

Narrative Literature Review

Student Wellbeing and the Primary to Secondary School Transition: A narrative literature review

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Abstract

Primary to secondary school transition is a significant yet normative milestone in the lives of young people. It is a time when children experience feelings of both excitement and worry, with student wellbeing potentially impacted by a multitude of simultaneous changes in their friendships, school environment and learning expectations. Research that has been published within the last five years points to four main structures that can assist students with moving into secondary school: 1. relationships with significant others (peers, parents and teachers); 2. belongingness; 3. school climate; and 4. school environment. However, whilst other studies have explored these structures, what appears to be missing in the literature is discussion from a holistic, multi-dimensional perspective that prioritises the perceptions of key stakeholders and is also underpinned with wellbeing theory. With wellbeing now identified as a matter of importance for Australian students (Department of Education, 2023), discussion that prioritises student wellbeing is potentially key to highlighting its significance and, ultimately, providing better support for students transitioning into secondary school. Here we review the current literature pertaining to student experience of the transition from primary to secondary school and the support for it in practice, with an additional focus on the potential of Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions Theory (MMT Theory; Jindal-Snape, 2016) to use a variety of perspectives in developing a better understanding of the multifarious complexities of this important time in the lives of students.

Keywords

primary to secondary school transition; student wellbeing; MMT Theory

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Introduction

Arguably, the move between primary and secondary school is one of the most significant transitions in students' lives as it also coincides with major biological changes associated with adolescence and is "generally regarded by educational researchers as a crucial phase in pupils' school careers" (Boone & Demanet, 2020, p. 944). As a significant life event for young people, the transition from primary school to secondary school has, understandably, long attracted the interest of researchers (Anderson et al., 2000; Bagnall et al., 2021c; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Mackenzie et al., 2012; Stevens & Whipp, 2025).

Whilst on one hand this period could be viewed as a seemingly simple move into a new learning environment, the multiplicity of factors encompassed by the change can invoke a wide range of responses, both from the students themselves and the significant others that surround the young person. Described variously as a time of "simultaneous academic, social and environmental discontinuity" (Bagnall et al., 2021b, p. 349), "an ongoing process of psychological, social and educational adaptation" (Beatson et al., 2023, p. 2) and "a complex issue [...] a process in which many have an important stake" (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008, p. 231), the transfer into secondary school clearly involves a lot of work on a number of levels for students as they grapple with major changes in multiple areas of their lives. It is a time of simultaneous "excitement and anxiousness" (Mackenzie et al., 2012, p. 306) and a period during which young people must exert energy and effort to make the move successful. Fortunately, students do not need to do all of the heavy lifting for themselves as there is evidence of a range of support and intervention programs (Bagnall et al., 2021a; Carmen et al., 2011; Chapman & Sawyer, 2001; Ellerbrock et al., 2023) and although the long-term effectiveness of these programs might not be known, researchers commonly point to the localised short-term success in addressing specific needs. In considering school transition from a more holistic perspective, recent efforts have prioritised student wellbeing and personal social and emotional factors over academic concerns (Bagnall et al., 2021c; Jindal-Snape et al., 2020), supported by calls for a more positive discourse across the field (Holt et al., 2023; Jindal-Snape et al., 2021).

To develop an understanding of this significant time in students' lives, this narrative literature review discusses and critiques articles relating to the over-arching question, 'How is student experience of the primary to secondary school transition represented in the literature and supported in practice?' There has been considerable international interest in primary to secondary school transition research over the past five years, including systematic literature reviews that have rigorously and extensively synthesised literature published since 2008. Together, these international systematic literature reviews have made significant contributions to theory, conceptualisation and methodological congruence (Hannah et al., 2023; Jindal-Snape et al., 2020), pupil experiences (Mumford & Birchwood, 2021), educational and wellbeing outcomes (Jindal-Snape et al., 2021), instrumentation (Bagnall & Jindal-Snape, 2023) and intervention design and evaluation (Beatson et al., 2023). However, there is a notable gap within the research field in bringing these insights together through the lens of wellbeing theory and prioritising the perspectives of key stakeholders. Therefore, this narrative literature review aims to further the understanding of the complex, multi-faceted nature of student experience, wellbeing and support in the context of primary to secondary

school transition in a holistic manner, with an additional focus on multiple and multidimensional transitions theory (MMT Theory; Jindal-Snape, 2016) to foreground and frame the review.

1. Multiple and multi-dimensional transitions theory

Multiple and multi-dimensional transitions theory (MMT Theory; Jindal-Snape, 2016) posits that any type of transition is not solely experienced by a person in isolation from others and other events. Transitions are also experienced by significant others close to the individual concerned, with both the individual and others experiencing any number of changes at different times, and that these multiple transitions are also impacted by other experiences and transitions in everyone's lives. Additionally, it acknowledges the impact of all these transitions on the individual's contemporaneous transition experience. In the context of primary to secondary school transition, this means that a student's transition experience might be impacted by the simultaneous transition experiences of themselves and of their parents, peers, school staff, etc., and that these people may also be impacted by what the student is experiencing. Further, other prior transitions of all parties are similarly acknowledged as influencing the student's current transition experience. Whilst this may sound complicated, MMT Theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) essentially acknowledges that a student does not simply move into secondary school in isolation; there is an interwoven network associated with the student which has an impact both of and on them.

