

Moving Up: Lessons from Researching Transitions During a Global Pandemic

Introduction

Never has conceptualising transition as an ongoing process rather than a one-off event been more important. However, when it comes to researching primary to secondary transitions, we should also recognise that Covid-19 has not only impacted the object of our research – transition, but it has also impacted on us as researchers, and it has shaped the ways in which we conduct research. Taking account of these entanglements is vital for thinking through what can be known about primary to secondary school transitions during Covid-19, and the practical advice that we can provide to schools.

In this blog post, we introduce some initial findings from the first phase of our study, 'Moving Up', led by [Dr Sandra Leaton-Gray](#) and [Dr Jane Perryman](#) at the UCL Institute of Education. This first phase was funded by the UCL Coronavirus Response Fund and Wellcome Trust and involved a rigorous review of the primary to secondary transitions literature in the UK and internationally. Drawing on this literature, we then conducted a snap survey and semi-structured interviews with teachers responsible for transition, and with Year 6 students. The aim of this first phase of research was to produce digestible guidance for [teachers](#) and for [students](#) to help them navigate the initial effects of Covid-19 on primary to secondary transitions.

In this blog we will explore in more detail some of the findings from our surveys and scoping interviews and situate these findings in the context of the wider transitions literature. We will then offer some reflections on our research process. These reflections will explore the ethical entanglements of doing transitions research during Covid-19. We will also reflect on our iterative and collaborative research design.

Fragmented Transitions - Exacerbated Inequalities

Schools have always prepared for primary to secondary transitions in a variety of ways. They have celebrated students' time in primary school with special trips and rituals to mark the ending of Year 6. Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) – for better or for worse – have become an important part of these endings for students and teachers. Transitions activities have also involved looking forward to new beginnings, such as orientation visits to secondary schools. Our survey and interview findings suggest that Covid-19 has created significant fragmentation in these transition processes.

Endings have been curtailed, abruptly in many cases. Students in our study reported disappointment at the loss of these end-of-primary activities, and some specifically mentioned disappointment about the cancellation of SATs. In addition, Year 6 students in this Covid cohort have had to navigate multiple overlapping transitions prior to their move into Year 7, first with the transition to lockdown and the associated changes and disruption to learning, then with the temporary move back to primary school in June and July. Two thirds of teachers surveyed had concerns about how these multiple overlapping transitions impacted on the mental health of their students. Indeed, existing research reminds us of the importance of [prioritising emotional wellbeing during primary to secondary school transition](#). The teachers we spoke to appear very aware of these issues, recounting multiple examples of activities they used with students to support their emotional wellbeing once schools reopened (e.g. daily PSHE, reflective writing exercises and assemblies). Data from our survey and interviews with Year 6 students suggests that they remain overwhelmingly positive in their expectations of secondary school.

Transitions are not only about endings and new beginnings but involve the actual logistics of transfer between primary and secondary schools. When local authorities coordinate these transfers a degree of equity is guaranteed (at least locally) in students' experiences of transition. This central coordination by local authorities, however, appeared to be severely challenged this academic year.

In addition to formal transitions processes, both teachers and students emphasised the importance of more informal processes. One teacher surveyed lamented the loss of teacher 'chats' during transition events, where useful 'insider' information would be shared, and collegiality cultivated. This informal knowledge transfer about students during transition is not without potential issues, but it does provide an important insight into the complexity of school transition processes and the multiple ways in which transitions have been disrupted this year. Informal knowledge sharing within families and parental networks was also highlighted by our study participants. With the disruption to centralised transitions processes, parents, older siblings and wider family contacts (e.g. friends who are teachers) became even more important for [sharing realistic details about transition](#) and destination schools. However, this reliance on informal networks raises important questions about the reproduction and perhaps even exacerbation of existing inequalities.

Schools that had taken a longer-term approach to transition had been able to mitigate the communication difficulties wrought by school closures and the explosion in teacher workloads. Although sporadic, some schools also tried to adapt their transitions processes in creative ways by organising virtual tours and 'meet the teacher' videos, sometimes synchronously, and a couple of schools conducted virtual family meetings. One school provided Year 7 pen-pals while others created asynchronous chat and activity spaces. However, as one student suggested, the over reliance on videos can lead to feeling "burnt out" and the opportunity for students to initiate and then sustain new friendships was limited in almost all these activities.

