

Moving Up

Secondary school transition processes during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 global pandemic of 2020 onwards has revealed, and continues to reveal, a great deal about many of the social structures and processes that we take for granted. One of these is the everyday practice of sending children to school. It has been disrupted in a manner unprecedented outside wartime, with consequences that are not likely to become fully apparent for a long time. This study, funded by the UCL Office of the Vice-Provost (Advancement) and the Wellcome Trust, looks at the particular case of Year 6 children in England (aged 10-11 during the school year 2020-2021) who were undergoing transition from primary to secondary school during the initial phases of the pandemic. We chose this group of children as they were on the cusp of adolescence, and working through challenging educational experiences, the effects of which have been magnified by the pandemic. Our study is interested in how these exaggerated effects have shaped their future educational progress, social relationships, and mental health.

Our review of the research literature suggests that a smooth transition to secondary school plays an important part in the general development of young people as they move towards adulthood. It also indicates that a successful transition is often the result of positive home and primary school experiences. Several additional factors are key to this. The first is carefully managing children's expectations of secondary school. Ensuring suitable continuity of learning, as well as minimising any missed learning opportunities, are also important. All of these were heavily compromised by the pandemic. To investigate this, we used a combination of surveys and semi-structured interviews to engage with 196 children and 64 teachers in different regions and social circumstances across England via two fieldwork phases. The first took place in summer 2020 and the second in autumn 2020. We asked children and teachers about the different ways children's educational experiences had diverged during the pandemic, whether there was likely to be any lack of learning opportunity or consequences for mental health and asked them to suggest changes that could be made to secondary school transition processes in general, in order to improve things in the future.

A number of key themes emerged as a result of the research. Our participants reported that there had been increased fragmentation of learning, with some children making greater progress than usual, while other children missed out. This was sometimes, but not always, linked to deprivation. There were many problems with technology which had created barriers to learning, including deficits in national broadband infrastructure and tariffs, as well as hardware availability in some schools and homes. There was a general picture of uncertainty, compounded by the cancellation of Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) scheduled for the end of Year 6, which meant that teachers were unable to report formally on progress in the ways they were used to. Many children reported feeling more anxious than before about their education, as well as their peer relationships at school.

In our findings, there were some positive outcomes of the pandemic for schooling, however. The teaching profession was forced into a programme of rapid modernisation and investment in terms of developing high level remote teaching skills. Additionally, those children attending school during the pandemic, because of Free School Meals (deprivation) status, or parental key worker status, sometimes made accelerated progress as a result of small group attention. Other children were able to explore their learning interests and hobbies in more depth than usual. We conclude that both positive and negative aspects of these children's experiences during the pandemic provide opportunities for reflection around, and improvement of, secondary school transition processes generally. We make two specific recommendations, namely working further towards a distinct Year 7 phase in secondary school, and improving training in, and use of, educational technology by children and their teachers.



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to levels of disruption for school children in the UK that have been unprecedented at least since World War 2. This research project has sought to understand the impact of this disruption for children ‘moving up’ from primary to secondary school during these unsettled times of rapid change, including the sudden and unexpected cancellation of most transition activities as well as cancellation of their national school tests. The cohort of children born between 2008 and 2009 were on the cusp of adolescence and preparing for transition to secondary school as the pandemic struck. They are likely to be affected more severely than other transitioning cohorts. Our report is based on a rapid review of the primary to secondary school transitions literature, an online survey of 191 children going through this transition and 56 Year 6 and 7 teachers, and online semi-structured interviews with a smaller sample of 5 children and 8 teachers. Our findings draw attention to both the positive and negative impacts of this disruption on children’s learning and social and emotional well-being during their transition. Evidence-based recommendations in this report include the need for school transitions to be taken seriously in national risk and resilience planning and for children’s social and emotional needs to be prioritised within future risk and resilience education planning processes.

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Literature Review

We were very fortunate to begin this study shortly after the publication of a significant meta-analysis of the primary-secondary school transitions literature (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). This publication was a valuable starting point for our own review of the literature on school transitions and provided some important building blocks for the methodology used in this project. However, it was published before the pandemic spread.

Jindal-Snape et al. (2020) found that research into school transitions overwhelmingly focused on the challenges. For this reason, our literature review and subsequent data analysis contributes to this field by paying close attention to both the challenges and the benefits of transition. In addition, historical education research, and research into education systems affected by disasters and conflict, remind us that disruption to education does not only present challenges but can offer new windows of opportunity. For example, towards the end of World War 2, the UK government passed the 1944 Education Act, which, amongst many other reforms, paved the way for universal secondary (as opposed to elementary) education. Similarly, France introduced the Plan Langevin-Wallon in 1947, with the aim of unifying educational structures. We therefore approach the disruption caused by COVID-19 as having the potential to generate both positive and negative impacts.

Our rapid review of the literature has led to the generation of several interconnected themes, which we have organised under two umbrellas:

a) Themes related to the school

Spies (2018) suggests that characteristics of effective transition programmes include (i) providing realistic experiences of secondary school expectations for incoming pupils, (ii) frequent communication with pupils, parents, and staff, and (iii) extensive and ongoing planning, assessment, and redesign of the transition program. Bearing in mind the disruption caused by COVID-19, understanding how these school-based processes may have been affected will be vital for developing an understanding of how COVID-19 has impacted primary to secondary transitions.

b) Themes related to individual children and their relationships

Children who typically experience smooth transitions between primary and secondary school tend to include those who can control negative emotions, use problem solving to negotiate solutions and are emotionally resilient (Bailey & Baines, 2012; Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; St Clair-Thompson, Giles, McGeown, Putwain, Clough & Perry, 2017). Children with consistent, ongoing parental support and a stable home environment are also more likely to experience smoother transitions (Smith, Akos & Lim, 2008; Waters, Lester & Cross, 2014; Hammond, 2016; Duineveld, Parker, Ryan, Ciarrochi & Salmela-Aro, 2017). Conversely, children with additional support needs, those who lack academic skills, or those who find it hard to follow directions or work independently or in groups are more likely to experience challenges when settling into secondary school (Hannah & Topping, 2012, 2013; Bailey & Baines, 2012; Hammond, 2016; Munthe & Thuen, 2009). Irrespective of the programmes that schools have in place to support primary to secondary transitions, individual children are predisposed to different experiences. Therefore, it has been important for this literature review to take account of these individual level differences as we develop a nuanced understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on primary to secondary school transitions.

In what follows, each sub-theme will explore the literature published prior to COVID-19 and, where possible, supplement this literature with the most recent research from the past 12 months which addresses the impacts of COVID-19.

Schools

Developing realistic expectations of secondary schools

In advance of starting secondary school, children generally anticipate meeting new teachers, some with trepidation, others with pleasure. Earlier research studies have indicated that some children enjoy having new teachers whom they see as dynamic, fun and knowledgeable, offering them new and different subjects and experiences (Neal & Frederickson, 2016; Booth & Sheehan, 2008; Cueto, Guerrero, Sugimaru & Zevallos, 2010; Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; Mackenzie, McMaugh & O'Sullivan, 2012). However, some children experience anxiety about the different teaching approaches they encounter in secondary schools. Children report that secondary teachers can be stricter than their primary teachers and more demanding academically, sometimes causing them to miss their former teachers (Ashton, 2008; Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013; Rice, Frederickson & Seymour, 2011; Mackenzie et al., 2012).

If, as Spies (2018) suggests, managing children's expectations is a key characteristic of effective transition programmes, then we must ask whether and how schools have supported children to develop realistic expectations during COVID-19. Prior to COVID-19, Transition Leaders in primary and secondary schools, and local authorities supported children by creating opportunities for them to visit their new school and meet their new teachers. However, with many schools closed, these visits did not go ahead. It is important, therefore, to understand what, if anything, schools have done to help facilitate realistic expectations.

Continuity of learning

Transition between primary and secondary school is a critical moment in children's learning trajectories. Schielack and Seeley (2010) show that, in transition to secondary school, children encounter major changes in instructional materials and approaches, work expectations, school structure and a marked increase in the difficulty of work. In addition, Attard (2010) finds that children often encounter a hiatus in teacher relationships and a reduction in individualised engagement. In general, children's academic achievement often declines, and attitudes and learning anxiety are affected, particularly in mathematics (Deiso & Fraser, 2019). Bearing in mind the context of COVID-19, the question we must consider is how a more uncertain external environment might disrupt learning further in this already turbulent time in children's school lives. Planned (e.g. long school holidays) and unplanned (e.g., natural disasters and wars) interruptions have the potential to impact children's learning dramatically, but these impacts are not necessarily the same for all children (Harmey & Moss, 2020). For example, a recent OECD report highlighted research findings that stated in normal times, children from disadvantaged families typically 'lose' one month of learning during the extended break from school over the summer (Alexander, Entwisle and Olson, 2007; Allington & McGill-Franzen 2010).

