a planner if you lose that it's a one hour detention at school." Sam.*

Two participants noted how travelling within their local community, either by bus or walking raised challenges for them and impacted on their levels of stress during their transition to secondary school. This was in relation to being harassed and chased by other YP, witnessing violence within the community, and seeing fights between other YP. This all impacted on their sense of safety and subsequently school readiness during transition.

- **Subtheme: Access to opportunities and activities, via curriculum and community learning.**

Each participant noted that extra-curricular clubs such as breakfast, homework, and book clubs help their school performance at school. Two participants expressed that providing pupils with food motivates them. They also expressed that clubs help them stay 'on track' with their work, gives access to resources students may not otherwise have access to and promotes learning. Each participant shared that having access to outdoor equipment during lunch and break time helped promote physical activity and friendships:

> *"Homework clubs are good. [..] it's good because you can go and they'll give you a computer to work on. [..] Say your parents haven't got enough money to buy you a phone or tablet or computer or anything, you can go there because it's free and [..]you just go there, and you just do your homework. [..] It gives you time to do your homework, so you won't get a line." Sam.*

Participants discussed how youth, community-based activity as well as varied curriculum activities which include visits and trips gives access to opportunities they otherwise may not experience, increases their confidence, and promotes wellbeing. Local community-based facilities, and spaces helps to support developing friendships outside of school and have access to independent social opportunities.

- **Subtheme: Belonging**

Each participant noted that being valued and accepted for themselves was an important aspect of transition. YP noticed that staff who responded in a way which promoted acceptance increased their

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sense of belonging at school. Furthermore, visual imagery which represented aspects of their identity increased their sense of belonging and promoted tolerance in school.

*In discussing visual displays at school: "It shows it's okay to believe what you believe in. And it doesn't matter what race you are. [..] And if you was part of the LGBTQ plus community. [..] It means like, you can do what you want to do, and you can believe what you want to believe in." Sam.*

Participants shared that school facilities which were accessible to their families and local community outside of school time, helped them to experience a stronger sense of connection to the school and promoted inclusion. Each participant expressed how family members or they themselves had accessed the community facilities.

*"The PE block [..] is the leisure centre. My dad plays football with my uncles and cousins in there. You can contact the leisure centre, because it's different part of school [..] and you just call them up[..]." " My friend had a birthday party there." Sam added to by Bob.*

## 4.2.6.2      Discussion of theme 6

Social inclusion was central to experiences YP with SEMH had in relation to transition. Where participants felt they were understood holistically, and there was interconnection between home, school, and their activity in the community (Corrigan et al, 2014), they were more likely to experience a higher sense of school belonging. Participation in extracurricular activities, is strongly linked to self-esteem, academic success, and higher expectations for college graduation (Blomfield & Barber, 2011; Martin et al, 2015). Participants highlighted that there continues to be inequity in the access to these activities which are linked to school performance, positive development and promotion of health (Roeser & Peck, 2003; Meier et al, 2018; Fredricks & Eccles, 2010). Whilst some participants expressed that school-based activities were more accessible for families with low socioeconomic status, there is a complex relationship between factors, which support and obstruct a sense of school belonging and either promote, or demote wellbeing (Meier et al, 2018).

Extracurricular activities carry a unique potential to increase motivation and reduce disaffection among YP who are disadvantaged (Bohnert et al, 2008) and promotes physical activity and

friendships (Halpern, 2003). School-based extracurricular activities are likely to be more available, as costs are often off-set by schools, and these activities require less of parents' resources in terms of time and transport as they take place at school (Dryfoos, 1999). Participants expressed that where tailored support was identified through recognition of the interactions at the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) reasonable adjustments within school helped with transition.

Where YP felt they fitted in with others and with their new environment this led to increased feeling of belonging (Sancho & Cline, 2012; Rose & Shevlin, 2017). As Mumford and Birchwood (2021) and Chui et al (2016) found, this appeared to centre on relationships. Participants identified that supportive teachers (Riley, 2019), who appear more understanding of people's experiences (Craggs & Kelly, 2018) substantially effects their feelings of belonging. Within this research, the social inclusion theme and relationships theme are highly interlinked and interconnecting, in relation to the success YP with SEMH difficulties experience during transition.

Furthermore, as Andreouli and Howarth (2012) identify local community contexts, as well as broader institutional practices can work together to produce social change and tackle inequalities sustained in social structures (Andreouli et al, 2013).

## 4.2.7.1 Findings for Theme 7: The role of a teacher

- **Subtheme: Values and attitudes**

Each participant noted that secondary school teachers who listened, were approachable, welcoming, understanding, had a sense of humour and were fair supported their positive transition into school:

> *"Coz when I've done something wrong, she [..], helps me and discusses it about like, what I've done wrong and how to, like prevent the situation and how I could have done better in that situation. It really helps me." Bob.*

Participants indicated that approaches that embrace techniques that foster good relations between teachers and pupils results in more motivated pupils for learning, thereby reducing the risk of exclusion.

*"When I was in year seven, she'd like sometimes speak to me to see how I was getting on and if I needed any support [..] and then she would say that I've been doing really well in school. And that it's been a pleasure having me in year seven."* Red.

Each participant expressed where teachers took a strengths-based approach to them, they had increased opportunities for social competence skill development which is linked to developmental progress.

- **Subtheme: Teaching methods**

Participants expressed that teaching methods utilised within the classroom impacted on their ability to participate and engage with learning. Two participants expressed that how they were paired in joint work, or small group work was important (Tullis & Goldstone, 2020; Ezeddine et al, 2023).

*"If it was partner work, one person like, they didn't let other people or me have a turn to like say their ideas, and let them [..] write it down. Then, I wouldn't really want to participate in partner work anymore."* Red.

Participants also discussed the importance of teachers' flexibility and adaptability to joint problem solve when supporting positive transition, both within the classroom and wider school environment.

## 4.2.7.2 Discussion of theme 7

This theme identifies the importance of teachers who are patient, considerate and welcoming who emphasise success in learning (McCoy et al, 2020) who reflect carefully on their teaching methods and how to apply them. As Carroll and Hurry (2018) state all successful programmes to support pupils with SEMH difficulties are underpinned by a positive approach by teachers and school leaders to pupils.

However, to meet the needs of YP with SEMH difficulties, educators express the need for practical changes to the curriculum and assessment as well as funding to enable additional paraprofessional support (Rice, 2021, Gray & Woods, 2022). Paired joint work, or small group work is important for peer learning (Tullis & Goldstone, 2020; Ezeddine et al, 2023) and social competence skill

development (Sutherland et al, 2010). This social skill development links to developmental progress or academic achievement, yet requires resource and paraprofessional support to effectively establish and provide this across the curriculum. As Deci and Ryan (1995) suggest unmotivated pupils are likely to have low self-esteem and most likely to experience negative emotions (David, 2010). Therefore, it is likely that YP with SEHM difficulties may require creative approaches to support their social skill and competence development, which in turn may promote their social inclusion.

## 4.2.8.1 Conclusions to research question 2

Participants discussed several important factors in their transition experiences to secondary school. There were categorised into seven themes:

- the ideal school child and conformity,
- familiarisation,
- moving towards adulthood,
- relationships,
- safety,
- inclusion and
- the role of teachers.