There is a growing interest in the use of MMT Theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) to investigate important life transitions as it takes a holistic view of the different simultaneous transitions that an individual might be undergoing, as well as those of significant others around them, and how these intersect, interconnect and impact each other. Indeed, Garner and Bagnall (2024) identify MMT Theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) as 'the most contemporary and recommended theory within school transitions research' (p. 4), and in the present review, the need for studies to include multi-dimensional considerations is repeatedly identified throughout. Whilst an analysis of MMT Theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) is well beyond the scope of this literature review, it is used here to illustrate the importance of considering significant stakeholders' perceptions regarding primary to secondary school transition. Amongst those explicitly advocating for greater holistic understanding based in MMT Theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) are Bagnall et al. (2022), Garner and Bagnall (2024), Hodgkin et al. (2025), Jindal-Snape et al. (2023) and Wood et al. (2025), who all took multiple lived experiences into account in their recent studies. Whilst this allowed for richer, more nuanced exploration of their data, "a comprehensive MMT narrative" (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020, p.559) still cannot yet be written as these studies largely appear not to have included a complete account of the multiple and multidimensional nature of all stakeholders' experiences. A reiteration of the potential for MMT Theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) to provide a sound conceptual base for interpreting participant voice during primary to secondary school transition was discussed in a recent systematic review (Jindal-Snape et al., 2021) which, among other significant issues, also identified a tendency to negatively frame the discourse in the literature and a lack of clearly conceptualized studies in the field, something also highlighted by Hannah et al. (2023). The consideration of these issues provides ample scope for growth in the future, with the use of MMT Theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) potentially being particularly beneficial when authentic and balanced accounts of lived experience during the primary to secondary school

transition are presented. Further, by deeply understanding and connecting with what young people and their families are saying, these lived experiences have the potential to make a significant contribution to prospective policy and practice concerning wellbeing and the successful transition into secondary school.

This narrative review, where wellbeing theory is operationalised as a construct with five contributing elements (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment; Seligman, 2011), will identify and synthesise literature from January 2001 to December 2025. An additional focus on MMT Theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) is also taken to help understand the complexities during this critical time in students' lives as the following research question is addressed:

'How is student experience of primary to secondary school transition represented in the literature and supported in practice?'

2. Method

A narrative literature review was selected to represent the literature as it allows the flexibility to present a broad overview, summary and synthesis of the available literature (Cronin et al., 2008; Green et al., 2006). This is helpful when planning a project as a balanced, comprehensive review of the literature allows for themes to be articulated, as well as any gaps in the literature to be identified.

Search Strategy

In locating literature relevant to this review, multiple database searches were conducted during February and March 2025, with alerts left for all search strings in addition to active, manual re-checking to December 2025. The databases were accessed through Murdoch University's library service and included EBSCO, the Education Database, ERIC, Informit A+, PsycInfo and Taylor and Francis, in addition to Murdoch University's own library search engine. Search strings used the terms 'primary to secondary school transition', 'primary to secondary school transfer' and 'Multiple and Multidimensional Transitions Theory', both individually and in combination with each other. Additionally, the term 'adolescent*' was used in conjunction with the latter three terms to narrow the focus of the search. The date options were left open to ensure that as many articles as possible could be located. Further searches were conducted in August 2025 and, in addition to the search strings above, included the terms 'elementary', 'middle' and 'high' school to ensure that any relevant literature from the United States of America had not been accidentally overlooked.

Inclusion Criteria and Screening process

Through these searches, 231 records were retrieved, of which five related to MMT Theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016). All 231 records were directly screened by the first author, with discussion regarding inclusion and exclusion criteria involving all authors. Duplicates were removed, as were theses and material that had not undergone stringent evaluation such as peer review, resulting in 118 articles. Further screening based on relevancy to the proposed research question was then conducted through reading each item's abstract to identify articles suitable for this review, thereby reducing the number of articles to 65. Figure 1 provides a PRISMA diagram of the literature search process and Table 1 details the inclusion and exclusion criteria:

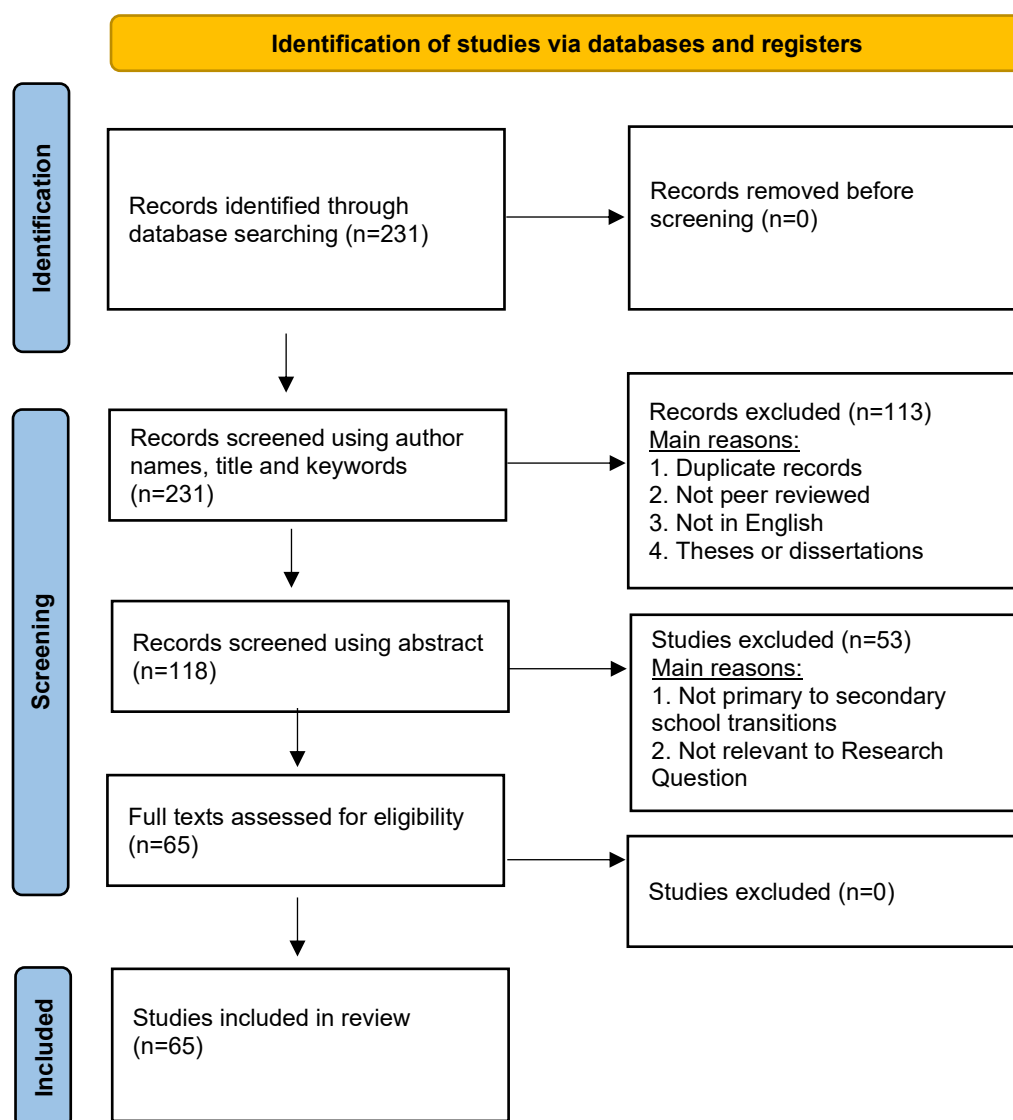


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram of study selection

Criterion	Inclusion and Justification	Exclusion
Type	Peer reviewed articles and edited books or book chapters, due to their perceived reliability and robustness	Conference abstracts Non peer-reviewed articles (e.g., newspaper) Theses/ Dissertations
Language	English-language publications to ensure accurate interpretation by the review's authors and minimise translation errors	Languages other than English

Date	1 January 2001 - 31 December 2025 to allow for maximum input from the field. (The original searches did not set starting date parameters – this was returned from the search itself)	Published prior to January 2001 (nothing returned in searches) Published post-December 2025 (analysis of data already well advanced)
Scope	General primary to secondary school transition to allow for breadth of literature, including ‘elementary’, ‘middle’ and ‘high’ school	Not primary to secondary school transition (e.g. transition post-secondary school; work transitions) Specialised areas (e.g. specific curriculum area)
Relevancy	Directly addresses Research Question as evidenced through the article’s title, abstract, key words and body Student and/or parent and/or teacher perspectives/ perceptions to reflect stakeholder voices and experiences	Did not directly address Research Question

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria of articles

Search Results

This narrative literature review was designed to answer the overarching question, ‘How is student experience of primary to secondary school transition represented in the literature and supported in practice?’, with an additional focus on MMT Theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) to help understand the complexities during this critical time in students’ lives. The 65 relevant articles identified above originate from Australia (n=13), Austria (n=1), Belgium (n=1), Canada (n=1), Finland (n=1), Germany (n=1), Italy (n=1), the Netherlands (n=4), New Zealand (n=1), the United Kingdom (n=31) and the United States of America (n=10). Twelve of the included articles were literature reviews, with ten systematic reviews (Bagnall et al., 2023; Beatson et al., 2023; Bharara, 2020; Dörrenbächer-Ulrich et al., 2023; Hannah et al., 2023; Jindal-Snape et al., 2021; 2020; Lukey et al., 2024; Mumford & Birchwood, 2021; and Topping, 2011), one integrative review (Harris et al., 2024), one unspecified review (Evans et al., 2018) and two theoretical papers (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). The inclusion of the existing reviews and theoretical papers provided strong support for the themes arising from the empirical articles, with any relevant original sources independently included. Care was taken to ensure that the empirical original source was not overly amplified through the inclusion of the reviews, by only using the review documents for their original ideas. Appendix 1 provides a summary of all articles included for analysis within this review.