In the USA, Kuhfeld, Soland, Tarasawa, Johnson, Ruzek & Liu (2020) were among the first researchers to produce a series of projections of COVID-19-related school attainment loss and its effect on test scores in the 2020-21 school year. These projections were based on (a) estimates from prior literature and (b) analyses of typical summer learning patterns of five million pupils. When they were published in May 2020, these projections mooted that pupils were likely to return in autumn 2020 with approximately 63-68% of the attainment gains in reading relative to a typical school year, and with 37-50% of the attainment gains in mathematics. They argued that pupils will likely (a) not have learnt as much during the truncated 2019-2020 academic year and (b) lose more of those gains due to extended time out of school. They projected that pupils could transition to secondary school almost a full year behind in the prescribed mathematics curriculum. However, the authors did not factor in home schooling and online instruction effects, so this modelling is likely to represent the worst-case scenario. Nonetheless, Kuhfeld et al. (2020) estimated that impacts on attainment would not be universal, and that the top third of higher achieving children could potentially make gains in reading compared to what might be expected in a normal school year with no pandemic. This is of course based on the assumption that gains in learning are always measurable.

Research during and immediately after the first lockdown in 2020 indicates that for many children, learning experiences at home were far from optimal and often fragmented. Parents were under immense pressure during this time and research by Montacute (2020) found that, in general, only 55% of parents were engaged with their children's home learning, and only 42% of parents felt confident home-schooling their children. However, this appears to differ amongst socio-economic groups. Eivers et al. (2020) found that pupils from higher-income households, and whose parents had higher levels of education, spent the most time on school work at home. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (2020) also found that, in May 2020, 70% of middle-class children and 84% of working-class children were not taking part in online lessons every day. Reasons for this were complex, although lack of access to digital technology (hardware and Internet access) were among the most significant. Sharp, Nelson, Lucas, Julius, McCrone & Sims (2020) show that these general patterns persisted towards the end of the 2019-20 school year, with only 44% of children fully engaged with learning in a measurable way during July 2020. However, questions can be raised about the role of schools in adapting to remote learning during the first lockdown, given that Green (2020) also found that 13% of parents reported that no work was set by schools, and 20% of children engaged in less than one hour of school-related learning a day, with a large variation within regions and across social groups. Disparities in online provision by schools were also evident, with 60% of private schools in the most affluent areas and 37% of community schools in the most affluent areas using an online platform to receive work, compared to 23% in schools in the most deprived areas in one survey (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020). Furthermore, that survey found that in the most deprived schools 15% of teachers reported that more than a third of their pupils learning from home did not have adequate access to an electronic device for learning. This contrasts with the most affluent state schools where only 2% of teachers reported similar problems.

Such fragmentation of the home learning experience also appears to have translated to school attainment. A recent meta-analysis of studies into the degree of school attainment loss in primary and secondary schools as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021) indicates that, although around two months' loss appears to be typical in varied measures for English and mathematics, this is often greater for disadvantaged pupils or in schools in areas of high disadvantage. (This research was

mainly based on reports developed by commercial providers of attainment tests, however, and is not a systematic review).

Kuhfeld et al. (2020) suggest that children in the US who fall behind while out of school are likely to gain the most over the following two years, providing there are no further interruptions to schooling. What is less clear from their modelling, however, is whether 'typical summer learning patterns' in the US are appropriate predictors of being out of school during the COVID-19 pandemic, since they do not take account of the specific constellation of financial, social, health and psychological factors. This added uncertainty suggests that it will be vital for increased information sharing between schools and parents so that the curriculum, teaching materials and learning environments can be adapted to understand and meet the needs of all children affected by the pandemic.

Early evidence specific to the Year 6 primary-secondary transition year group (Golding, Barrow & Grima 2020) found that, although language/writing and mathematics synthesis had often not happened in any systematic way during lockdown for those at home, some children, including the most vulnerable, who remained in the reduced form of school (specifically for more vulnerable children and key worker parents), flourished both socially and academically in the resultant smaller groupings. In addition, while it may well be the case that school-related learning and attainment has been disrupted by the pandemic, many children have engaged in meaningful educative experiences that they might not otherwise have had the opportunity to pursue, often influenced by individual or family interests (Bubb & Jones, 2020). As Biesta suggests, during lockdown, "*Children learned all kind of useful things while at home – cooking, gardening, cleaning, and many other things related to daily home life. It does make sense, therefore, that schools connect to all this learning when children return, in order not to send out the message that time has just been wasted*" (2020, p.1).

Continuity of assessment

In England and Wales, there is emerging evidence that the first period of lockdown and the move to remote learning negatively affected teachers' ability to assess children's learning, both formatively and summatively, and that it was more difficult to assess children's readiness for secondary school (Golding, Barrow & Grima, 2020). This may in part be due to the fact that teachers' assessments have been considered less important than external assessments since the Education Act of 1988, leading teachers to rely less on their own judgements. Therefore, when the UK government cancelled all Key Stage 2 standardised assessments (SATs), schools took a variety of approaches. Some primary schools felt they had sufficient data to be able to classify children's attainment against SATs criteria, (e.g., as working towards/meeting/exceeding expectations in reading, writing or mathematics) whereas other schools did not feel able to provide this information, or chose instead to provide secondary schools with more qualitative data. Irrespective of the approach taken by primary schools, the cancelling of Key Stage 2 SATs does mean that data cannot be easily compared with previous years, introducing more uncertainty about progress during the transitions process, particularly for secondary schools, some of which rely on this data to make grouping decisions or trigger processes for additional support (Moss, Bradbury, Duncan, Harmey and Levy, 2020).

Children

Health and Wellbeing

Prior to COVID-19, most primary school children reported feeling prepared for their transition to secondary school and very few were still anxious about transition after their first term (Poorthuis, Thomaes, Aken, Denissen & de Castro, 2014; Evangelou, Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons & Siraj-Blatchford, 2008; Gillison, Standage & Skevington, 2008). However, some studies suggested that transition to secondary school can lead to a marked overall decline in academic engagement and motivation, as well as an increase in self-reported school problems for some pupils (Benner, Boyle & Bakhtiari, 2017; Deieso & Fraser, 2018; Madjar, Cohen & Shoval 2018; Martinez, Aricak, Graves, Peters-Myszak & Nellis, 2011). This decline has been linked to reduced feelings of connectedness with the new school and increased feelings of depression and anxiety (Hebron, 2017; Lester, Waters & Cross, 2013), especially among those who had found the transition experience hard. Children with additional needs, such as Autistic Spectrum Disorders, can feel particularly daunted by the size of secondary schools, and worry about getting lost. They may also express concerns about the increase in noise in secondary schools (Booth & Sheehan, 2008; Evangelou et al., 2008; Hammond, 2016; West, Sweeting & Young, 2010; Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Knesting, Hokanson & Waldron, 2008; Mackenzie et al., 2012; Hannah & Topping, 2013; Dillon & Underwood, 2012).

These findings are particularly significant if, as Dyregrov (2004) argues, depression in children can slow down cognitive functions and lead to a further loss of motivation. Dyregrov's work suggests that children who have found COVID-related school closures, multiple lockdowns and periods of quarantine to be traumatic, may find that their memory and concentration levels have been affected, especially in those subjects that demand high concentration (e.g. mathematics and physics). Their self-control may have also suffered, or they may need additional reassurance (Dyregrov, 2004). Conversely, some children may have found learning at home with a parent or online to be less daunting than normal school and they may be fearful of starting again in the schooling system and with new teachers (Eivers, 2020). Once again, it would be a mistake to assume that children's experiences, thoughts and fears are universal.

Chong et al. (2020) have found that physical activity often declines dramatically once children move up to secondary school and that COVID-19 has further exacerbated these issues due to changes in eating, sleep and activity during the first period of lockdown, leading to greater rates of obesity. Malnourishment is another concern. A study by Forsey (2017) revealed that children eligible for Free School Meals are more likely to experience hunger and lack sufficient nutrition when schools are closed, e.g. during the summer holiday. For these children and their families, the closure of schools due to COVID-19, and the uncertainty about how Free School Meals would be provided, raises further questions about the health and well-being of children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds during and after the pandemic.

According to Eivers et al. (2020), many children from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds were more likely to have been living with an at-risk adult who may be required to shield from COVID-19 for health purposes prior to starting secondary school, increasing the likelihood of anxiety among these children and potentially leading to ongoing absences. This also applies to children in multi-generational households. Additionally, some

children will have been bereaved and unable to mourn in the usual ways. Others might be especially anxious about a potentially life-threatening virus or living with a newly chronically-ill parent suffering post-viral complications, requiring family care and support. Schools need to be aware of such children's needs and do their best to offer support and advocacy.

Peer relationships

Peer relationships both before and immediately after transition to secondary school are closely connected to children's academic achievements and their social and emotional well-being (Neal & Frederickson, 2016; Eskelä-Haapanen, Vasalampi & Lerkkanen, 2020; Langenkamp, 2010) found that flourishing peer relationships in primary school protected most children against declining academic outcomes after the move to secondary school. This appears to be the case, irrespective of whether children move to the same school or class as their primary school peers but, importantly, but does not hold true for lower achieving primary school pupils. In addition, when children have less robust relationships with peers in primary school, they are more likely to struggle during their transition to secondary school (Eskelä-Haapanen et al. 2020). Worries about making new friends and being bullied are exacerbated for children who had unsatisfactory peer relationships in primary school, and they are more likely to report that they miss the friends they have left behind (Evangelou et al., 2008; Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Dismore & Bailey, 2010; Davis, Ravenscroft & Bizas, 2015; Keay, Lang & Frederickson, 2015; Hammond, 2016).