Whilst each YP had differing views about the relative impact of these factors, which inevitably influenced their transitional experiences, these themes were consistent across the data. The YPs experiences are broadly in keeping with literature in relation to transition (Mumford & Birchwood, 2021) and specifically in relation to how SEMH difficulties may impact on school success (Carroll & Hurry, 2018). Findings highlight that where YP are perceived as non-conforming, maladaptive and non-ideal, there is a significant risk to their wellbeing. YP with SEMH difficulties expressed that where the school environment promotes positive relationships, emotional and physical security and independence, supported by targeted interventions which considers YPs holistically drawing on their strengths, then successful transition is more likely.

4.2.3 Findings in relation to research question 3: What are the most important factors associated with successful transition from YP with SEMH difficulties perspectives?

During PAR cycle one, participants examined, acted, and reflected on the consequences of action to develop key ideas which they felt helped them succeed in Year 7. The initial statements were developed collaboratively in relation to YP's experiences and views were shared (see appendix 10 for the first version of recommendations). During PAR cycle 2, these key ideas were collaboratively amended (see appendix 11 for the second version).

4.2.3.1 Findings from action research cycles 1 and 2: What factors help us to be successful in Year 7: our recommendations.

Within PAR cycle one, eleven recommendations were generated within the focus group outlining what YP with SEMH felt helped them to succeed in Year 7 (see appendix 10). These included the importance of relationships to help emotional and physical safety, familiarity with the environment as well as offering inspirational opportunities both within and in extracurricular time.

Within PAR cycle two, a feedback meeting aimed to edit, verify and quality assure the collation of recommendations from the focus group. An additional statement was added which focused on the notion that YP with SEMH felt staff working with them required understanding, skill and qualifications in relation to their needs as well as a positive attitude to support the transition of YP with SEMH difficulties. Amendments to other statements were made as YP expressed that good communication, quick follow up when there were difficulties, and help to understand what changes they could make at school required attention. The amended statements are detailed in Table 7 below (and can be seen in appendix 11) below.

Table 7: "What helps us succeed in Year 7": recommendations made by YP with SEMH difficulties, in PAR cycle two, which support effective transition into secondary school. (Modifications which were added in after the feedback meeting are shown in italics).

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Help us build relationships with friends, teachers, and others in school |
| 2 | Help us to get familiar with the school surroundings and environment |
| 3 | Accept and celebrate our individuality and understand that our reactions may be different to others. *Help us to understand what changes we can make.* |
| 4 | Recognise our effort about our achievement. This motivates us. |
| 5 | Help us feel emotionally and physically safe in, around and travelling to/from school. *This can mean we may need time when we are struggling.* |
| 6 | Help us know the spaces and people who can support us when we are feeling wobbly and *follow up quickly when there are difficulties.* |
| 7 | Help us to have inspiring opportunities and access to extracurricular activities. |
| 8 | Enable and inspire us. Help us feel welcome in lessons, problem solve with us, adapt, help us to do our best and *give us opportunities to help others.* |
| 9 | Know about us and our lives and be interested in where we go and what we do. |
| 10 | Make school welcoming by building links and *having good communication* with our families, community and others who support us. |
| 11 | Help us develop the skills we need for young adulthood. |
| 12. | *Make sure the staff who are supporting us understand and are qualified to support us well. Treat us fairly, keep an open mind and have a respectful attitude towards us.* |

## 4.2.3.2       Discussion of findings

Friendships, settling into school life, getting used to new routines and a growing interest in school and schoolwork (Evangelou et al, 2008) were all aspects noted by the YP as important to their transition success. Building positive relationships with friends (Ashton, 2008), teachers, and others

in school (Sancho and Cline, 2012; Mumford and Birchwood, 2021) helped the YP to feel a sense of belonging and to feel accepted as individuals.  However, relationships with friends can be linked to psychological difficulty at the time of the transition (Hirsch & DuBois, 1992).

The YP commented that feeling both emotionally (Geddes, 2017) as well as physically safe in school was of real importance to increase their capacity to respond to academic learning. The YP reflected on beliefs about the how the environment can support their efforts to achieve their goals, by supporting the development of their skills for young adulthood (Wentzel, 1999). As Mumford & Birchwood (2021) discuss, changes to the social and physical environment that transition affords are significant, and support for the growth of friendships, self-esteem and independence with the transition process (Evangelou et al, 2008) was emphasised by the participants. Furthermore, having goals to behave in socially appropriate ways have been related to increased socially appropriate behaviour (Wentzel, 1991).

Inspiration as a motivating factor in transition was significant for the YP. They expressed that social motivational processes, such as appreciation or new opportunities, helped them to understand what changes might help them such as learning how to establish relationships.  Concurrently, YP with SEMH difficulties expressed that academic motivational processes (which recognise effort, inspire, and help with problem solving) also underpinned successful transition (Wentzel, 1999). The YP highlighted that they wanted to be inspired and to experience new and extracurricular activity. As relations between social and academic goal pursuit are described as reciprocal and hierarchical in nature (Wentzel, 1999), this reflects YP beliefs about how they might achieve transitional and subsequently academic success.

Bagnall et al (2022) highlighted navigating secondary school transition is already stressful, especially for those with SEN. Pre as well as post transition support to enable familiarity was important to all the participants who felt that this significantly aided their transition into secondary school.  Ashton (2008) highlighted YPs anxiety around getting lost or navigating a new and large physical environment. The YP in this research suggested that careful planning to help familiarisation with their new surroundings aided their success.  With an increased focused on growing up (Ashton, 2008) and being treated as a young person heading towards young adulthood, this offered successes.

The YP involved were from a population who are often characterised as oppositional in interactions (Nind et al, 2012). They wisely articulated that at times they might respond differently to their peers and acknowledged that having safe people and spaces to go to supports their successful educational transition. The relational support the participants discussed both pre and post transition was key to their adjustment over the transition period (Bagnall et al, 2022). This required teachers to know about them as individuals and be interested in where they go and what they do, both inside and outside of school. This enhanced communication enabled the YP to feel welcome and supported (Bagnall et al, 2022). These YP saw time, respect and understanding as centrally important to seeing them as people (Nind et al, 2012), who have relationships outside of school which impact on their lives, rather than solely as students for short amounts of time in a classroom.

The additional recommendation identified by the YP focused on the need for qualified staff who show understanding, empathetic approaches and treat them fairly pre, during and post transition. Universal as well targeted provision for YP with SEMH during transition was discussed by participants as supporting their success. As Carroll & Hurry (2018) found, a positive approach adopted by teachers and leaders to YP with SEMH underpinned all intervention programmes supporting YP with SEMH success. Furthermore, YP expressed that they required professional and committed professionals who offer practical and functional environments for success (Simpson et al, 2011), who have a depth of understanding of their needs (Carroll & Hurry, 2018).  As Hickinbotham and Soni (2021) indicate, school staff would benefit from a greater awareness of the implications of language, such as formal and informal labels related to SEMH. YP with SEMH difficulties are twice as likely to be taught by unqualified teachers or supply teachers than their peers in a mainstream setting (Thorley, 2016). Therefore, the opportunity to develop staff awareness to reframe potential negative perceptions and utilise strengths-based approaches would be beneficial (Hickinbotham & Soni, 2021). The YP noted that staff who keep an open mind and have a respectful attitude towards them, despite previous challenges, were highly significant to their success in year 7. As Breeman et al (2015) and Mowat (2010) found YP with SEMH made better social and academic adjustment where both positive teacher-child and peer interactions are in place. Whilst the significance of positive relationships had been identified initially, within the feedback meeting the YP felt this needed to be more explicitly identified and led to the additional recommendation for successful transition.