Equity of digital access to these online transition activities was a significant concern: 77% of teachers surveyed said access to computing equipment was difficult for some or most of their students and 47% reported poor local broadband speed and/or reliability. Of greatest concern, however, is that extra transition support for the most vulnerable students was not delivered. Our data indicates that the most vulnerable pupils (and their families), including those with SEN, did not get the additional support usually available for transition preparation; extra site visits, holiday clubs or one-to-one teacher-pupil meetings simply did not happen in most cases.

Having looked at some of the data from the first phase of our study, we now want to take a moment to reflect on the process of our research and the relationship between this process and our findings.

Towards an Iterative and Collaborative Research Design

Iteration

When our 'Moving Up' project was initially conceived in May 2020 it was designed as a one off. The intention was to conduct a mixed methods study to a) understand how Covid-19 was disrupting primary to secondary transitions and b) make recommendations to schools for how to mitigate these effects. It was ambitious, particularly in terms of the timelines proposed. As a Covid-19 rapid response project it had a great deal of institutional support; funding was released quickly, and research operations processes were significantly expedited. For example, ethics applications that would typically take between 7-21 days could now be approved within just 3 working days. However, despite these expedited processes, the end the school year was upon us by the time we

were ready to launch. Even drawing on our existing networks, we found it extremely difficult to recruit participants: 31 teachers and 14 students completed our survey and we conducted interviews with 7 teachers involved in transitions processes and 5 students moving between Year 6 and Year 7 in the summer of 2020. As our earlier discussion of these findings suggests, we have begun to see some interesting themes in our data. However, we also decided to rethink our research design.

An iterative approach to research is one that evolves with the research and uses early learning to inform later phases of research. It would be disingenuous to suggest that this was our intention all along, however, we have come to believe that an iterative approach to researching primary to secondary transitions brings with it a certain cogency, particularly when transitions are conceptualised as a process rather than an event. We have also found that an iterative approach might be particularly important for researching a phenomenon that is in a state of flux, due to the ever-changing influence of Covid-19.

With the above in mind, we are now in the process of designing subsequent rounds of data collection.

Collaboration

Covid-19 has reminded us what research collaboration can achieve. In less than 9 months, researchers from around the world have developed and begun to disseminate an effective Covid-19 vaccine. A truly unprecedented achievement. While we cannot claim to have collaborated on quite this scale, our Moving Up project has been invigorated by a wave of collaboration and collegiality from within UCL and beyond – including generous support from Prof. Divya Jindal-Snape.

We know from experience that collaboration can be fraught with potential disagreements and misunderstandings, and the competitive publication landscape has made this doubly difficult to navigate. However, opening this project to colleagues within our department has created a source of community and collegiality, something that has been particularly difficult to maintain while we are all working so remotely. Inviting colleagues to be a part of this project has particularly benefited early career researchers, who have gained vital research experience and opportunities for networking with more senior colleagues.

Thinking through this iterative and collaborative approach to our research project has also prompted questions about ethical research practice about transitions during this global pandemic.

The Importance of Cultivating Ethical Sensibility

Ethics should be at the forefront of our thinking about research on school transitions during the Covid-19 pandemic. Our research team have been grappling with the limitations of institutional research ethics and its emphasis on ethics as an *a priori* research process - as a hoop to jump before research can begin - when what counts as ethical research practice is in a constant state of flux.

Borrowing from the work of Emmanuel Levinas on 'Ethics and Infinity', we have been interested in cultivating an ethical sensibility in our research on primary to secondary school transitions. Ethical sensibility is the idea that ethics does not pre-exist an encounter between researcher and research but unfolds in the encounter. It subsequently foregrounds the responsibility we have for others and recognises that this responsibility may shift and take different forms as we move within and

between contexts. Applying an ethical sensibility to researching the impact of Covid-19 on school transitions means appreciating and responding to ethical dilemmas as they arise in the planning, researching, writing and dissemination of our research. It means being aware of newly emerging circumstances faced by schools and our participants, the changing ethical guidelines provided by universities and research funders and attending to the cumulative impacts of Covid-19 on schools, our participants and on ourselves.

Conclusion

Not only are we learning about the impact of Covid-19 on primary to secondary transitions, but we are also learning about how to conduct research on transitions during a pandemic. In this blog we have tried to unpick these entanglements. We have explored some emerging themes from the first phase of our research. We have also invited you into what Liz Stanley has called ‘the black box’ of our research – revealing what has gone wrong, what we have learned, and how we have put this learning into practice. It is our hope that this blog post can be empirically and methodologically useful to transitions researchers, teachers, and education policy makers.

Authors: Dr Emma Jones & Dr Katya Saville

Affiliation: UCL Institute of Education: Department of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment

Contact: e.s.jones@ucl.ac.uk