Methodologically, there were slightly more qualitative (n=20) than quantitative studies (n=17), with a further twelve studies using mixed methods. Two articles were reports. Of the empirical articles, only one study was conducted in a through school, where students can attend the same school from

Kindergarten through to Year 12. The importance of this is that the experience may be different in these two different contexts, something which is largely unexplored in literature.

3. Findings and Discussion

The intention of this narrative review is to present a holistic, objective and comprehensive overview of the literature retrieved during the searches specified above. In keeping with recommendations by Cronin et al. (2008) and Green et al. (2006), a rigorous process of analysis that followed structured guidelines with careful record-keeping was employed. After locating relevant literature through the methods previously described, the main findings were identified through reading, re-reading and summarizing each article, with a summary table and supplementary notes maintained during the process. Open, interpretative analysis of the content allowed the key points of each article to be identified, with these then grouped and synthesised across the body of literature prior to the writing of the narrative review.

The transition into secondary school was universally acknowledged as being of importance across all reviewed articles. Whilst there were many different foci for the articles and a wide range of findings, some common themes developed during the analysis process described above. In answering the research question ‘How is student experience of primary to secondary school transition represented in the literature and supported in practice?’, these themes shall now be discussed under the headings ‘Student Wellbeing’, ‘Supportive Structures’ and ‘Project Considerations’, with MMT Theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) imbuing the discussion.

Student Wellbeing

Student wellbeing has been given prominence in the education systems of many developed countries, including through the introduction of a student wellbeing framework in Australia (Department of Education, 2023), the provision of guidance, resources and prioritising of student voice in the United Kingdom (Children’s Commissioner, 2026; Department for Education, 2025) and through federally curated and maintained resources in the United States of America (U.S. Department of Education, 2026). In the context of primary to secondary school transition, however, nurturing the emotional wellbeing of students is currently discussed as being both critically important but lacking in the literature (Bagnall et al., 2021b; Bagnall & Jindal-Snape, 2023). Additionally, the importance of safe, supportive environments with supportive peers and teachers who value student voice and prioritise student relationships are also highlighted (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; van Rens et al., 2019). Attending to student wellbeing, including better understanding around mental health and developing targeted social-emotional skills intervention programs, is becoming more common in the literature (Donaldson, Hawkins, et al., 2024; Pollak et al., 2024), although there is still much work to do in the field, particularly when considering the long-term effects of programs and in terms of government efforts to promote student wellbeing.

Sniedze-Gregory et al. (2021) recommended two broad, long-term aims to assist students with the move into secondary school in both the short and long term. First, that schools should look to promote “a sense of community and belonging” (p. 63) amongst all their members and second, that students should ‘develop a “wellbeing buffer” around themselves that includes skills to manage life changes’ (p. 63). Additionally, Sniedze-Gregory et al. (2021) suggest that student voice should be

listened to and that support efforts should be framed in a positive or growth-focused manner, consistent with recommendations also made by Bagnall et al. (2021a) and Jindal-Snape et al. (2021) and providing strong foundations for future exploration.

Changes in the learning environment between primary school and secondary school have been commonly reported as contributing to both positive and negative student experiences (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020; Mackenzie et al., 2012). In countries with highly stratified educational systems such as Belgium and the Netherlands, students are streamed into various academic tracks for their secondary education based on grades and teacher recommendations in primary school (Boone & Demanet, 2020; Lorijn, Laninga-Wijnen & Ryan, 2024). Boone and Demanet (2020) report that students who were placed on a non-academic track were found to feel greater futility and be at greater risk of disengagement. This lack of control over their educational future could negatively affect students' motivation and wellbeing and is also interesting when considered in conjunction with recent findings that mental health trajectories can potentially be tracked from childhood and that links between school type, bullying and victimisation can also be drawn (Donaldson, Hawkins et al., 2024; Donaldson, Morgan et al., 2024). Therefore, the multidimensional aspects of student mental health, motivation and overall wellbeing, including the trajectories and intertwining of all three, constitutes an area worthy of closer scrutiny due to the potential to impact student experience as they transition into secondary school.

Relatedly, understanding how and why various psychological aspects affect adolescents might allow for better wellbeing support provisions; however, there appears to be limited "research on psychological factors in promoting positive transition" (Bharara, 2020, p. 115). Providing some insight, Dörrenbächer-Ulrich et al. (2023) found that links between self-regulated learning, executive functioning and metacognition cannot be overlooked, especially during primary to secondary school transition when stronger demands are placed on self-regulated learning. Further research into how these three processes work, as well as greater awareness of and support in schools for the reported dips in self-efficacy and motivation across primary to secondary school transition, were called for (Dörrenbächer-Ulrich et al., 2023), especially as these are the very aspects of self-regulated learning that could assist students to cope with the variety of changes associated with moving into secondary school (van Rens et al., 2019) and might well improve overall student wellbeing.