The YP further highlighted the importance of good communication between YP, teachers, pastoral staff, senior leadership, and their families for effective transition. As Stanbridge & Mercer (2019) assert there are well-documented situational factors which correspond to risks of exclusion and mental health difficulties. However, in education policy, factors relating to exclusion and mental health needs are often attributed to dispositional, within-person factors (Stanbridge & Mercer, 2019). The YP within this research recognise and identify this articulating that good communication and relationships between those involved within their lives might enable this to be better understood. YP also articulated that they may need extra time when they are struggling to feel safe yet also timely follow up with them and others when there are difficulties. This helped the YP to move on from a difficult event, situation, or feelings in a timely, supported way rather experiencing increased anxiety, frustration, and tension until there was a resolution.

### 4.2.3.3 Conclusion to RQ2

Each of the 12 statements created by the participants interact and are interconnected with each other, directly impacting on how the YP experienced transition. Each of these statements represent an important aspect that collectively the YP identified as facilitative in their successful transition to secondary school. There are specific statements, which the YP involved gave more focus or 'voice' to which may be more significant for YP with SEMH difficulties during their transition to school.

As the participants who are from a population who are often characterised as oppositional in interactions (Nind et al, 2012), they wisely expressed that they might respond differently to their peers at times. Therefore, the relational support the participants discussed as highly important to both pre and post transition (Bagnall et al, 2022) was significantly more than perhaps other YP without SEMH difficulties may require. They expressed that for teachers and paraprofessional support to know about them as individuals was key, for example, knowing where they go and what they do, both inside and outside of school. This enhanced communication was significant for the YP to feel welcome and supported (Bagnall et al, 2022). This ties into the expressed need by YP with SEMH difficulties to feel accepted as individuals and for those working with them in school to work respectfully with them, keep an open mind and help them understand what and how changes can be made to support their success.

## 4.3 Conclusions, implications, and reflections

### 4.3.1 Key Conclusions

This research gathered YPs views in relation to secondary school educational transition in an authentic way utilising Lundy's (2007) model of participation. It demonstrated the positive role that involving YP with SEMH difficulties can play in identifying solutions to the challenges they face and how using participatory approaches can enable those often unheard to be heard. Through utilising Lundy's (2007) model within a PAR approach, seven themes were identified in relation to supporting successful transition. Two prevalent themes YP with SEMH difficulties identified which underpins and relates to all aspects of the findings were the narrative of safety as well as an adaptive or ideal school child. The YP articulated how school approaches and systems can make them feel 'bad' or maladapted and therefore unable to be their authentic selves.  Authenticity has been described as socially and psychologically beneficial with positive links made between self-reported authenticity and wellbeing (Robinson et al, 2013). The research offered an opportunity for the YP to authentically reflect on their experiences and to undertake personal growth activity through their involvement, which are significant elements which can improve self-rated authenticity (Brunell et al, 2010). The application of Lundy's model identified considerations for how using this model with this population can increase opportunities for success.

A further outcome of the current research is the development of twelve statements identified collaboratively with YP with SEMH difficulties, which offer a guide to the development and review of pre, during and post transition planning. These statements (see table 11) offer explicit understanding of the key factors in relation to transition for YPs with SEMH difficulties. Given the high rates of exclusion of YP with SEMH difficulties, it becomes even more important that schools can be proactive, planned and work more collaboratively with students and their families to increase YP with SEMH early engagement academically and socially within the transition process. The use of sensitive questioning and carefully considered participatory techniques YP with SEMH can

effectively report and reflect on their transition experiences enabling them to be agents of change within their own environments.

As CYP with SEMH difficulties can provide particular challenges for students, families and teachers (McCoy et al, 2020), this research hopes to add to research which enables these students to feel heard and understood, and as solution creators in their own right. Without this, there is a significant risk that the transition process and subsequent outcomes for these pupils could be negative, resulting in YP feeing they do not belong and unable to feel successful within a learning environment. As this and other research (Dolton et al, 2020) demonstrates, personal views and reflections on experiences have an important part to add to the evidence base.

## 4.3.2   Strengths and Limitations of the research

A strength of this research was the empowering participatory approach which offered a population who are underrepresented within research the opportunity to be heard. For young people to be at the heart of the initial development of a tool which could impact on the transition experiences of other young people with SEHM difficulties gives voice to their experiences and demonstrates how learners with SEMH difficulties can impact positively on the wider school environment, when given the space, time and opportunity for involvement. This research demonstrates how adaptations can be made to the research process, including creative approaches to data collection to encourage participation (Fleming et al, 2023). The participants who took part experienced a positive opportunity in school for their views to be heard, which was evidenced by their continued, and ongoing optional involvement and desire to be involved in presenting findings to senior leadership in the future. The research also developed a tangible outcome, which could form a basis for further work around transition. For example, the statements co-constructed through this research could be utilised as a basis for the development of a quality assurance tool, to aid the successful transition of YP with SEMH difficulties within schools. Additionally, the statements could form the basis of a transitional tool for schools to utilise to monitor and develop their transition work, in relation to YP with SEMH difficulties, and more universally. In utilising Lundy's model, it identifies how this framework can be utilised in an educational setting to work collaboratively with those who voices are most unheard and who are most underrepresented. This could include newly qualified teachers, or parents within the school community, and further action research cycles could take place to bring these experiences and views together in relation to transition.

However, the use of a participatory approach meant that a number of practical and logistical issues were experienced due to competing demands of the SENCo, myself and the YP which interfered with recruitment and impacted upon the process to ensure inclusivity of all learning approaches and needs of the YP (Groger et al, 1999; Templeton et al, 2023). Factors such as cultural expectations may have shaped the parents' and YPs consent for their participation in the research. However, the SENCo and myself worked collaboratively to develop a process which aimed to support involvement of all potential participants (Chaumba & Locklear, 2021). Whilst the participants may not have represented the entire spectrum of population of YP with SEMH difficulties within schools, voluntary participation encouraged investment, ownership and positive attitudes of the YP and supported a collaborative way of working (Oja & Smulyan, 1989). Potential change in the participants sense of belonging and attitude to school as a result of feeling they have been identified as successfully transitioned into secondary school could be considered a further strength of the research.

As with all participatory research, there is continuum (Aldridge, 2007) and this research cannot be said to be wholly participant led. I identified the research topic which resulted in me formulating the research questions. Therefore, there is the risk that these questions may not have been reflective of real sentiments and problems of the participants (Kemmis, 2010). However, it was important to me that the research, with its emancipatory aims, was as inclusive as possible, with the voices of the YP being prioritised at all stages. Furthermore, some issues were beyond the scope of the analysis reported. This includes the impact of socio-economic factors, family dynamics, as well as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the YPs educational transition experience. Further consideration of the complex interplay of factors, as outlined by Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006), ecological systems theory may require further focus.

Whilst the 12 statements identified by the YP with SEMH difficulties provide new understanding of the factors that promote successful transition, the nature of PAR means that the findings are applicable to the context in which the project was carried out. This means that wider generalisation is not possible. However, there is practical wisdom gained from the research and therefore there is some transferability in relation to inclusive practice for similar settings who may wish to further consider transition and promoting success for YP with SEMH difficulties. This research also offers further insight into the lived experiences of YP with SEMH during transition which could be utilised to influence pupil outcomes in a similar context in a positive way.