This literature points to the importance of understanding how COVID-19 and the subsequent disruption to school transitions affects peer relationships. We need to understand what steps primary and secondary schools, families, and children themselves may have taken to foster peer relationships over the past year, particularly during periods of lockdown and school closure. We also need to understand whether and how the dynamics of existing peer relationships may have changed, for better or for worse. Did children lose contact with peers, did relationships with peers improve, or did the disruption lead to the fostering of new peer relationships? Hattie (2013) has found that when secondary schools take proactive steps to foster peer relationships, particularly during the first few months, this can have long-term positive effects on children's social and emotional well-being. So, for children who moved up to secondary school in September 2020, we need to know how school policies on nurturing relationships, despite social distancing, may have affected the dynamics of peer relationships.

Summary

Achieving a balance between having high expectations of all children and providing sensitive support to those individuals experiencing specific difficulties will undoubtedly present a challenge to schools over the coming months and years. The literature relating to trauma at any scale (e.g. Dyregrov 2004, Van der Kolk 2003) suggests that young people benefit from an acknowledgement of traumatic events, as well as teaching that makes adjustments to the usual behavioural and learning expectations sensitively, but it is also found that frequent reference to the trauma can be counter-productive. This approach echoes the work of Bath (2008) who suggested that there are three ways that can support children who have experienced disruption to schooling: 'the development of safety, the promotion of healing relationships, and the teaching of self-management and coping skills' (p.18).

Given also the emerging evidence about the *range* of impacts of the pandemic on school attainment for different learners, teaching needs to stress opportunities to move forward, while being alert and actively sensitive to any missed opportunities for learning. Educators have to be aware they are involved in long-term reparative work, both in terms of relationships and in terms of academic targets. Emotional and educational recovery from the pandemic hiatus is likely to take years for some pupils, rather than months. Formative assessment and sensitively differentiated teaching are going to be more important than ever before. Irreversible judgements could do irreparable harm in this context, for example putting children into fixed sets or streams in Year 7 with little opportunity for flexibility. Acceptance of the different contributions pupils bring to the classroom, rather than a deficit model emphasising 'loss', can support genuinely formative and creative learning opportunities that build on the learning that pupils have achieved over their primary years in total.

In summary, the pandemic has provided both considerable disruption to the existing order and a conceptual space to allow for revision of how secondary school transition is typically approached. This report explains how this develops through documenting the views of primary and secondary school pupils and their teachers as the pandemic unfolded during 2020 to 2021.



Design of our Investigation

Background to the study

While we found that there was a reasonable literature on transfer to secondary school, circumstances facing the Year 6 2019-2020 cohort were unprecedented and schools needed guidance in how best to accommodate this cohort of children to ensure the best transition possible, building on their experiences for subsequent cohorts of children. This seemed particularly necessary because, as we have indicated above, secondary school transition coincided with the onset of adolescence in many cases, particularly amongst girls. It was clear that the potential for exacerbated mental health difficulties within the next two to three years would be substantial if school transfer was not approached in a manner consistent with children's actual experiences of disruption, which may have included periods of missed learning, ill-health and bereavement. It also needed to take account of ongoing difficulties with the organisation of schooling as the pandemic unfolded.

By the summer of 2020, teachers were being forced to extrapolate from the experiences of prior cohorts, or anecdotal information, rather than having an evidence base to draw upon in relation to transition to secondary school. It was also difficult for schools to develop a rigorous understanding of the impacts on mental health. We were awarded funding in July 2020 to investigate these issues, as well as many other related challenges, and worked over the summer to develop evidence for schools. By 1st September 2020, we had issued guidance for both secondary schools and incoming Year 7 pupils on which aspects of schooling and pastoral care should be prioritised during the coming term, and how young people might best cope with their lives at school during unsettled times. We subsequently extended this through further engagement with a broader sample of research participants, and both initial fieldwork phases inform this report.

Table 1: Timeline of COVID-19 pandemic school closures in England

Date	Status
23 March 2020	First national lockdown. Schools close.
1 June 2020	Phased reopening of schools.
<i>July-August 2020</i>	<i>First data collection round.</i>
<i>September-October 2020</i>	<i>Second data collection round.</i>
5 November 2020	Second national lockdown starts. Schools initially remain open but close at the beginning of the Christmas holidays.
8 March 2021	Schools reopen.

(Timeline for our research in italics)

Research method and tools

Our study maps the lived experience of a sample of 196 children and 64 teachers in England across different regions and in different circumstances during this unsettled time. Every region in England was represented and teachers and children came from both maintained and independent schools. Overall, the response to the autumn 2020 fieldwork phase was better than the summer 2020 phase, but this is to be expected given that, in the summer, we were carrying out fieldwork during the school holidays, when contact is very difficult.

We developed the following overarching research questions for both phases.

1. How have the educational experiences of the 2020 graduating cohort of Year 6 children in England diverged as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What is the likely scale of missed learning opportunities amongst the cohort, and what consequences might there be for children's mental health?
3. What potential consequences of the pandemic are there for secondary school transition, in England as well as internationally?
4. How can we ensure best outcomes for children in Year 7 and beyond?

By using a variety of contacts, including national organisations such as the College of Teaching, we recruited teachers from schools in every English region and in four types of locale: metropolitan, urban, suburban and rural. Year 6 and 7 teachers were targeted in the summer and Year 7 teachers in the autumn. A range of socio-economic contexts were reflected in these teachers' schools, with a median of 21-40% of pupils eligible for Free School Meals. Through these teachers, and separate social media callouts, Year 6 pupils were invited to participate in the summer and Year 7 pupils in the autumn, with survey data indicating that 8% were eligible for Free School Meals. We are aware that, due to the need for the team to work remotely, pupil responses were not fully representative as those with insufficient technological access were inevitably less likely to participate.

We carried out an online survey of children and teachers, and then undertook qualitative interviews in order to confirm and develop our survey findings. As table 2 below shows, our total engagement was close to 500 participants. However, in the second row, online survey responses include all participants who engaged beyond the contact details and consent pages, i.e. provided data that could be analysed that related directly to our research questions (even if not every question was answered).

Table 2: Research sample

Research tool	N=teachers	N=children
Total engagement (click-throughs)	113	326
Online survey	56	191
Semi-structured interviews (online)	8	5

Ethical issues

The research went through a rigorous and detailed process of UCL ethical approval in anticipation of the many sensitive issues that were likely to be raised, and the relatively young age of the child participants. We ensured that, even though interviews were being carried out remotely, we used interviewers who had current clear enhanced DBS (criminal) checks and we worked in pairs where possible when interviewing children. Interviews were recorded using secure university systems and survey data stored on a university server to make sure there were clear lines of ethical accountability and verification. Participants were fully anonymised.



Our findings

Data were analysed using themes initially generated from the literature review, which were then refined as data were coded. A codebook was developed by two team members using a subset of the data and then tested by each other member of the team to ensure agreement. Upon analysing all the data, we found that responses under the codes generated could be grouped into the following main themes:

1. Communication and pupil handover
2. Curriculum (dis)continuities
3. Expanded role of technology
4. Absence of the extended curriculum
5. Wider impacts of the pandemic.

Communication and pupil handover

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, primary to secondary school transition was approached in slightly different ways by schools, often depending on local customs and priorities. However, many similarities were also apparent. In some areas, Year 7 leads, or their counterparts, would visit children at their primary school, particularly if the primary school was officially linked to a local secondary school. In addition, Year 6 pupils often attended their future secondary schools for what are commonly known as “Taster Days”. These visits frequently took place in the summer term. The purpose of a Taster Day was for Year 6 pupils to meet other children who were going to be in their new classes, to tour the school, to take part in sample lessons and to receive information briefings about what to expect when they joined their new school in September. In addition, teacher communication networks were often active behind the scenes. Year 6 teachers and Year 7 Heads of Year exchanged pupil information forms, and there were often informal discussions about particular children as well, with specific meetings often held to discuss children who have Special Educational Needs. The results of Year 6 national Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) were shared with the new secondary school. Some Local Authorities also funded dedicated Transition Leads who co-ordinated initiatives across local secondary schools, standardised paperwork where possible, and encouraged best practice.

In the case of our research participants, these common transition practices were disrupted significantly by the COVID-19 pandemic. In some cases, children were not able to visit their new secondary schools at all, as Open Days/Evenings had to be immediately suspended before the annual cycle of such opportunities had been completed. Others might have visited the secondary school site earlier in the academic year, but this was not followed with the usual Taster Day. Physical tours of the school site were frequently replaced with virtual tours, either live or pre-recorded, and face-to-face Taster Days were dropped altogether. Some secondary schools sent activities for incoming pupils, or set pupils up early on secondary Google Classroom systems, to allow for asynchronous updates so pupils would feel included and also start to familiarise themselves with the way secondary school was going to work. There were also special quizzes for incoming pupils, and one school

released a video every day. One particular all-through (ages 4-18) school even abandoned transition altogether and just moved to a Year 7 approach during the June of Year 6. Therefore, there were varied grass-roots solutions to the problem of achieving a high-quality transition during the pandemic, just as there had been different approaches previously. It is worth noting, however, that transition for children with Special Education Needs was particularly disrupted, as these children would usually have had several additional school visits and events which did not take place, with little alternative specialised provision reported by our participants.

