

# Primary-Secondary Transitions: A Systematic Literature Review

This report highlights key findings from a systematic literature review on the primary to secondary transition, undertaken by the University of Dundee. The review aimed to provide insight into the impact of transitions and the factors that support or hinder a successful transition. The document is of particular interest to policy makers and professionals working in education.

## Main Findings

The key findings from the systematic literature are discussed in terms of the research questions.

### Research Question 1: What does the evidence from the UK and other countries suggest about the impact of the primary to secondary transition on educational outcomes and wellbeing?

Most studies report that the transition from primary to secondary school is associated with a **decline in educational attainment**. However, there are important methodological limitations of existing research. Researchers note that it is difficult to disentangle the impact of other factors, such as socio-economic background, which are known to impact on attainment.

There is some evidence that pupils actually adjust, at least in **wellbeing** terms after an initial decline in wellbeing outcomes, relatively quickly to the transition. Nevertheless, the transition can impact negatively on perceived school belongingness.

Due to the research design deployed in most studies, we do not know the long-term impact of the primary-secondary transition, or if these effects are sustained as most studies did not collect data beyond the immediate period of starting secondary school.

## **Research Question 2: What does the research suggest about the experiences of children and young people during their transition from primary to secondary?**

Pupils and parents are primarily concerned with changes in **relationships** during the transition from primary to secondary school.

Several studies have explored peer-related concerns, finding that whilst this is often a primary concern of pupils, the transition can also have a positive effect on opportunities for establishing new friendships. Concerns relating to teacher relationships are also reported by pupils. Whilst pupils may initially respond positively to the opportunities for new relationships with teachers and peers, the effect does not appear to be long lasting.

There is some evidence that a lack of fit between pupils' development stage and the **school environment** may impact on how pupils experience the transition from primary to secondary.

Other studies have reported on **academic concerns** experienced by children. Some have found that pupils experience the changes around curriculum, homework and assessment positive, whilst others find the volume of homework to be problematic.

Most studies suggest that pupils experience a dip in school **engagement and motivation** in secondary schools, however it is not clear whether this is due to the transition itself or other developmental changes.

## **Research Question 3: What are the key factors that make a positive or negative contribution to the primary-secondary transition?**

The review found that there are a number of individual, interpersonal and school level factors that can support or hinder the transition from primary to secondary school. Overall, the key factors which make a positive or negative contribution to the primary to secondary transition are those situated within the pupil's ecological system, such as the pupils themselves, family, teachers, peers, and environmental and school factors.

To date, no research has comprehensively explored all these factors within the same study. It is therefore difficult to determine how and to what extent they support or hinder the primary to secondary transition.

## **Research Question 4: What does the evidence suggest about the differential impact of transition on children facing additional educational barriers such as poverty or additional support needs?**

Overall, there exists little research on the differential impact of transition on children facing additional educational barriers.

However, researchers do suggest that children with additional support needs may experience a more difficult transition. There is also evidence that these pupils, and their families, may benefit from differentiated support during the transition from primary to secondary.

### **Research Question 5: What does international evidence suggest about the characteristics of educational systems that support or hinder the transitional experience?**

Most of the research around the characteristics of educational systems that impact on the transition from primary to secondary school provides inconclusive findings.

Existing literature has explored: age at transition; impact of Independent vs public schools; size of school; the impact of through schools versus schools requiring transition to secondary school; and the effect of one primary school or multiple primary schools feeding into a secondary school.

Regardless of these characteristics, a supportive and safe school environment which involves pupils in the transition process was important for smooth transitions.

### **Methodology**

The review was undertaken in accordance with the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre, 2010) approach to systematic literature reviews.

We searched multiple databases in the Web of Science (WoS) - Science Citation Index Expanded, Social Sciences Citation Index, Arts & Humanities Citation Index; Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC); from the British Education Index (BEI); PsycINFO and Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA). Key journals in the field such as British Educational Research Journal, and the American Educational Research Journal were scanned, and key and eminent researchers in the field were contacted. Each piece of literature was screened against the inclusion criteria developed when scoping the review. EPPI-Centre weight of evidence (WoE) judgments were applied to each of the included studies. After a multiple stage review process, 96 studies were included in this report from the initially identified 4652 studies.