The intended next step of the research is to present the recommendations and factors which YP with SEMH difficulties expressed as highly significant to their transition to senior leaders. Although this action for PAR cycle 2 was discussed with participants, this in ongoing and will be carried out over the coming terms, where further planning to influence change can take place.

Finally, the level of subjectivity within this research can be considered as a limitation. Researcher bias within methods such as photo voice, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, thematic analysis and feedback workshops might have been at play. However, the interpretivist view which underpins this research suggests that all research is impacted by personal interpretation (Gray, 2021). Therefore, explicit acknowledgement of my insights as a researcher, and my role in shaping the findings, becomes a strength of this research (Thomas, 2013).

### 4.3.3  Implications for Educational Psychology practice

Rather than offering generalisable conclusions, this research has resulted in a number of reflections which offer 'practical wisdoms' (Broadhead & Gregson, 2018) for how transition may be considered for YP with SEMH needs. It offers insight into the benefits of taking a participatory approach with students with SEMH difficulties to support inclusive practice and promote success in school.

Firstly, this research offers considerations for individual practice:

- Consideration of how space, voice, influence, and audience can support the empowerment of YP with SEMH difficulties in sharing their perspectives offers a practical model which can help YP to impart practical solutions to challenges they face. YP value the opportunity to express their feelings and ideas especially where they have not had other opportunities to share openly about past experiences (Fleming et al, 2023). Practitioners can apply the questions formulated by Lundy (2007) within case work with YP with SEMH difficulties.
- This research indicates that YPs level of knowledge, willingness to participate and ability to communicate their experiences should not be taken for granted. Consideration of methods, approaches, timings, and utilising existing positive relationships to best support this population's involvement is required so YP feel able to express themselves, and be listened to (Roffey, 2012).
- Practitioners may need to reflect on the power their position holds, their levels of knowledge and the common view that they are experts.  EPs may be well placed to support and develop

local knowledge and experience, especially given the close links with SEN departments as well as the services that support more widely.

- Practitioners could reflect on the degree to which YP with SEMH difficulties are involved in transition planning and how practice could be more child and family centred to support successful transition. The statutory guidance (DfE/DoH, 2015) states, inclusion and empowerment of CYP with SEN is key. Therefore, EPs have the potential to play a key role in facilitating discussions which may result in increased participation of individual involvement of CYP with SEMH difficulties in their pre, during and post transition work.

Secondly, this research offers consideration for schoolwork:

- The transition statements/ recommendations collaboratively created within this research outlines the factors impacting on successful transition. These could be utilised by EPs as a tool to promote discussion around how transition is experienced by each intake of Year 7 students with SEMH difficulties. SENCOs may be well-placed to take a role reframing within-child or dispositional framing language within SLT contexts (Stanbridge & Mercer, 2019) leading to improved situational understanding of behaviour resulting in the identification of helpful, situational adaptations. This may offer a helpful and inclusive contrast to the 'maladaptive' narrative experienced by YP with SEMH difficulties often found championed directly and indirectly through government-led guidance and performativity pressures (Stanbridge & Mercer, 2019).

- Consideration of the twelve identified themes impacting on the transition of CYP with SEMH difficulties could be utilised and considered by EPs with SENCos and YP when considering transition planning. In doing so the practical capacity of a school, that is its organisational systems and culture, to enable and accommodate the CYPs participation could be considered (Templeton et al, 2023). Within secondary schools, this could be discussed within planning meetings and shared with staff responsible for overseeing transition planning as a starting point.

- The development of CPD for school staff, which directly involves the experiences and views of YP with SEMH difficulties and considers the psychological and situational factors relating to behaviours that cause concern in schools could be developed. A focus on the importance of careful consideration of the language used to describe behaviour would be pertinent. As Stanbridge & Mercer (2019) assert this would need to be very carefully and sensitively

delivered with a clear context, here in relation to transition success, in order to ensure that messages around avoiding particular language are not received as 'liberal political correctness'.

- As the emphasis on the well-being of CYP increases and schools take on more responsibility for supporting CYP with mental health difficulties more research is required (Dolton et al, 2020). Future research could examine the effectiveness of the utility of Lundy's (2007) model alongside self-determination to consider how YP with SEMH difficulties could be increasingly seen as social actors, and agents of change within their school environment.

- Whilst school staff have a busy curriculum and staff workload is high (DfE, 2018), EPs could explore the longer-term benefits of the involvement of learners which can increase resource and promote motivation levels in learners.

Finally, this research offers consideration for family, community and/ or partnership-based work:

- As CYP highlighted the importance of interconnection between home, school and their local community to their transition success, EPs could seek out opportunities to work in partnership within the local community. As EPs often work closely with families further activity could be identified with families to support transition success, based within the community, over the summer period. This could identify protective community factors for CYP with SEMH difficulties, such as relationships which could support effective transition. In identifying alternative identities outside of school environment, a positive narrative could be built around YP with SEMH difficulties who may struggle and be more likely to experience social exclusion. This partnership work with families in community settings as well as community groups may further identify additional resources to support CYP with SEMH needs in a holistic way during transition.

- Whilst CYP are increasingly taking part in international events and meetings (Templeton et al, 2023), Lundy's (2007) model is not currently used across other continents. However, it has much to add to the youth participatory work that is taking place within schools and communities internationally. There is the opportunity to consider how further PAR could be carried out with secondary schools, utilising Lundy's (2007) model to further identify how transition is experienced internationally for YP with SEMH difficulties.

- Whilst this research has been restricted to processes that support the participation of YP with SEMH difficulties in school transition development, it has important learning for

professionals working in the wider contexts of youth work, community work and within Children's services.

### 4.3.4  Final reflection and key points.

This research demonstrates that CYP with SEMH difficulties can relate their personal experiences and perspectives effectively and accurately, in this case in relation to transition, and that their voices should be included in future research (Dalton et al). Templeton et al (2023) express that transformative research offers an opportunity for researchers to bring about change and for researchers and YP to reflect. This research encourages change through the participatory approach taken through self-reflection and promotion of critical thinking of the YPs social environment. Despite the limitations of the current climate, it is argued that practitioners working with YP, especially those who are less heard, apply and utilise the four aspects of Lundy's (2007) model to help them to understand how YP with SEMH difficulties can provide practical wisdom and improve educational practice, both in relation to transition and more widely. At the heart of education is the belief that every child or young person has abilities that can be developed, uncovered, unearthed, and enhanced. Teaching enables individuals to think intensively and critically yet given increased pressures on school staff (Rice, 2021) there is the danger that a population of YP feel underestimated or undervalued. This could lead increasingly to YP feeling and being excluded both socially and educationally. As CYP are more likely to be positive about the value of their contribution than adults (Templeton et al, 2023), there is a need for those responsible for supporting YP in preparing for adulthood to consider how structures or cultures can support YP to be agents of change so that any YP with SEMH difficulties can honestly express themselves:

*"If you're new to this school, [..] and you're struggling, because it's a big difference coming from year six to year seven, because there's more responsibilities, you could figure out, with a teacher, a way to [..] feel more comfortable"*. Red.

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# Appendices

**Appendix 1    Senior staff letter and consent form**

Dear Headteacher/SENDCo,

My name is Siobhan Aspley and I am a trainee educational psychologist in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of my doctoral studies at the University of Birmingham. I am currently on placement at xxxxx Council. During my time with the service, I am hoping to complete a research project on the experience of Year 7 pupils who have an identified SEN need, in relation to their social, emotional and mental health (who do not have an EHCP in place). A photo voice process, interview and focus group will be conducted with these pupils to find out about what factors they believe facilitate and hinder successful transition into secondary school.