Some pupils reported concerns about the changes to secondary school transition that were taking place. For example, one child said during the summer 2020 data collection round, *“There haven’t really been any transition days/school tour things so I don’t know my new school that well, so I might get a bit lost”*. Aware of these concerns, some schools offered incoming pupils personal online tutorial meetings with a Head of Year or similar, although others were unable to do this due to lack of digital resources at school or at the pupils’ homes.

Teachers also felt that compromises had been made, for example:

What hasn’t worked as well ... It would have been nice if they could have come in in small groups. You know, groups of 10 here on this specific day, you have got a 10-minute slot where we’re going to follow a route around the school ... and you know this is the nearest toilet for this building. This is where you buy your uniform. This is how you top up for lunch and things like that. Because all of those little processes which are quite key to your school life – they won’t know how to do.

Secondary schools continued to share the usual information packs regarding arrangements such as timetables, uniforms, transport and lunches, but they also now had to include additional information regarding arrangements for ‘bubbles’. This specialised information covered staggered starts, movement routes around the building, mask-wearing policies, separate allocation of lavatories for specific year groups, classroom management, classroom seating policies, and quarantine protocols. A lot of effort went into making sure the day-to-day management of pupils on school sites could be achieved safely. However, pupils were often painfully aware that this was going to have a significant impact on their school experience, particularly by remaining in one classroom for all or nearly all their lessons. It was clear that some pupils felt a sense of loss at this prospect, while others were relieved. One responded,

I don’t think we will move around for lessons or have our lockers. This made me sooooo sad because since I knew ... that you moved around for lessons, I’ve always been waiting to do that. Now that has been taken from me and I feel so sad and disappointed.

Another pupil related their loss to the restrictions placed on sport, *“There will be quite a few things we can’t [do] such as fixtures, which I love”*. Some pupils also worried that social distancing might have negative social consequences. As one said, *“We might still have to social distance from other children, meaning that it would be harder to make new friends”*. Others were sanguine about the necessary changes, for example in the words of one pupil, *“The not normal will be normal for me”*.

During the summer of 2020, Year 6 and Transition Leads were being rapidly upskilled in terms of digital capability, so they could communicate effectively with secondary school colleagues they could not meet face-to-face, but this was not always straightforward. Not only did the technology present problems, but not having seen their pupils for quite some time added more uncertainty around what information could confidently be passed on to secondary schools. As one Year 6 teacher said, after experiencing multiple system crashes and data entry efforts being deleted as a consequence,

We have to do all the form filling again and that was really difficult because you were making judgements for children that you hadn't actually taught properly since March. So, we had to have quite a few frank conversations with the high schools to say, look, I can tell you where I thought they were going to be, and I could tell you if they've engaged with learning, but just because they haven't really engaged with us didn't mean they weren't doing it.

Overall, therefore, we see a picture of Year 6 teachers doing their best to communicate complex information digitally to secondary schools and secondary schools trying to communicate needed practical information to incoming pupils, with varied results. Many of our child participants appeared to be flexible and understanding of these limitations in response.

What wasn't clear was how carefully the data transfers from Year 6 to Year 7 teachers were considered, in the light of general cohort fragmentation and learning disruption, and how far they were used by secondary schools to inform provision which was being changed very rapidly (for example, to mixed ability teaching throughout).

Curriculum (dis)continuities

One significant focus of primary schools in England is Year 6 sitting Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs), which are taken in English and mathematics during the month of May. These tests were originally designed to provide a standardised quality assurance measure of primary schools, but almost since their inception they have also acted as a measure of children's attainment. Therefore, they were perceived by many of our child participants to be extremely important in informing their secondary schools of what they had already achieved. In May 2020, the SATs were cancelled and therefore children did not sit these tests, at least not formally.

It was clear that the cancellation of SATs had been a disappointment to some of the both pupils and teachers. In the words of one Year 6 teacher, "*They were really keen to do the best that they could in Year 6 and, sadly, when we left in March, the big question was 'are we not going to do our SATs now?'*". Many children reported having spent a lot of time at primary school learning examination techniques, preparing explicitly for SATs, and sitting past papers, and it was clear that SATs were seen by many as an important stage in transition to secondary, and perhaps something of a rite of passage, demarcating the end of primary school. Year 7 teacher participants, however, did not seem so concerned as they had their own assessment systems. For instance, one child reported sitting banding tests at secondary school in advance of arrival, which were being used instead of SAT results. Many secondary schools have always preferred their own tests, rather than SATs, as the means for sorting children on arrival at secondary school. At the time of writing, the 2021

SATs have also been cancelled, and it remains to be seen if this will result in long-term changes to assessment at this key stage.

Within the vacuum left by the cancellation of the SATs, it was sometimes difficult for Year 6 teachers to encourage all children to engage with learning all of the time, especially as this learning was now online. The success of different approaches varied, according to the pupil group, so we saw evidence of cohort fragmentation starting to develop, sometimes in unexpected or unpredictable ways. Typical Year 6 teacher comments included:

Some of the boys seemed to enjoy working at home and produced better work. Some have not engaged at all, the gap will massively widen ... you have your really enthusiastic, bright, maybe 10 or 15 that are always doing it every single week. You might have 15 to 20 that dip in and out, and then you've got some that just haven't engaged whatsoever.

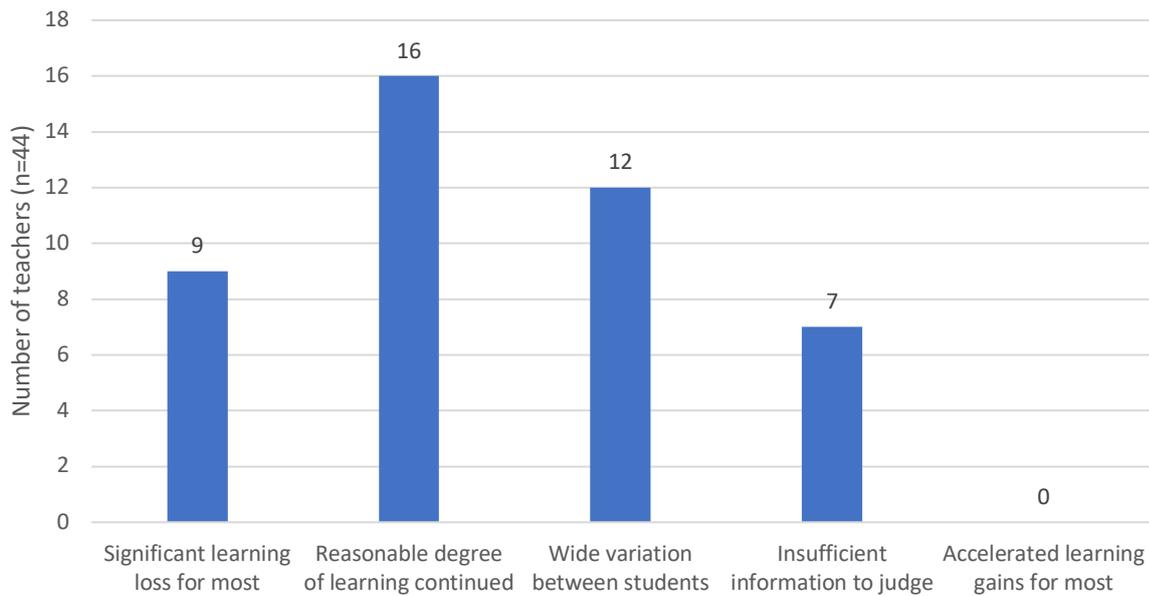
You can't actually make them do it ... There will be gaps. Those who worked hard at school also worked hard at home.

My two brightest children didn't perform particularly well. It was almost as though they missed the stimulus of other children around them, and so they were bored by home learning.

Most of our kids tend to come from quite disadvantaged backgrounds and I think it's important to keep in mind the inequality side of it. Some pupils from more affluent areas perhaps might get more support ... whether it's from organisations or whether it's just parent support ... it's important to keep in mind that kids from backgrounds like ours, where there is high unemployment or other social problems, they need that support in there to give them an equal chance to carry on learning and stay safe.

Teacher survey results reinforce this, with Figure 1 below showing that, although about a third of teachers felt a reasonable degree of learning had continued for most or all their pupils during the first lockdown, more felt that there had been disruption, with 27% reporting significant fragmentation and 20% that there was a significant impact on most or all their pupils.

Figure 1: Teachers' perceptions of pupils' lost learning opportunities during the first lockdown



Children in the study expressed a range of viewpoints. Many of them stated that they had been looking forward to learning new subjects at secondary school and indeed this was one of the things they liked most about secondary school (See Appendix). However, they also indicated that being able to determine how hard or easy it was likely to be was important to them. Once in Year 7, many felt that this is where primary school had helped them most, in building confidence to tackle harder subjects, testing them on what they knew already, and giving homework explicitly designed to prepare them for secondary school. For example, one child described how her Year 6 experience had been explicitly modelled on secondary schools, including lockers, homework and detentions. Others wrote about being given things like subject guides to help them gauge what to expect. In addition, some schools had set more challenging work in Year 6 so children would get used to increased demands on them; for example, several children wrote about being given algebra and more difficult English language lessons focusing on comprehension, which were based on the Year 7 curriculum, and this seemed to be well received, as did encouraging children to become more independent. A few children, however, stated that they had not been given enough support and wished that they had been challenged more, specifically with homework, which may well be due to schools prioritising a less academic focus post-lockdown in the last few months of their Year 6.