The literature strongly indicates that the social and emotional wellbeing of students is critically important, with 16 articles in this section highlighting its significance, and studies that prioritise student perspectives alongside the voices of significant others in the school community are ideally positioned to develop the holistic understanding of the transition into secondary school from a first-hand perspective. There is clearly an opportunity to untangle some of the psychological complexities associated with this important stage of child development, with potential links to ways that wellbeing can be enhanced and students better supported as they navigate the changes, both in policy and in practice.

Supportive Structures

There is concurrence across the literature that students are more likely to experience a less problematic move into secondary school when they feel supported. Whilst a range of supports were discussed, they were dominated by four main structures: relationships with significant others (peers, parents and teachers); belongingness; school climate; and school environment.

Relationship with others

Key amongst sources of support seems to be the relationships that students have with significant others in their lives, including their families, peers and teachers (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; Mumford & Birchwood, 2021; Rogers et al., 2017). The importance of social support has been discussed as being vitally important for academic achievement (Lin et al., 2024), with friendships and peer relationships often the most pressing issue for students as they move into secondary school (Ashton, 2008). Time and multiple opportunities for students to build relationships with others in their new learning environment are important and have been discussed as helping to combat loneliness, with parents and teachers needing to be cognisant of and responsive to what students are going through (Coffey, 2013; Lorijn, Zwier, et al., 2024). Further, Bagnall et al. (2024) posit that supportive relationships need to be considered holistically, multi-dimensionally and within the broader context of student wellbeing, including children's perceptions of what they are both excited and concerned about, allowing for a richer narrative of the transition experience to be told. Indeed, when holistically exploring the voices of students and their primary to secondary school transitions experiences, Hodgkin et al. (2025) recently described a "complex web of mechanisms that work together" (p. 11) to support children, adding strength to the importance of supportive relationships at this critical time.

In a different yet complementary vein, the work of Lorijn, Laninga-Wijnen et al. (2024) and Lorijn, Zwier et al. (2024) describes the important role that peers can play in helping to combat school disengagement and loneliness. However, the dataset suffered from a 45.1% attrition rate, meaning that valuable information could have been lost, thereby impacting the results of the study. In addition, the Dutch education system differs from that in countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom in that it is highly stratified academically, meaning that different results might eventuate if the study were to be conducted elsewhere. Nevertheless, the importance of considering the multiple contextual factors surrounding the nature of relationships with significant others and the move into secondary school can clearly be seen, with its importance gaining prominence in recent years (Demkowicz et al., 2023; Holt et al., 2023).

Belongingness

Relatedly, and identified as being significant in the literature, is a student's sense of belonging to their school, with some studies finding a sense of connection with both their peers and teachers important influencing factors in belongingness (Brewin & Statham, 2011; Espelage et al., 2015; Hassard et al., 2024). Indeed, Hassard et al. (2024) found relatedness to be relatively stable across the transition into secondary school and in a broad sense, these results are encouraging. It must be remembered, however, that the timing of Hassard et al.'s (2024) data collection coincided with initiatives put in place by the State Government of Queensland, Australia, to support the systemic change to include Year 7 as part of secondary school which may have favourably biased the results and that the study suffered from a high attrition rate. It would be interesting to investigate whether the positive influence of these initiatives remains today.

When evaluating the psychological effects of the transition into secondary school, Evans et al.'s (2018) review explored the importance and effect of environmental and individual level constructs as well as contextual variables. One recurring feature in Evans et al. (2018) was the importance of strong relationships and social support networks in assisting students to make a more positive transfer and to feel as though they belonged; however, several inconsistencies across the literature

they reviewed made it difficult to draw firm conclusions. These inconsistencies pertain to the currency of the studies, with many using older data and not accounting for the issues of today's adolescents, including the use of readily available technology. Additionally, and as found in this review, a wide variety of programmes or initiatives were reported on in the short to medium-term on one aspect or facet of primary to secondary school transition in one cohort of students only, with the continued impacts or benefits of programmes over truly longitudinal time periods and in multiple cohorts of students or considering multiple aspects and the 'big picture' largely unreported. Further studies that start to unpack belongingness from a psychological needs and wellbeing perspective would be well-placed to shed insight into this multi-faceted phenomenon including, perhaps, how competency support aids relatedness and a sense of belonging.

Further emphasising the importance of belongingness, Heinsch et al. (2019) responded to an identified community need "to better understand the relationship between school connectedness and youth mental health" (Heinsch et al., 2019, p. 340) when students move into secondary school. Whilst this was a small scale study in one school and there were areas that might have benefitted from further discussion during the focus group sessions (for example, how and why the identified "safe places" (Heinsch et al., 2019, p. 351) are beneficial), the importance that the participants placed on friendships in helping them to feel comfortable and connected with their new school was strongly illuminated. This led Heinsch et al. (2019) to suggest that schools should provide structured opportunities for students to interact, thereby using the benefits of peer relationships to assist with building the protective networks that can support young people during their move into secondary school. Wood et al. (2025) further reiterated the important role that whole school approaches can play in providing opportunities for students to take a more central, active role in their support of and for each other. Using solely student perceptions, Wood et al. (2025) suggest that including the perceptions of parents and school staff might be beneficial in providing a more holistic view in future studies, something that is also strongly advocated for in the work of others (Bagnall et al., 2022; Curson et al., 2019; Packer et al., 2024).