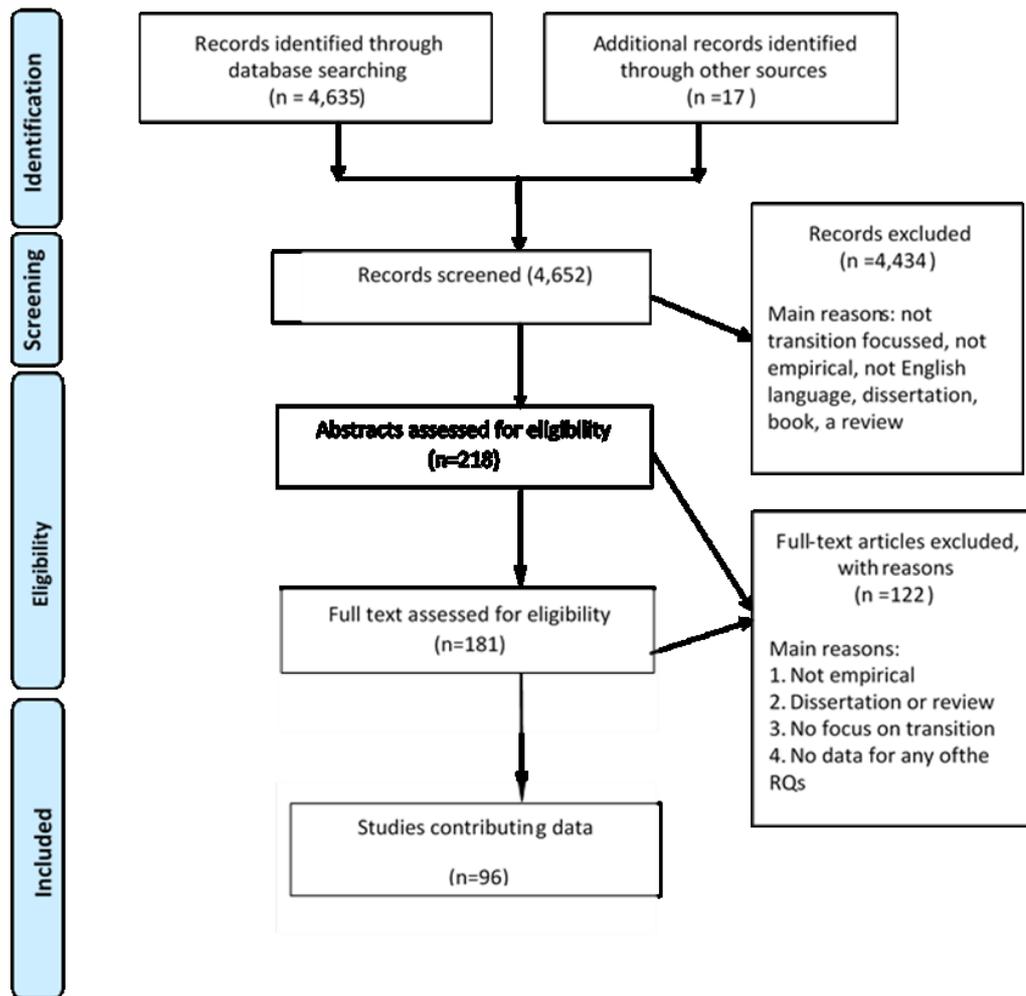


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram of study selection

## Conclusions & Recommendations

There was robust evidence to indicate a decline in pupils' educational outcomes after they moved to secondary school, along with declines in motivation, school engagement and attitudes towards some subjects, and an increase in levels of school absence. Similarly, there was evidence of a negative impact on wellbeing, including poorer social and emotional health, and higher levels of depression and anxiety. However, whether this impact was as a result of the transition to secondary school and what proportion of pupils experienced this decline were less clear. Further, the link between educational and wellbeing outcomes is not clear.

### Recommendations for policy and practice

- Schools transition practices should support the development of a sense of school belonging; this is important for pupils' educational and wellbeing outcomes.
- Both primary and secondary schools should support pupils in developing strong peer networks through planned activities.

- Schools should provide opportunities which enable pupils to form secure attachments with a number of professionals in primary and secondary schools.
- Ongoing dialogue is required between primary and secondary schools, as well as within secondary schools, to ensure that there is continuity of pedagogical approach.
- The school curriculum and teachers' pedagogical approach should encourage problem based learning and learning of emotional and social skills.
- The discourse around primary-secondary transitions at national level should also include a focus on positive outcomes.
- Parents should be involved as equal partners in transition planning and preparation.
- Schools should appropriately tailor their transition processes for pupils with additional support needs and be mindful that transitions can trigger additional support needs for some.

### **Recommendations for future research**

- A longitudinal design, capturing data from P6 to S2 should be used.
- Research questions and data collection instruments should focus on both positive and negative aspects of transition.
- Data should be collected from all stakeholders, and should focus on the transitions of everyone.
- In order to disentangle the impact of different factors on the transition to secondary school, research should explore the transition experience across a range of pupils and various education systems.

### **How to access background or source data**

The full report containing all background detail and analysis can be found online at:  
[www.gov.scot/primary-secondary-transitions-report](http://www.gov.scot/primary-secondary-transitions-report)



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