In terms of lockdown reality, some children had used school closure periods to develop their own interests, and this led to greater autonomy. For example, one child reported carrying out a project on Japan that had involved investigations into the Asian hornet and other related animals. This had led to an investigation into Sumo wrestling and subsequently an enquiry into what Sumo wrestlers ate, followed by learning some Japanese, which the child had found very exciting. There is no doubt that some children used the autonomy afforded to them by a combination of school closures, enhanced subject content, and good quality Internet access (where it existed) very profitably, in ways that would help them develop into excellent secondary school pupils. For other children, however, things did not always work so well. Once they got to secondary school, however, some pupils felt that expectations which had been outlined by their primary schools as

being key were not always followed through, for example, where secondary schools did not insist on joined-up handwriting, or where homework wasn't always expected to be completed. A few Year 7 children reported that they felt that little new material had actually been covered during their first term of secondary school, and that there was a greater focus on revision instead.

One thing which seemed to facilitate transition was when primary and secondary schools used the same academic platforms, for example Google Classroom, as some pupils indicated that it was familiar to them when they made the shift. At the same time, many children expressed disappointment that they had been unable to access specialist subject rooms and facilities such as food technology, art rooms and science laboratories because of the pandemic. One child wrote in a charming manner that she had been expecting to use 'bunts and burners' in science and was disappointed that this had not happened in the first term. It became clear from our data generally across a number of questions that many children associate the ability to move around a building for learning, and to use specialist subject rooms and equipment, with a greater sense of maturity, which they see as an important aspect of the secondary school experience that they were missing. Indeed, other school practices aiming at limiting the spread of COVID-19 also appeared to be limiting the ability to develop a sense of maturity. For example, one child wrote, "*Something that has surprised me is that I thought we would have a lot more freedom, but we still have to line up at the end of the day*". A few Year 7 children described their thoughts on this rather differently, appearing to appreciate the more primary-like arrangements. One noted "*You can't do a lot of things like go in the science lab or art room but for me because all your lessons are in one building it feels nicer*" and another that "*it made it easier for us because we didn't have the older children around us*", but these represented the exceptions to what was regarded as the general view.

Nonetheless, in many of these responses we can see that some children participating in the research found that their last half of Year 6 had actually prepared them well for Year 7, by granting them more autonomy over their learning in addition to school-assigned activities with greater challenge and overlaps with the Year 7 curriculum. However, we are aware that absent from our data are children without adequate Internet access. This absence needs to be held in mind when reviewing the otherwise positive comments surrounding access to enhanced learning that many participants clearly enjoyed.

Expanded role of technology

There were many comments and responses from both children and teachers which referred to the role of technology in both schooling generally as well as transition specifically. Many children told us about the role of technology in their home learning during the transition period, but sometimes there was a disconnection between home and school experiences. For example, one child wrote:

My parents purchased 'My Happy Mind Year 6 Transition Programme' which was an online course and had lots of activities. This programme could have been used at school to help children prepare mentally for the transition. Unfortunately because of lockdown, there was no talking about secondary school. When we went back to school at the end of Year 6, we did lots of cooking which was fun but it did not

prepare anyone for secondary school. The only talk of secondary was about the fact we would get a detention if we did not present our work properly.

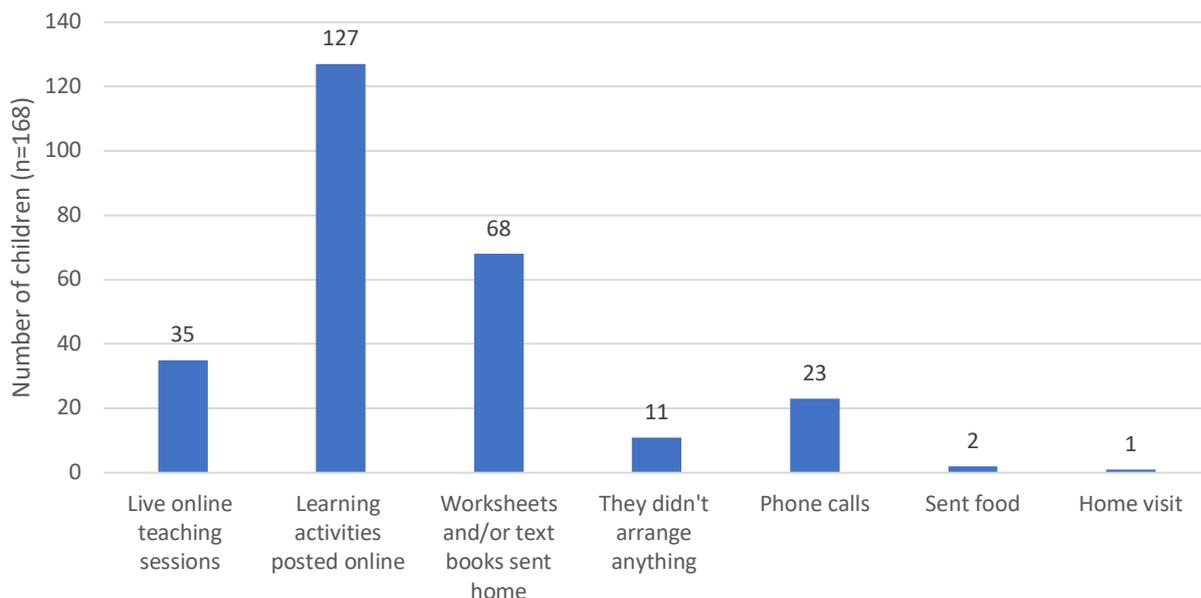
However, as part of the transition process, many other children reported having access to online virtual tours of secondary school in advance of their arrival, as well as live video calls with secondary school teachers, and this was regarded as very helpful in briefing children about what to expect. Webinars and the opportunity to meet other pupils online were also regarded favourably. One child had received video messages from current Year 7 pupils and described this in positive terms.

Once in Year 7, children were already planning mentally for future lockdowns, and several said that skills with packages like Zoom and Teams would be very important in the event that they were needed for remote lessons at secondary school, although not seeing their teachers face to face would be “*different and strange*” in the words of one young respondent. Another child had experienced a rehearsal of what to expect,

My school has prepared for this by having one extra day off before half term but that day we did online school via Microsoft Teams and now we all know what to do in case we have another lockdown. On the other hand, my primary school did something similar using Google Classrooms. It is very helpful in primary [as] we had no idea what was happening in lockdown.

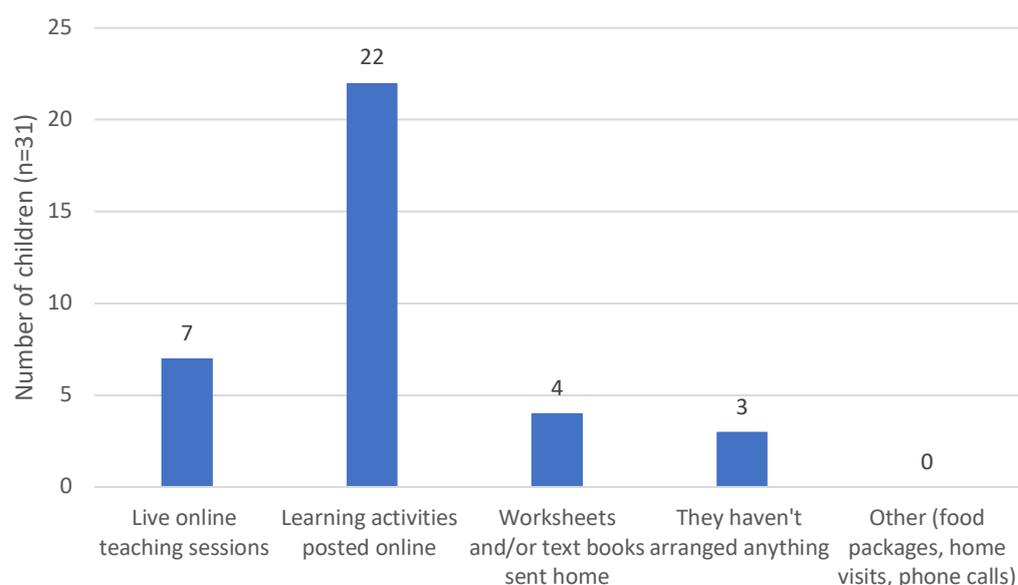
Although children reported that their primary schools only had limited access to educational platforms during the first lockdown, survey data suggests that the majority of Year 7 pupil participants had had some online provision during lockdown in Year 6, with Figure 2 showing that 76% experiencing asynchronous online learning and 21% synchronous online teaching at some point during the summer term of their Year 6. However, worksheets or textbooks were still more likely to have been assigned (41%) than live online teaching.

Figure 2: Pupils’ reported primary provision for home learning in the first lockdown



Because the government requested some regions go into lockdown during the autumn term, and some pupils had experienced quarantine during local outbreaks, some pupils had already experienced periods of local lockdown or self-isolation in their autumn term of Year 7. The types of online learning provision during these times seem very similar to their Year 6 pre-transition experiences. Figure 3 below shows that 19% of the children surveyed in the autumn term of 2020 had spent time learning at home, and the large majority of these (71%) had been provided with asynchronous online learning. 23% had experienced live online sessions, roughly in line with their experience in Year 6. Additionally, a few reported that they had been given worksheets or textbooks (13%) in secondary school.