Your school has been identified as one which has a high proportion of pupils with SEN needs in relation to their social, emotional and mental health needs.  I am seeking your consent as the researcher would need to visit the school to work with the pupils and would be asking questions about the pupil's school experiences. I am seeking pupils who meet the following criteria:

- Be in Year 7
- Are identified, prior to attending secondary school, as requiring special educational needs support for their social, emotional and mental health needs
- Are known to the pastoral team and/or SENCO
- Students that are aware of their SEN need
- Have been successful in their transition into secondary school
- Do not have an EHCP

The pupil and their family would receive an information sheet and consent form. Data about the pupil's attendance would be required and I will need to arrange suitable date(s) to meet individually with each participant. A photo tour, where the pupils take images of important spaces/

places/objects to them in terms of transition would take place over a week period and interviews will aim to be an hour. The interviews with pupils will be held during the school day and would mean the pupil missing some lesson time. A follow up focus group would take place during the school day and will aim also to be an hour. The photo tour, interview questions and focus group will explore what factors the pupil feels facilitates and hinders successful transition into secondary school. If a pupil wishes to no longer partake in the research, they can withdraw their data up to one week after the date of the focus group by speaking to me in person or by using my contact details below.

This research project will form part of my doctoral thesis and will be written up as a formal report. It is important to mention that all participants and school names will be anonymised, and confidentiality maintained.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. If you have any questions or would like further information, please feel free to contact me at XXXXXXXX

My academic supervisor is Anita Soni and can be contacted at ████████████ ■

Yours faithfully,
Siobhan Aspley
Trainee Educational Psychologist
University of Birmingham

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**Senior staff consent form**

Head teacher name (please print):_____

School (please print):_____

**Please sign below to give consent for pupils, family and staff to be contacted and be able to participate in the project.**

I have read the attached letter and I give consent for pupils, staff and family to be involved.

Signed (Title of senior staff signature) _____

**Please sign below to give consent for the researcher to undertake information gathering in your school.**

I acknowledge that the researcher will need to work with the pupils, staff and family in school and consent to them doing this.

Signed (Title of senior staff signature) _____

Date: _____

Dear Parent,

My name is Siobhan Aspley, and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of my doctoral studies at the University of Birmingham. I am on placement at XXX Educational Psychology Service.

I am getting in contact with you as your child has been suggested as a suitable participant for my project. I am seeking your consent for your child to be involved in the project. I am hoping to conduct a research project about the experiences of children who have successfully made the transition into secondary school who have support for their social, emotional, and mental health. I am particularly interested in exploring the supporting and hindering factors to their achievement of successfully making the transition from primary to secondary school.

This project will involve me interviewing your child and for them to take part in a focus group with other students. It will also involve them taking pictures in school of places, spaces and things that helped them transition into secondary school. The interview and focus group will be roughly an hour each and will take place in school. The photo voice activity will take place during the school day. This means that your child will miss some lesson time.

Some things you need to know about the research project:

- The images taken as part of the photo tour will be taken on school digital devices and the images downloaded to a password protected space. The interviews and focus group will be audio-recorded. Only I, Siobhan, will listen to the recording, unless due to time constraints a transcription service is used.
- The photographs will be used within the interview to support conversation with your child about their experiences of transition in school and why these are important to them. In agreement with your child some may be used as part of a focus group with other participants as a prompt for discussion.

- Anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained. This means:
  - Your child's name will be changed in the formal report. This means that only I, Siobhan, will know who said what. Transcription services would be given a pseudonym name to maintain anonymity.
  - Locations, school names and other participants' names will also be changed.
  - The recorded interviews, focus groups and images from the photo tour will be kept in a password-protected and secure format.
- I will have to share information with the school's designated safeguarding lead(s) if a safeguarding concern arises.
- If you or your child decides that they no longer wish to take part then you can withdraw their data up to one week after the date of the focus group. This can be done by using my contact details below.

If you consent to your child taking part in the research project please sign the forms attached.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. If you have any questions or would like to talk through the information provided please feel free to contact me at ████████████████

My supervisor is Anita Soni and can be contacted at ████████████

Yours faithfully,

Siobhan Aspley

Trainee Educational Psychologist

University of Birmingham

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**Parental consent form for child**

Parent name (please print):_____

Child's name (please print):_____

**Please sign below to give consent for your child to participate in the project.**

I have read the attached information and give consent for my child to be involved.

Signed (parent signature) _____

**Please sign below to give consent for voice recording to be used with your child.**

I know that voice recording will be used with my child and that the recordings are confidential and for the use of the researcher only. I give my consent for voice recording to be used.

Signed (parent signature) _____

Finally, if researcher needs to contact you regarding your child please provide a telephone number that you can be contacted on

Phone number: _____

I consent to being contacted by the researcher should they need to speak to me regarding my child.

Signed (parent signature) _____

Date: _____

**Appendix 3    Information for pupils and consent form**



Hi, my name is Siobhan and I am a trainee educational psychologist. I work with children and young people to find out about their school experience and support them in school.
I am doing some research exploring young people's educational experience and would like you to take part.

## Why am I contacting you?

I am contacting you because I am interested in young people who at times can struggle with their emotions or feelings in school and who have been successful in making the move from primary to secondary school.
I would love to hear about your school experience and what factors you think help and don't help you to move from primary to secondary school.

## What would happen?

1. I would ask you to complete a few activities/have a think before we meet; one would be to take pictures of spaces, places and anything you think has helped you settle well into school. This will be taken on school digital devices.
2. We would meet to have a conversation about your school experience (more information of the back page) and also work with a small group of other students to develop some key ideas of what you feel makes transition easier for pupils in your school.

**Location:** we would meet in your school. The interview and focus group will be in school time so you will miss some lessons if you chose to take part.
**Duration:** the interview should take 1 hour.

## What will happen with the conversation details and images?

The conversation will be recorded and I will listen and type up the conversation afterwards. The images will be looked at and written about afterwards. I will not use your real name so no one will know who you are apart from me. You can choose the name you would like me to use. I might use a service who writes out text who will hear the recording if I run out of time. They will not know your name, I will have to tell relevant adults if I think you are in danger or not safe.

## What to do if I want to take part?

If you decide you would like to take part, please complete the consent form and ask your parent/carer to send it back to me or (insert name of staff member in school).

## What would the conversation be about?

I am interested to find out about:

♦ What individual, school, home, community and other factors help and support you settle into secondary school?

♦ What individual, school, home, community and other factors don't help and support you to settle into secondary school?

♦ How have these together created the experience you have had in moving to and settling into secondary school?

### What are individual factors?

Individual factors are things about you to which impact upon your transition into secondary school. For example, your view of the new school, pressures, goals, motivations, aspirations, significant life events.

### What are school factors?

School factors are those within your school which you believe impact upon your transition into secondary school. For example, relationships in school with teachers and friends, feeling like you belong, lessons enjoyment.

### What are home factors?

Home factors are those factors within your home which you believe impact upon your transition into secondary school. For example, your family expectations for you, family input about the move to secondary school, e.g., access to a laptop and books, home environment.

### What are community factors?

Community factors are those factors within your community which you believe impact upon your transition into secondary school. For example, friends, youth or sports or other clubs, religion, feelings of safety in local community.