School climate and school environment

The secondary school climate and environment have both been linked with a sense of belongingness in the literature and discussed as potential protective factors in assisting with student wellbeing and positive mental health (Wang et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2025). It has also been suggested that the early development of positive relationships with teachers can assist students with a stronger sense of belonging to school, greater engagement and generally better academic outcomes later (Katsantonis, 2025). These three studies, however, generally focussed on only one aspect of the multi-dimensional nature of school climate or environment and two (Katsantonis, 2025 and Wang et al., 2019) used data selected from large existing datasets. Whilst data acquired in this manner can yield valuable information given the wide scope of survey respondents, the nuances within the data and personal perspectives cannot be explored further due to the broad and anonymous contributions. Nevertheless, other studies such as Duchesne et al. (2012) and Fraser et al. (2021) have discussed the importance of school climate, culture and structure in successful transitions, with Espelage et al. (2015) also identifying that peer bullying behaviour can be impacted by the support of teachers and a sense of belonging. Therefore, unravelling the inherent multiple subtleties of school climate and environment through qualitatively harnessing the power of participant voice, potentially longitudinally, and analysing it from a psychosocial perspective might be key. Additionally, whilst the

relatedness nutriment of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) is mentioned in Katsantonis (2025), the use of this theory as an analytic tool may shed greater insight into the links between relationships, engagement and motivation.

When considering school environment, the opportunity for students to progress from primary through to secondary school on the same campus could be regarded as an advantage as they would already be somewhat familiar with the school's features. This was surprisingly not the case for the participants in Mackenzie et al.'s (2012) study based in a through school (Kindergarten to Year 12), where no strongly discernible difference was found between students who moved through from the primary school and those who entered in Year 7. With a limited number of studies conducted in such environments, this is potentially an avenue worth exploring in future studies, in addition to the support mechanisms that exist in K-12 environments.

Transition support and supportive programs

All reviewed literature that focused on reporting on the effects of transition support programs found that the programs assisted students in some way. Recent efforts (Anderson et al., 2015; Bagnall et al., 2021a; Bagnall et al., 2024) have focussed on aspects of social and emotional developmental support, particularly with reducing the number of worries that students have about moving into secondary school, finding a contemporaneously positive effect on the social and emotional skills of the student participants. However, these studies all reported on short-term effects and what is not clear is whether any of these three programs had lasting effects on the participants in their future school lives, nor if the programs have been repeated with similar results. Other transition program research has focused on building leadership skills (Kostina-Ritchey et al., 2017) or supportive networks (Chapman & Sawyer, 2001; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2023), generally identifying that transition is a process which needs to allow for responsiveness to emergent student needs, relationships are crucial and that longer-term studies would help to unpack these further. Relatedly, Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) described how effective transition programs can be of great benefit to students and detailed many ideas of activities that might support students through this time. Whilst it is unclear from other literature if there has been any uptake of Cauley and Jovanovich's (2006) ideas, their sentiments were echoed by Akos (2022) who identified that parent orientations were important and that "programs that facilitate and build upon student enthusiasm and confidence might provide encouragement to overcome worries and build motivation during transition" (p. 344).

A unique perspective was provided by Visser et al. (2023), who conducted a fully retrospective study approximately five to six years after students had participated in a program designed to improve their academic track, finding that the students viewed the program positively and they had felt motivated to try harder, at least in the short term. Whilst it could be argued that retrospective studies might be impacted by participants' subjectivity or clouded memory over time, the opportunity to reflect and discuss enduring effects and memories is not common in the literature. The study by Visser et al. (2023) was impacted by the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic, with a gap of almost a year between some of the interviews; however, no mention of how the time differential nor the impacts of isolation might have affected the participants' perspectives was mentioned. Further, longitudinal studies appear to be scant in the literature and could help to evaluate the stakeholder perceived effectiveness of existing programs in schools over time which

might, in turn, lead to better understanding of the actual long-term impact of the programs and potentially enhance support for future cohorts.

Although the breadth of a variety of intervention programs and investigation of specific supports adds considerably to the field, what appears to be missing are qualitative, big picture wellbeing studies that investigate what significant stakeholders (students, parents and immediate school staff) think, feel and experience during the move into secondary school. Indeed, Hodgkin et al. (2025) and Packer et al. (2021) have both recently explored the voices of stakeholders and highlighted the importance of listening to and working with learners, as well as the need to include more research involving students' families so that a more holistic picture of the transition process can be established. Additionally, studies that investigate these stakeholder needs from a psychological needs perspective also appear to be lacking.