Figure 3: Year 7 pupils' experiences of provision for home learning in autumn Term 2020



Several pupils indicated that, were they to go into future lockdowns, they expected to have more online teaching. 69% of Year 7 teacher participants surveyed in the autumn term said they would be using synchronous online teaching during any such further lockdowns. Even amongst those Year 7 children who had not been learning from home during their first term at secondary, many indicated that they now spent more time online than a year ago. It is also worth noting that, when surveyed in both Year 6 and Year 7, most children indicated that they felt that they learned less by working online from home than when in school. To enable this move to digitised learning, teachers often reported working behind the scenes to the point of exhaustion, learning and deploying new systems to support transition and engagement, as well as working out how to teach remotely at the same time. Live online teaching, with the instant ability for parents to view and scrutinise lessons, was described negatively by one teacher thus: *“being under the microscope almost removed the human element”*. Other parts of the job could also be a very dispiriting experience, as one of our Year 7 teacher interviewees described in relation to data entry associated with attendance tracking during the first lockdown,

[It] was an absolute nightmare ... every two weeks we had to upload data in inverted commas and say which children were engaged with online learning or which we hadn't seen ... So as a tutor you would get half your students. And then maybe one of SLT¹ or somebody that doesn't have a tutor group would get the other half, and you would follow the list that you've got in front of you, which was compiled by all the other teachers. They used a Microsoft document which crashed. They used Google docs which crashed. So, we put in hours, literally hours ... then you find out at the end of the day 'Oh, by the way, it's disappeared'. So, it was the worst thing.

A Year 7 teacher painted a vivid picture of how professional life had changed during this period, as a result of mixed-mode teaching which combined face-to-face instruction with remote learning.

It is definitely exhausting to be teaching and planning for your classroom, then making arrangements for pupils at home ... whether it's sending work packs, setting work on teaching software, such as ActiveLearn and Mathswatch, and then trying to livestream and record your lesson and teach simultaneously so that pupils at home get the same experience as the pupils you are teaching in class in front of you. Live recording your lesson is extremely stressful as it affects the natural flow, for example having someone ask to go to the toilet and having the class behave immaculately because of the recording, etc., etc. Having to pay for your own equipment was not expected but we understand that schools have no money to fund all of this.

Overall, from most Year 6 primary teacher comments made during the summer data collection round, it was clear that, in the first lockdown, there was a clear preference for asynchronous learning, and this spanned both state-maintained and independent sectors. As one independent school teacher explained,

Live teaching ... we didn't feel that was the best route. We appreciate that might be quite a controversial decision, because other local preps did do live teaching, but we felt that by delivering it asynchronously, ... [it] would give flexibility for the families.

Nonetheless, many teachers recognised how their online expertise had improved. In the surveys, teachers indicated that their ability level in online learning pedagogies and techniques had significantly increased compared with before lockdown, with a mean score of self-assessed expertise increasing from around 45% to 65% (where 0% represents 'complete novice', 50% 'satisfactory' and 100% 'expert'). There was still a degree of variation within the sample but, by the autumn term, a number of Year 7 teachers were getting into their stride in terms of developing new skills in instructional design and live remote lesson delivery. What can be described as a kind of 'semi-synchronous' model appeared to be increasingly common, where some teaching happened online in real time complemented by uploaded digital materials. In relation to this, some teachers reported that many children's ICT skills appeared to be rapidly improving and they became much more capable at things like manipulating what was on the screen, managing text boxes and so on. Due to the loss of extended curriculum activities such as drama productions and sport (which we discuss later in this report), some subjects such as ICT were also being given additional lesson time in some cases, allowing teachers to cover more curriculum material.

¹ Senior Leadership Team

There were significant difficulties for children in some homes, however. Teachers described how many children had no access to laptops or printers or were sharing single devices amongst multiple children. In such cases, schools frequently sent stationery packs home and, in some cases, reading books, but this was not always sufficient to prevent some children missing out learning activities that others in their class were covering. In one primary school, the home learning packs had become more popular and taken over from online provision. In another school, it was clear that physical learning packs had become a poor relation to other forms of learning. As one Year 6 teacher said:

... we had to come up with other ideas that would be conducive to online home learning and also recognising that they've not got the full resources, especially things like art and music, whereas we've got musical instruments and paint and all sorts of media at schools. Well, they pretty much got a few colouring pencils and some felt tips and the back of an envelope, our families.

Some teachers reported parents' own knowledge of technology to be relatively limited. One Year 6 teacher said that not all their school's parents had email addresses, and that they struggled to open the Free School Meals vouchers. In the event, this school had opened up its office to provide IT tuition and support for such parents.

It was clear from teachers' responses overall that differential technology access and knowledge had contributed to cohort fragmentation. This sometimes was linked to children's desire to engage with learning. As one Year 6 teacher put it in July,

[there is a] potential massive divide here because you have some kids who've done no schoolwork since March.

Another explained,

The more able pupils and those that want to learn are confident to be online and ask for help when needed. However, pupils that are disengaged in school or work-shy do not engage. Having no Internet or equipment is also a problem.

However, not everyone was as stressed about formal school learning online. One Year 6 child explained how she had developed a social workaround suited to the new remote model of learning during the first lockdown:

So, the teacher put ... assignments on when we login, so we can see what we do and we usually have a meeting for every lesson. So ... the teacher will explain everything we need to do, so it wasn't that difficult. ... we would cheat and tell the teacher we finished, then we just go out. Often by ourselves. Do whatever we like.

The general picture that is painted throughout these responses is one of fragmentation of pupil experience, learning, and technological access. This fragmentation frequently means disrupted access to learning for those in digitally deprived areas, where there is inferior access to the necessary resources. This is likely to have consequences for secondary school transition. However, at the same time, we also see a form of forced modernisation in relation to various learning technologies, as teachers become increasingly skilled in using new platforms and systems.

Absence of the extended curriculum

The last year of primary school is frequently characterised by an acceleration of the Maths and English curriculum content and examination practice towards the SATs period in early May, followed by a relaxation of the formal curriculum when increased music, drama, sports days, special social events and residential class trips take place, known as the 'extended curriculum'. In 2020, the end of Year 6 proved to be almost unrecognisable for this cohort of children, compared with the experiences of previous years. End-of-school productions were suddenly cancelled. There were no sports days. Residential trips didn't take place. Leavers' Days and assemblies were limited and fairly insignificant in scope. Children had been looking forward to all of these very much. In the words of the various children:

There were a lot of things we were supposed to do but didn't happen, from residential trips to BBQ so it was quite disappointing, but I think the teachers made a lot of effort to keep us happy so we can't complain much either.

Year 6 is meant to be a really fun year but then it all got ruined and we didn't even get a proper leavers' assembly.

I have not been able to hug my friends, and we couldn't have a leavers' party, so we couldn't say goodbye properly to everyone in the year. It means I haven't kept in contact with lots of my friends.

Generally, children came across as resigned but negative overall, although one child reported feeling closer to her classmates after being in a 'bubble' with them for the end of Year 6.

Teachers had clearly tried to do their best in very challenging circumstances, and many had finished much of the usual (prescribed) material by the time of the first lockdown, but others had not been able to cover all the material they planned to before the end of Year 6. As one Year 6 teacher reported:

We prepare them [for secondary school] using a PSHE [Personal Social and Health Education] unit all about changing. And actually that usually leads neatly onto when we do our SRE [Sex and Relationships Education] unit at the end of the summer, which of course didn't happen either. So, I have sent a whole load of children up there who haven't got a clue what the real birds and the bees is. Good luck, high schools!

Year 7 brought its own gaps in curriculum. Almost half of teachers surveyed indicated that the number of practical activities at school had been reduced compared with normal years as a result of the pandemic. Half said there were fewer extracurricular clubs and more than half that the number of trips had been reduced. In particular, science practical activities had frequently been changed to demonstrations, meaning pupils were not able to develop practical skills. Inter-house events and enrichment activities were reduced or not provided. Despite teachers' best efforts, it proved impossible to provide the full educational offer that would otherwise have been accessible to most Year 7 children.

What was striking in some cases in the children's responses was the evident stoicism. As one told us:

I think that it has changed. But although many people think that COVID-19 has made everything horrible, it has cancelled everything ... I honestly think that this has made us even more united because all of us are going through hard times, all of us may be upset, and that is good because then, we can all help each other to make ourselves happy, to think positive and to have fun! Many things have changed, like when We couldn't have a school trip, all school trips were cancelled, we need to wear masks in corridors, we need to sanitise all the time, which is a bit annoying, but we all need to carry on like this for a while to combat Coronavirus and Year 6s need to be ready, strong and brave for the transition next year.

Although quite a lot of children surveyed said they missed the extracurricular provision that they were hoping for in Year 7, Appendix 1 shows that a sizeable group were still enjoying the clubs and sports in which they were able to participate. Many children recognised the constraints they were currently under and were still able to name many things they were enjoying in secondary school.