### Other factors?

Anything else that you think has impacted your transition into secondary school. For example, any laws or policies, social media, impact from covid-19.

Please use the activity sheet attached to write any notes down about factors which you believe facilitate and hinder your academic achievement.

**Pupil consent form**

My name: _____     Date: _____

My school: _____

Please circle your answers:

| | |
|---|---|
| I want to take part in the project | Yes    No |
| I have read and understood the information sheet and know I can withdraw from the research up to 7 days after the focus group has taken place | Yes    No |
| I know that I will be audio recorded and this will be heard by Siobhan only | Yes    No |
| I understand that if Siobhan becomes concerned about me, she will need to let another adult know | Yes    No |
| I understand that the views I share with Siobhan when discussing the images I've taken, as well as in the interview and focus group will not be shared with my family and teachers unless Siobhan is concerned about me | Yes    No |
| I understand that my views will be written in a report but my name will be changed so only Siobhan will know they are my views | Yes    No |
| I know that I can withdraw from the project by contacting Siobhan | Yes    No |
| I am happy for data about my transition into school s, e.g. attendance, academic success to be shared with Siobhan | Yes    No |

# HINDERING FACTORS and EXPERIENCES: WHAT MADE THINGS DIFFICULT

## HOME: Things where I live

## SCHOOL: Things where I learn

## COMMUNITY: Things in my area

## INDIVIDUAL: Things about me

## Any other thing that made a difference

# FACILTATING FACTORS and EXPERIENCES:
## WHAT HELPED ME

### HOME: Things where I live

### SCHOOL: Things where I learn

### COMMUNITY: Things in my area

### INDIVIDUAL: Things about me

**Any other thing that made a difference**

**Appendix 5    Timeline of the data collection process**

| Date | Activity |
| --- | --- |
| July 2022 | Photo walk – collection of photo data |
| July 2022 | Semi structured interview 1 |
| July 2022 | Semi structured interview 2 |
| September 2022 | Semi structured interview 3 |
| September 2022 | Focus group with participants |
| February 2023 | Feedback workshop with participants |

| Issue / topic | Issue / topic | Possible question | Possible follow-up questions [Prompt] | Probes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Completion of rapport building activities and discussion of the pre-task activity. | | How did you find the activity?<br><br>Did you enjoy it?<br><br>Which of the photographs is most important for you in terms of transition into secondary school? | Can you tell me a bit more about that?<br><br>Why is that? | |
| Personal information about the participant/to get the participant to think across their Year 6 and Year 7 experience | | Thinking of your experiences of primary and secondary school, overall, how has your school experience been?<br><br>On the timeline, what have been the most significant experiences for you? | Can you tell me a bit more about that? | |
| | | Have you known you were settling into school well? | Can you tell me a bit more about that? | |
| Facilitating factors and experiences of transition | Individual factors | Thinking across Year 6 and Year 7, what, if any, individual factors do you believe have facilitated/supported/helped your transition into this school? | How has that factor supported your transition?<br><br>Can you tell me a bit more about that? | Can you give an example? |
| | School factors | Thinking across Year 6 and Year 7, what, if any, school factors do you believe have facilitated/supported/helped your transition into this school? | How has that factor supported your transition? | Can you give an example? |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Can you tell me a bit more about that? | |
| | Home factors | Thinking across Year 6 and Year 7 what, if any, home factors do you believe have facilitated/supported/helped your transition into this school? | How has that factor supported your transition?<br><br>Can you tell me a bit more about that? | Can you give an example? |
| | Community factors | Thinking across Year 6 and Year 7, what, if any, community factors do you believe have facilitated/supported/helped your transition into this school? | How has that factor supported your transition?<br><br>Can you tell me a bit more about that? | Can you give an example? |
| | Other factors | Thinking across Year 6 and Year 7, what, if any, other factors do you believe have facilitated/supported/helped your transition into this school? | How has that factor supported your transition?<br><br>Can you tell me a bit more about that? | Can you give an example? |
| Hindering factors and experiences of transition | Individual factors | Thinking across Year 6 and Year 7 what, if any, individual factors do you believe have hindered/been a barrier/negatively impacted your transition into this school? | How has that factor hindered your transition?<br><br>Can you tell me a bit more about that? | Can you give an example? |

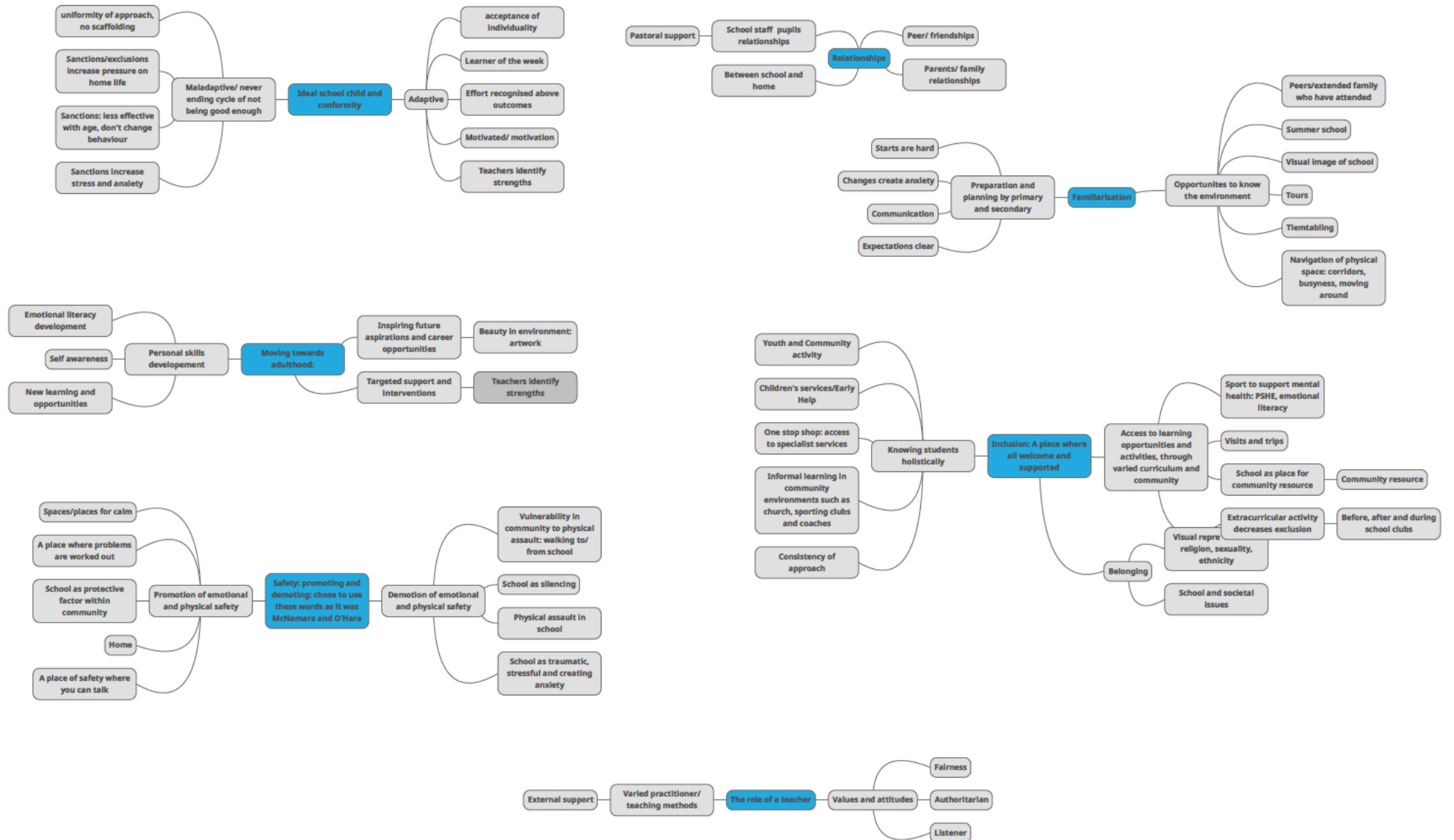| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| School factors | Thinking across Year 6 and Year 7 what, if any, school factors do you believe have hindered/been a barrier/not helped your transition into this school | How has that factor hindered your transition?<br><br>Can you tell me a bit more about that? | Can you give an example? |
| Home factors | Thinking across Year 6 and Year 7, what, if any, home factors do you believe have hindered/been a barrier/not helped your transition into this school? | How has that factor hindered your transition?<br><br>Can you tell me a bit more about that? | Can you give an example? |
| Community factors | Thinking across Year 6 to Year 7 what, if any, community factors do you believe have hindered/been a barrier/not helped your transition into this school? | How has that factor hindered your transition?<br><br>Can you tell me a bit more about that? | Can you give an example? |
| Other factors | Thinking across Year 6 to Year 7, what, if any, other factors do you believe have hindered/been a barrier/not helped your academic achievement that you haven't already mentioned? | How has that factor hindered your transition?<br><br>Can you tell me a bit more about that? | Can you give an example? |