This lack of deep understanding of multi-dimensional, first-hand experiences might have implications for how best to involve, include and support all stakeholders as students move into secondary school. Furthermore, the voices of key frontline staff such as education assistants who are in close contact with students, especially those who might be vulnerable to a poorer transition, appear to be largely absent from the literature. This means that a wealth of information pertaining to support that could be useful to students and the broader community might be missing. By investigating the efficacy of current measures implemented by schools, greater understanding as to whether they continue to meet student needs in an ever-changing world or not could potentially be obtained.

The need for flexibility in meeting student needs has been discussed by a number of researchers over time including Brewin and Statham (2011), Carmen et al. (2011), Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2014) and, more recently, by Wood et al. (2025), who propose that students should not only be listened to but be at the forefront of the planning for successful transitions. With both the educational and home environments playing a major role in shaping the futures of our young people, it therefore seems important for studies to listen to what all significant stakeholders have to say, harnessing the experiences and strengths of all and amalgamating them in order to understand how individuals and groups of students can be supported and empowered to move forward and embrace the transition into secondary school positively.

4. Project Considerations

Despite the primary to secondary school transition period seeming to be a well-researched area, scholars continue to identify a paucity of studies that prioritise qualitative student involvement and perspectives (Ashton, 2008; Bagnall & Jindal-Snape, 2023; Mumford & Birchwood, 2021). As the main stakeholder at this significant time in their lives, the importance of considering student voice cannot be underestimated. Heinsch et al. (2019) advocate for the inclusion of "young people as competent contributing research participants" (p. 351), positing that their active involvement and first-hand perspectives have the potential to add much deeper insights than might otherwise be gained. When investigating phenomena with many intersecting complexities, such as the transition into secondary school, student voice can clearly be seen to be an advantage (Sniedze-Gregory et al., 2021).

In developing our understanding of the transition into secondary school, it is also important to listen to the perspectives of significant stakeholders to gain a more holistic view of the lives and circumstances surrounding young people (Bagnall et al., 2021b; Coffey, 2013; Hodgkin et al., 2025; Lukey et al., 2024; Packer et al., 2021). Indeed, Jindal-Snape and Miller (2008) state that “schools should not neglect the beneficial impact on children of informal support from families, peers and the community” (p. 231), thereby highlighting the significant role that others play in supporting young people to move between the levels of school. This is supported by the work of many scholars, including Bagnall et al. (2022), Curson et al. (2019), Topping (2011) and Wang et al. (2019), who concur that the families, peers and teachers all play a vital role in supporting the transition of students into secondary school. Moreover, the aforementioned scholars recommend that the voices of significant others be given attention as their perspectives tend to be scant in the literature.

Fitting in, or a sense of belonging, was described as important to students and benefiting their wellbeing in some studies as previously discussed (Hassard et al., 2024; Heinsch et al., 2019). Whilst these studies tended to focus on mainstream students, a limited number of other studies focused on exploring the experiences of minority groups, such as those from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Cunningham et al., 2024) and ‘looked after’ children (Francis et al., 2021). Whilst both studies were small in scale and unique to certain parts of England, these studies highlighted the importance of considering and attending to the needs of individuals and minority groups within larger cohorts. Harris et al. (2024) concur that consideration, research and support need to be provided for children with “nondominant intersecting identities, such as religion, physical disability, special education needs, and sexual identity” (p. 81) as this appears to be largely missing in the literature. Qualitative studies might provide greater scope for the voices of potential minority groups to be heard which might, in turn, lead to greater understanding of their experiences and how they can best be supported as they move into secondary school. Additionally, it is worth noting that all studies included in this literature review were conducted in Western countries and that voices from a non-Western perspective are scant in the literature, leaving researchers to ponder how primary to secondary school transition works and impacts students in a broader, international sense.

Further support for the inclusion of previously under-represented aspects, including socio-economic status, in the transition literature is found in the work of Garner and Bagnall (2024) and Bharara (2020), the latter calling for socio-demographic factors in connection with wellbeing and ‘the significance of physical, spiritual and psychological facilitators’ (p. 118) to feature in future studies. Bagnall et al. (2021a) identified that students with special educational needs, including social and emotional mental health concerns, were profoundly under-represented in the literature. This led to Bagnall et al. (2021a) reiterating the importance of listening to stakeholder voice and strongly advocating for greater interest across the research community in addressing the paucity of work investigating and presenting the voices of students with additional needs. By investigating the move into secondary school in a qualitative, holistic manner, some of these previously scarcely reported aspects of students’ lives might be able to come to the fore and their impacts from a multi-dimensional, psychosocial perspective to be analysed.

School environments that embrace the interwoven nature of indigenous Australian identity, knowledge, culture and cultural practices were described by Lukey et al. (2024) as being a strong enabler for student engagement, participation and wellbeing across the move into secondary school. Unfortunately, Lukey et al.’s (2024) systematic review found little evidence that first-hand

indigenous perspectives have been included in many studies, nor evaluation evidence of many programmes that were described as supporting indigenous students to participate in secondary schools. This was accompanied by a call for schools to build “ongoing, authentic and trusting” (Lukey et al., 2024, p. 404) relationships with indigenous communities. Further evidence in support of this is provided in Sniedze-Gregory et al. (2021), who found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students felt less joy and contentment when moving into secondary school, as well as greater uncertainty. This is clearly an area that requires attention. With seemingly few other studies attending to the needs of indigenous peoples during primary to secondary school transition around the world, this appears to be an area that again might benefit from holistic, qualitative studies as this might allow indigenous participants to share their culture, knowledge and experiences so that a fuller picture of their identity and understandings can be represented in the literature.