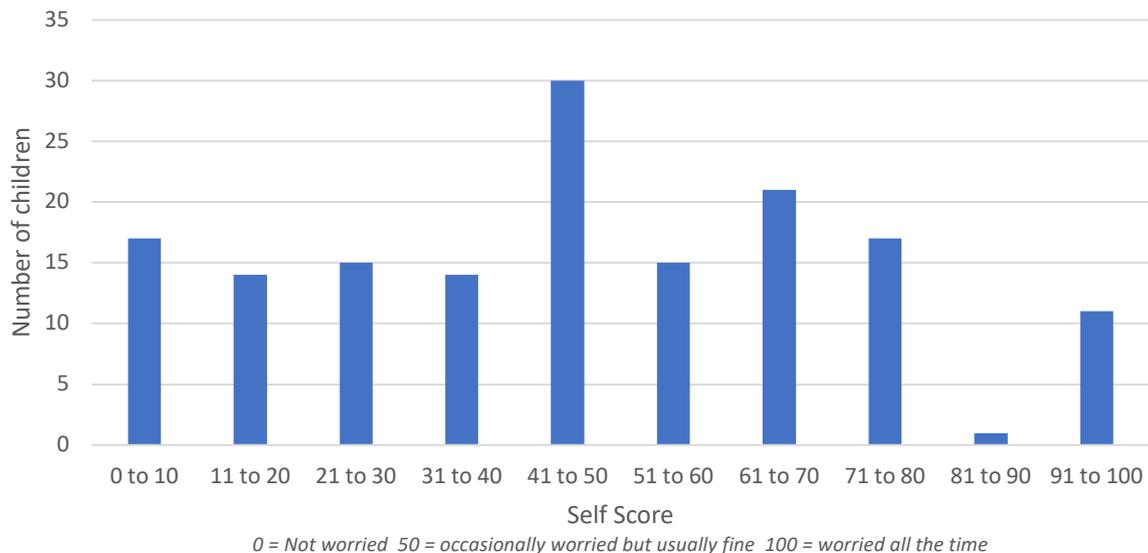
Wider impacts of the pandemic

There were different emotions involved in moving schools during the pandemic. When children were asked in the autumn term if secondary school was turning out as they expected, most pupils indicated that it was the same or better than expected. Similarly, when asked how they have been feeling in general since starting secondary, most indicated they were happier than they had been in primary school. This contrasts with a different picture when Year 6 pupils were asked in July 2020 how happy they were, although it was from a much smaller sample. The next section examines specific issues relating to children's overall wellbeing.

Stress and anxiety

Despite the overall general picture represented above being fairly positive, it is clear that some children were still struggling emotionally in Year 7. When asked how worried they were in general, Year 7 children responded varyingly. Although Figure 4 below shows that the average score falls somewhere in the middle of the ranking index at 49.6, indicating that they might be occasionally worried, but usually fine, there was a significant spread, with 29% scoring over 70 and 7% self-scoring at or near 100, indicating significant anxiety.

Figure 4: Year 7 Pupils' self-scoring of degree of anxiety, autumn 2020



While some children expressed stoicism, others said they struggled during this period. One Year 7 child told us during their first term at secondary,

I start crying every night because it is SO hard to make friends and the way everyone looks at me I don't feel welcome, accepted or understood. Also, I hate TikTok and that is all everyone talks about.

Another reported a litany of difficulties on arrival at secondary school, which was fairly typical of the experience of some other Year 7 pupils,

Almost every break there's a huge crowd and we almost always sit on wet and muddy ground, there's people who mention my name and most of the time when students talk the teachers do absolutely nothing about it. The classes aren't bad, but students always talk and a few teachers do things about it. Social distancing practically isn't a thing and some teachers have favourite students. Kids swear a lot. Teachers don't know. There are a few benches to sit on but they're covered in bird poop. When there are crowds some teachers do nothing. The crowds are huge, like most of the Year 7s, break is too short and some girls and boys pick on people but they never get caught. There is good stuff in this school but they have a lot to work on. I hear my name mentioned too often and some girls keep looking at me and smirking. I'm losing my temper.

Some of this can be attributed to normal adolescent adjustment, but many of the responses indicated ways in which the pandemic had amplified some of the usual problems young people experience when starting secondary school. This was mirrored in some of the teacher comments; for example, one teacher reported that Year 6 children had felt much less secure, more worried about transition, and very aware they had lost opportunities for learning, as well as lost confidence. Some schools had clearly made thoughtful attempts to anticipate problems such as these, and develop effective pastoral solutions, as we found in responses such as this from a Year 7 pupil:

In my school we have a sort of mental health teacher and he ever so often pops in our classes to check we are OK and is always there to help us. I also have an amazing head of year and as much as she is strict, she is also extremely kind.

One secondary school had set weekly preparation sessions for primary pupils who would be arriving, and this was reported as being helpful for a child coming to the school with no existing friends. One of the primary schools had developed an 'anxiety barometer' post-lockdown so children could describe their emotional temperature reading as green, amber or red, encouraging helpful emotional literacy work. However perhaps the most extreme example of institutional adjustments to transition we came across was the case of a special school which taught across both primary and secondary phases. They had abandoned transition altogether and started the Year 7 programme in Year 6, which was said to have worked well.

There were some unintended consequences of teaching Year 7s in 'bubbles' away from other year groups. Several teachers reported positive outcomes from Year 7s not being exposed to the oldest children at their new schools. This was felt to limit the scope for new pupils to copy and learn bad behaviour patterns, and it was also felt to be less intimidating for younger pupils as they started secondary school, thereby reducing general stress. But some pupils were sorry not to mix with older children, perhaps because of having been the oldest in Year 6.

Remote learning during the summer lockdown also proved challenging for some pupils. For example, one teacher reported,

Very high achievers ... they wouldn't be able to cope with the workload that they were being given and I had so many emails saying 'Miss, Miss, Miss, I'm really sorry it's going to be late. My mum said I really need to go out for a walk because I'm just getting too stressed and I don't want to let you down'. And so that was quite hard and I said, 'Look, go for your walk. The work is going to be there if and when you can do it, do it. It's fine. Don't worry.'

Being at home during lockdown with struggling parents also caused problems for some children. For example, as one teacher told us,

One boy in my class, for example, wasn't coming into school, so he was stuck at home with his mum and his brother and things really did spiral out of control. His mental health took a massive dip and he ended up really getting very violent towards his mum and towards his brother and towards his pet dog.

Deprivation and welfare

A very clear theme that arose in the responses related to differential provision for technology amongst school pupils, and links to deprivation. In some schools, teachers bought their own equipment so they could deliver teaching remotely. They also organised food banks, stationery packs, and other forms of support, such as IT training for parents who were more or less unable to support their children's learning otherwise.

For some pupils, home learning appeared to have been a disaster. In the words of one teacher, “*There are no benefits to home learning for the children in our school*”. Another told us, “*We have kids come in that we’ve done the clothes in the washing machine for, and things like that, because there’s not this parental support that they get in other areas*”.

Another expressed a sense of bitterness towards the independent sector,

The comparison with private schools and their teaching in real time makes me extremely angry; real time online teaching takes less time and less work by teachers, is easier to prepare, and makes in-lesson assessment possible. We cannot do it in our school as we have too many pupils sharing IT equipment. We have around 75% of pupils who have kept either absolutely on top of their work, or have done enough to keep in touch. The issue is that the other 25% are the pupils who are sat on in school and who you cannot sit on remotely. An online or even telephone intervention has really no impact.

In addition to two-thirds of teachers surveyed who indicated that they had concerns about the mental health of some or more of their pupils, 30% reported that they had concerns regarding domestic abuse or violence for some of their pupils, almost all of which led to safeguarding referrals by the school. Several teachers reported doing home visits for vulnerable children. As one teacher explained,

We’ve had a few, you know, children who are victims of domestic violence and things like that, and I’ve been really worried about them. And my specific children, in my mind, I’m thinking of, they would hand in the work you know at school, religiously. They’d have a few problems here and there, but they’d come and speak to me about it. And then online they were doing it. And then they just suddenly stopped. I’m really, really worried, so then you know you go through the safeguarding process and things like that.

Another told us,

I actually had one family where I had another parent contact me concerned about the messages that another child was sending her daughter – just saying of the things that were going on in the family and the family was basically breaking down. And so I was able to advise the parents through email and ring Family Connect ... Talk to them about their concerns, they will deal with it anonymously and they did, and managed to help the family ... we actually got the girl into lockdown provision because she wasn’t accessing it ... we were able to then do some work with her in school to support her with the family breakdown that had happened.

There were several other welfare incidents reported to us. For example, in the words of one Year 6 teacher,

By May, June there were other issues that were happening. We were ringing to talk to some parents and parents weren’t there ... obviously away from the home and we were trying to talk to them about their children ... ‘I can’t talk right now, I’m not in’ and this was when we were in lockdown, we were ... well and truly in quarantine.

There were indications that the normal referral process was also disrupted, leading to frustration. Although individual schools and clusters of schools were able to deploy existing resources (e.g. dedicated emotional support workers), one Year 6 teacher reported significant problems accessing help for children during the pandemic, that caused her serious professional concern:

I also took a child to what's called the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Panel. And that's another way we can go and ask for advice, and it's the way that we can get children seen by CAMHS². We don't go directly to CAMHS any more here, we have to go to a triage panel. And we took a child to Panel, but we were given advice first, and actually they asked us to use the mentor, which we had already done.