**Appendix 7     Focus group schedule for participants**

| Time | Activity | Resources required |
|------|----------|--------------------|
| 0-5 | Welcome, introductory game and snack. | Snacks<br><br>Drinks<br><br>Confidential space in school |
| 5-10 | Group agreement development – to consider confidentiality, sharing personal information and agreed way of working. | Post it notes.<br><br>Pens |
| 10-55 | Presentation of photographs in themes to group. Prompt with the following:<br><br>What are your thoughts of these photos?<br>Why were they important for you?<br>How might these photos be better grouped?<br>What is it important to note about these in relation to transition? What helped or hindered your transition which is shown in the images you took? | Laptop<br>Audio recording<br>Presentation of photos in themes |
| 55-70 | What next? Discuss and give brief overview of potential next steps.<br>Arrange details for feedback session: what are the YPs availability.<br><br>Thank you and any other questions | Calendar to arrange next session |

📄 Transcribed_MP_Final                                    💡 Code  💬 Annotations   ☐ Edit  ↗

Speaker 2: and then I'm fine afterwards.

Speaker 1: So what other things about you that have helped you do you think setting into school well?

Speaker 2: Er.. because my friends at school are so close.. from primary school .. er.. my .. all.. my friends came to this school.

Speaker 1: Yeah..

Speaker 2: So, it is nice to know that I had friends I already knew here just in case I couldn't make any friends. That's one of the things that helped me a lot.

Speaker 1: So your ability to make friends you think is a quality that's …

Speaker 2: I…I can make friends easy..

Speaker 1: Yeah..

Speaker 2: I just go up to them and say hi and we're talking and the next minute we're best mates

Speaker 1: Yeah..

Speaker 2: and the day after we know each other speaking to we know each other when..

Coding Density

Home life affects attitude at school
Friendships help with reassurance
Children are victims of physcial assault by their peers
Children feel vulnerable in their community
Disorganised home makes school harder
Disorganised homes results in disorganisation at school and sanctions
Moving house is chaotic and means I get into trouble for forgetting things
Individual support with emotions
Parent supports school approach
I can't concentrate on school when I am moving house
Sanctions do not change behaviour
Sanctions increase stress and pressure
Anxiety changes things
Teachers are insensitive about sexuality
School can be a place of physcial and emotional unsafety
Honesty is positively rewarded
Adults can help make things better

## Appendix 9      Mind map presenting categorisation of themes.

**Appendix 10   Overview of themes from focus group: PAR cycle 1**

## Transition

### What helps us succeed in Year 7

- Help us to build relationships with friends, teachers and others in school.
- Help us to get familiar with the school surroundings and environment.
- Accept and celebrate our individuality and understand that our reactions may be different to others.
- Recognise our effort above our achievement. This motivates us.
- Help us feel emotionally and physically safe in, around and travelling to/from school.

2

### What helps us succeed in Year 7

- Help us know the spaces and people who can support us when we are feeling wobbly.
- Help us to have inspiring opportunities and access to extracurricular activities.
- Enable and inspire us. Help us feel welcome in lessons, problem solve with us, adapt and help us to do our best.
- Know about us and our lives, and be interested in where we go and what we do.
- Make school welcoming by building links with our families, community and others who can support us.
- Help us develop the skills we will need for young adulthood.

**Appendix 11   Amended overview of themes from the feedback meeting: PAR cycle 2**



# Transition

## What helps us succeed in Year 7

Help us to build relationships with friends, teachers and others in school.

Help us to get familiar with the school surroundings and environment.

Accept and celebrate our individuality and understand that our reactions may be different to others. Help us to understand what changes we can make.

Recognise our effort above our achievement. This motivates us.

Help us feel emotionally and physically safe in, around and travelling to/from school. This can mean we may need time when we are struggling.

Make sure the staff who are supporting us understand and are qualified to support us well. Treat us fairly, keep an open mind and have a respectful attitude towards us.

2

## What helps us succeed in Year 7

Help us know the spaces and people who can support us when we are feeling wobbly. Follow up quickly when there are difficulties.

Help us to have inspiring opportunities and access to extracurricular activities.

Enable and inspire us. Help us feel welcome in lessons, problem solve with us, adapt, help us to do our best and give us opportunities to help others.

Know about us and our lives, and be interested in where we go and what we do.

Make school welcoming by building links and having good communication with our families, community and others who can support us.

Help us develop the skills we will need for young adulthood.

**Appendix 12**        **Additional quotes from participants to further illustrate identified themes in response to RQ2**

**Theme 1: The ideal school student and conformity**

- **Subtheme: Maladaptive or non-ideal student**

*"If they're in older years [….] they've had detentions a million times before, so no one cares to get excluded … so they will try their best (to get excluded)."* Bob.

*"Teachers are all like […] if you do summat bad [..] what you call it like, an SLT person, so that's for like naughty people.. [..] comes for you […] so you really expect to get yelled at. [..] You know the consequences […] you're going to have detention […] it will result in arguments at home because your parents won't be too happy."* Sam.

- **Subtheme: Adaptive or ideal student**

*"Good behaviour or like, going to book club.. they give you like a token .. […] and you choose a book and you can get a book… your book of choice."* Sam.

*"I think no one's been nominated or like chosen yet (referring to 'learner of the week'). But if I get chosen my mum and dad are gonna go crazy, because I've never like had anything like that before."* Bob.

**Theme 2: Familiarisation**

- **Subtheme: Preparation and planning in pre and post transition.**

*"Some head teachers came in to speak to some people from other schools, but I didn't get that. And I was confused because I wanted to like be introduced to the school because I have had no brothers or sisters or anyone here really, and it's like a brand new start."* Bob.