It therefore seems vital for research into important stages of life (Jindal-Snape, 2016) to be ongoing and to include diverse voices (Cunningham et al., 2024), reflect a variety of situational circumstances and keep abreast of contextual changes, such as that of the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, Bagnall et al. (2022) and Edge et al. (2023) concur that the restrictions of the pandemic had an immediate detrimental effect on school students, reporting increased levels of social-emotional disturbance, heightened anxiety and greater difficulty with settling into the new school. Whilst the long-term effects of the pandemic are unclear, major, sudden changes are known to have an immense impact on all concerned in educational communities and schools then need to adapt quickly.

It seems important, therefore, that school transitions research needs to take a wide-angle approach so that the experience can be narrated with as much richness of detail as possible, thus further highlighting the need to underpin studies with an open, holistic theoretical framework such as that afforded by MMT Theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016). By including and valuing all participants’ contributions in a sensitive and considerate manner, a diverse opinion and perspective base can be represented and interconnections can be explored, all of which will greatly contribute towards the continually developing multi-dimensional understanding of student wellbeing during the transition into secondary school and potentially contribute to best educational practice.

5. Limitations

This narrative literature review aimed to answer the research question, ‘How is student experience of the primary to secondary school transition represented in the literature and supported in practice?’ by identifying and synthesising contemporary themes within the field. Despite best efforts, it is possible that some relevant literature might have been missed during the search processes; additionally, the literature located represents a largely Western focus and future endeavours will focus on locating research representing a greater diversity of cultures and backgrounds. The paucity of studies investigating factors such as psychological needs during school transition and diverse student backgrounds (e.g. students with a variety of additional support needs) makes it difficult to identify key themes or to generalise findings in these areas; further, this then limits the ability to plan effective policies and practices to support the wide gamut of students at their specific points of need. Methodologically, the inclusion of other literature reviews in this narrative review could be viewed as a limitation due to the potential crossover of articles; however,

using the review documents for their original ideas provided valuable insights in support of the themes developed. A meta-synthesis of all extant literature reviews might be a fruitful contribution to the field. Finally, primary to secondary school transition research is an active and constantly evolving area, meaning that the findings of this literature review should be considered in conjunction with emerging literature.

6. Conclusion

Transitioning from primary into secondary school clearly continues to be an important time in the lives of children (Garner & Bagnall, 2024; Holt et al., 2023), with student wellbeing and supportive networks being crucial elements in ensuring that the process is successful. In determining what is happening both with and for the young people concerned, it seems important for projects to prioritise first-hand significant stakeholder perspectives so that the multi-dimensional nature of the experience can be fully captured. Additionally, research into psychological factors which might impact students during the transition into secondary school is sparse (Bharara, 2020; Dörrenbächer-Ulrich et al., 2023), as is clearly conceptualised research with a focus on wellbeing (Hannah et al., 2023; Jindal-Snape et al., 2021) and studies which include these might prove beneficial to the field. Moreover, studies that consider the holistic, dynamic and interactive nature of transitions have been advocated for (Bagnall et al., 2024; Jindal-Snape et al., 2020) and greater use of MMT Theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) might well allow for a more comprehensive understanding to be gained. The call for more clearly conceptualised research with a focus on wellbeing that also reframes the discussion in a more positive manner (Hannah et al., 2023; Jindal-Snape et al., 2020; Jindal-Snape et al., 2021) should also be heeded as this might also assist with the move into secondary school being seen more broadly as something to look forward to and is vital to progress the discourse in the field.

Therefore, carefully planned studies which use first-hand stakeholder perspectives, clearly articulate the conceptualisation of all aspects and are underpinned with robust theories would be well-placed to make a significant contribution to the field of school transitions research in both a broad and nuanced sense. Through identifying and synthesising key themes in the literature, including the importance of sound methodology and theorisation, this narrative review has paved the way for future empirical studies to embrace the power of valuing diversity of stakeholder voices in understanding the multi-dimensionality of the transition experience into secondary school. Additionally, this deeper understanding of the significant life event might have further implications for policy and practice, particularly in terms of how broader networks of support over longer periods of time could enhance the transition process for all involved.

Ethics and Consent

Ethics approval was not required to conduct this review of the literature as it did not involve human or animal participants.

Data Availability Statement

Data was acquired from previously published research and Appendix 1 contains information relevant to the reviewed articles.

Competing Interests

CB is a member of IJELT's editorial team and was removed from the review process to ensure independent review and editing.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the conceptualisation of the literature review. KS undertook the literature searches, analysis of literature and wrote the original draft manuscript. PW, SC and CB made contributions to and edited the original manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version.

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