Overall, it became clear that teachers had been working exceptionally hard during the pandemic to extend their wider pastoral roles, to serve the children in their care, but that the necessary resources had not always been available when and where needed.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic that started in 2020 represents a significant global disaster that has had a serious impact on the educational experiences of children in school. However, it is too early to know whether these have longer-term implications. Despite this, the pandemic also provides a policy window to reform education at considerable pace, with lessons to be learned from the different social and educational issues it exposed. We see two primary areas of consideration for future education policy and practice: moving towards a distinct Year 7 phase in secondary school, and investing nationally in educational technology training, hardware and infrastructure.

1. Moving towards a discrete Year 7 phase in secondary school

Many English secondary schools are extremely large by European standards, frequently with well over 1000 pupils. This means very young pupils are thrown together with a large number of older pupils immediately upon arrival in September. While children gradually adjust to the situation throughout Year 7, comments from children and their teachers suggest to us that this situation might be taken for granted, but that it is perhaps not optimal. It potentially makes behaviour management more difficult within schools, as younger pupils learn bad habits from older ones, and younger pupils are afraid of being bullied at secondary school by the older pupils. Additionally, the large size of the buildings causes a great deal of stress to some younger pupils as they are genuinely fearful of becoming lost or disorientated and worried when this happens, even though paradoxically most children said they wanted the opportunity to wander around a bigger site as well. All of these things mean that children's mental energies are being expended in ways that do not necessarily support the main purpose of moving to secondary school, which is to engage with specialist subject teaching in a more demanding manner,

² Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service

whilst being supported to go through the physical, psychological and emotional changes associated with adolescence.

The natural experiment of ‘bubbles’ presented by the pandemic has meant that new techniques have been tried accommodating Year 7 pupils, with some success. We hesitate to recommend a completely physically separate lower secondary phase, as our research findings do not indicate a desire for that, but simple steps such as having a part of the school mainly (but not exclusively) dedicated to Year 7, with some segregation of social areas for high quality break times as well as separate toilets, can help to mitigate the stress of joining the secondary school. This can then free up children’s cognitive energies for enhanced learning and better-quality social engagement with their Year 7 peer group, setting a positive tone for the years ahead. If complemented by other opportunities to interact with older members of the school in a more controlled environment, perhaps through sports, clubs, performances and trips, this could be a useful tool in promoting high quality learning within a framework of enhanced pupil wellbeing during the early days at secondary school, for the duration of Year 7.

2. National investment in educational technology and training at all levels

Clearly it was fortunate that the pandemic happened a generation after far-reaching global development of new information and communications technologies were introduced, allowing some continuity of professional practice in education that went beyond the simple postal correspondence course. However, education technology investment in most countries, including England, has not gone far enough in terms of ensuring equality of access, or educational resilience during difficult periods. This has led to fragmentation of learning for many children. Until now, the emphasis has frequently been on collective provision within the school building, either through computers sitting in computer rooms, laptop and tablet sets on trolleys locked away at the end of the day, interactive whiteboard use, or expensive online textbooks and educational platform subscriptions used mainly within the school building or by children whose home situations provide for a technologically-enabled experience. At the other extreme, our data indicate that some independent schools saturated relatively young children with all-day online learning, as they saw this as the optimal substitute for a classroom experience. Many stopped the practice when it became apparent children could not cope very well with whole days sitting in front of computer screens being minutely scrutinised by their teachers.

For both independent and state-maintained school sectors, finding the balance between online and offline education proved very challenging, as was working around the inevitable vagaries of broadband availability in different parts of the country, and in different homes. These matters are now too important to be left to chance. There needs to be a structured national programme of training in remote learning, for both pupils and their teachers, combined with the modernisation of educational systems so that multiple forms of access to learning are available at short notice with minimal additional development time required by teachers. This

degree of planned resilience within the system can then usefully support children's learning in a range of difficult situations, ranging from individual problems such as chronic ill-health, through to localised issues such as school fires, transport problems and adverse weather conditions, and national situations such as future pandemics. Twinned with this, there needs to be the introduction of something along the lines of a scholars' broadband package, where those in education can access the best available broadband locally at a token cost from their usual Internet Service Provider, through collaboration with industry (in the same way that reduced price train and bus services are often provided by transport companies for children travelling to school on their routes). Finally, children need to be given routine access to loan laptops to use outside school when they need them, so that they are not disadvantaged by being unable to study online. This needs to be systematically planned and provided for at a national level.

Living through something such as a pandemic is challenging for everyone. In the case of the English education system, it stress-tested social structures and physical infrastructure that had changed surprisingly little since the introduction of interactive whiteboards and teacher email accounts in the early 2000s. It also exposed and exaggerated complex social problems such as mental health, domestic violence, and deprivation. The education system fortunately did not collapse in the face of these challenges. Children were able to engage with a surprising degree of provision carefully and rapidly created by committed teachers. However, the pandemic did have the effect of making these forms of entrenched disadvantage within society more visible than ever before whilst exacerbating them. It exposed quite brutally the increasingly overwhelming difficulties experienced by many children when they are simply trying to gain the education that is their right. If we agree it is necessary to take special care of our youngest pupils as they move into secondary schools, then we also need to pay attention to the learning environment that surrounds them, and learn from adverse events.



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Photos: Kirsten Holst for UCL

Appendix

Figure 5: Pupil views on what has been good about starting secondary school

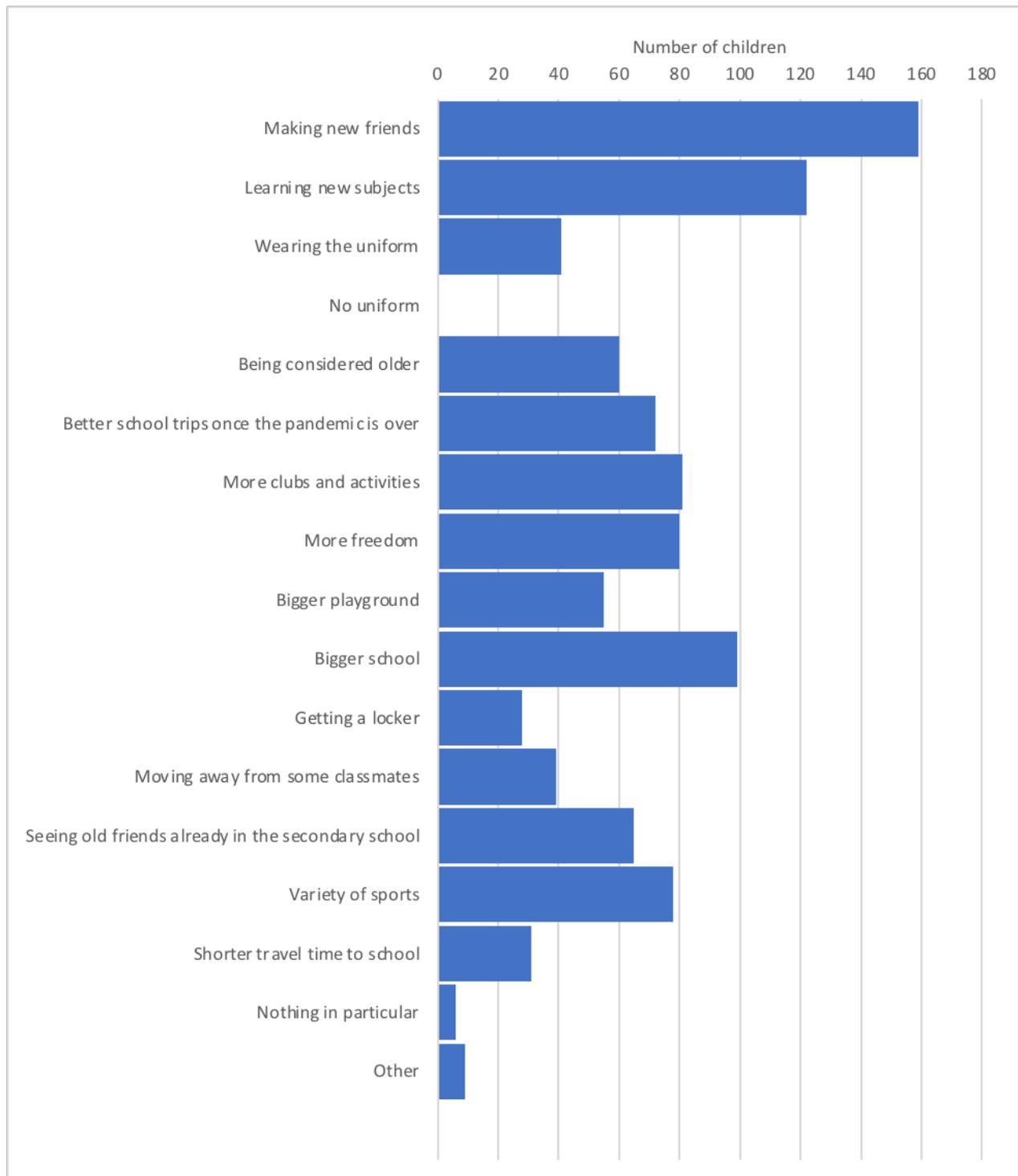


Figure 6: Pupil views on what hasn't been so good about starting secondary school