*"it doesn't matter what school you go to […] you're not going to know what lessons to go to, where to go and you kind of panic on the first couple of days […] If you're late to lessons […] you get lines. Because on the first couple of weeks, you're not going to want lines"* Sam.

*"My, like, teacher in primary school, she over exaggerated 'coz you don't do your homework, you're gonna get a detention.' And I'm like, Miss, what if what if we, like do our homework, but they don't see it, you'll still get a detention? But all you get is a line."* Bob.

*" If you like […] you've never met any of the teachers before, how do you know what they look like? […] Because you're not gonna go around asking every teacher what their name is so like it's a good thing, because then you can go up to them because you will know their face."* Sam.

**Theme 3: Moving towards adulthood**

- **Subtheme:     Personal skills development**

*"Not everyone's gonna like you, they are going to have their opinions. [..] And they're gonna be horrible but you got to try and just ignore them."* Sam.

*"Because you know, everything that's happening at home, [..] it's pressing on you and you're taking that attitude into school. [..] At the start of the year [..] I had attitude with everyone [..] like whenever anyone like came up to me and like, was trying to be my friend I'd tell them to go away."* Sam.

- **Subtheme:     Targeted support and interventions**

*"If I missed the day at school because I was ill, and [..] when they come back [..], we got a load of tests to do and work to catch up on. [..] And then I kind of get like, frustrated with it. And I just want to go home again."* Sam.

*"And then my mom, she was able to ask if they could help me a bit more. [..] Like, when I got there, they did help me a lot more with my work."* Red.

**Theme 4: Relationships**

- **Sub theme: School staff-pupil relationships**

*"Sometimes teachers can really help because if, if you are in year seven and you've got lost, you could ask a teacher or if you're having troubles at home, [..] you could [..] ask your teacher for some more support."* Red.

*"Like if you're in lessons and like the teacher is doing your head in.. and you don't want to speak to them or other students because you'll like blow up at them.. it's somewhere where you can go and speak to them teachers [..] and they can speak to that teacher and see what is going on."* Sam.

- **Sub theme: Friendships**

*"So sometimes, like I'll go on to the phone to my friends, and we will do revision together or we help each other with homework."* Red.

*"My football teams helped [..] I could just talk to them about their school and see how it's what it's like. And we can just [..] say different things about our schools."* Bob.

*"Like people post people getting hurt and then it just made me feel like what if that happens to me? Yeah. [..]I hope it doesn't still."* Bob.

*"You go up to people become friends with them and the next day they don't want to know you. [..] I calculated how many friends I had yesterday, I have a bit more than that.. I know I do.."* Sam.

- **Sub theme: Family relationships**

*"So I just go up to people. I just start a conversation like my dad. [..] My dad, once we walked to the shop, and he said to this person, hi, alright. And I said, why do you always say that to people? And he says, Did I, I can't remember? And then the second he said that, he turns to someone to say, Hi, you alright? I bursted out laughing. It was so funny."* Bob.

*"One time, we invited my friend to come to the beach and me, my mom, my brother and his girlfriend, they .. we all went to the beach. And me my brother and friend we did a race…"* Bob.

*"My mom's helped a lot and my dad, cuz they said High School was good for them. And [..] I was just like, if high school was good for them, then, why wouldn't it be good for me?"* Bob.

- **Sub theme: Relationship between adults at home and at school**

*"I know, two of the teachers in there [..] because Miss B knows my mom [..] and then I just go there and then they ask me how I'm doing."* Bob.

**Theme 5: Safety**

- **Subtheme:  Promotion of psychological safety.**

*"If you need to speak to somebody coz [..] something really bad's going on at home, and you're worried [..] something else is going to happen, you could speak to a teacher. [..] So they don't like force you to talk about how you feel. They just like they would take it steady and let you talk first."* Sam.

*"It shows it's okay to believe what you believe in. And it doesn't matter what race you are. It's like, that doesn't make a difference. And if you was part of the LGBTQ plus community, that's not a bad issue. It means like, you can do what you want to do, and you can believe what you want to believe in." (in discussing visual displays). Sam.*

- **Subtheme: Demotion of psychological safety**

*"People push each other down the stairs. The stairs get crowded really easily so like, when ..it's just really busy, like there's hardly any space to move on the stairs." Bob.*

*"I think in the playground when there's elder years [..] there's a lot of like pushing and shoving… so [..] some people push their friends like as a joke, but they fall into a year seven, and then that person could get hurt." Red.*

*"Because of the bullying problems [..], that's when it all spiralled. And it got worse. [..], it's slowly dying down now." Sam.*

*"In the time between breaks and changing lessons, sometimes people could get injured or they could get lost. Or like even if like, if they see a sibling or a friend from a higher year group [..], and then they lose track of time." Red.*

*"I got beat up... [..] I just went blank, I didn't know what was happening." Sam.*

**Theme 6: Inclusion**

- **Subtheme:  Knowing students holistically: interconnection between home, school, and community.**

*"Following up [..] when something really serious happens to make sure that you feel okay, settled and know it's been dealt with [..]could [..] make you feel you'd settle into year seven more easily." Sam.*

*"There was a lady who, um.. me and my mom would, it was like a video call and then she would ask like, how I was feeling and if I was nervous. And then she would she do like activities with me on the laptop. And then like, it would make me not very nervous anymore."* Red.

*"The House.. [..] they get more in depth with things [..] social workers go there. Yeah, I used to go there for my social worker. And like, they normally do like your tea, coffee, hot chocolate, they give you a couple of biscuits. [..] It's just a nice place to sit and talk."* Sam.

*"I loved the youth weekend [..] because in the Tribal Wars, there was like team leadership. And like the team leaders [..] had to like, just stand in water for like 30 seconds and then go neck high in it for 30 seconds."* Bob.

*"I got two sides of the family [..] because they've split [..] It's difficult, because one's messaged me saying like all the nicest things but that person has been horrible to my parents. [..] I don't know what to do because I'm in the middle of it all."* Sam.

- **Subtheme: Access to opportunities and activities, via curriculum and community learning.**

*"There's a book club [..] they'd give you food. [..] They'd give us like drinks, cookies, cakes, milk. [..] For going to book club they give you like a token [..] and you put a token in there and [..] you choose a book and you can get a book… your book of choice."* Sam.

*"I went to another school yesterday for a cricket game [..] and it's got a nice big field and a nice basketball courts."* Bob.

*"We always get the basketball, and its really fun to do it in break and lunch, its something to do."* Bob.

*"If it's just break and there's nothing to do people can get bored very quick but when there's like ping pong tables and basketball, it gives them activities to do so they're not bored." Red.*

- **Subtheme:  Belonging**

*"Well, in year six, I always thought that high school, it wouldn't really be like the best place for me. [..] When I got two Year 7, I was surprised because I didn't feel nervous at all. [..] It was kind of like I fit in there." Red.*

*"So having a group of friends who you have a laugh with, and yeah, feel like you fit in is important." Bob.*

*"Everyone needs to be like welcomed, [..] like George Floyd, for example, [..] because it was wrong that policemen don't. [..] Everyone should be welcome anyways; racism and sexism shouldn't be a thing." Bob.*

**Theme 7: The role of a teacher**

- **Subtheme: Values and attitudes**

*"So we had a little tour and [..] she got to show us like the music room and where you can play instruments and all the new things you can do. I was excited a lot." Red.*

- **Subtheme: Teaching methods**

*"They can let you off sometimes, they can be lenient, you have to go to a nice teacher, like some teachers can be nice with you." Sam.*