Introduction and background

The transition to primary school is a critical period for children and their families. During this time, children experience a new and different environment with increased demands and expectations, which can lead to higher levels of anxiety and stress. Previous research indicates that half of children are reported by their teachers to have difficulty adjusting to formal schooling. Successful transition predicts later school achievement, socio-emotional outcomes, and well-being with sustained long-term benefits.

With the first national lockdown in March 2020, the closures of educational settings and social distancing measures, transition practices were severely disrupted and support for the transition of young children from nursery to school was limited. In July 2020, the Bristol City Council Early Years Team commissioned an academic team at the University of Bristol to investigate the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on early years transitions to school, with a focus on young children with SEND. Researchers adopted a mixed-methods research design to provide a more detailed picture of settings’ typical transition practices and the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on with a focus on pupils with SEND. In the first phase of the project (June/July 2020), data was gathered from an online survey. Responses were received from 33 practitioners from Primary Schools and 23 practitioners from pre-school practitioners. Phase 2 involved semi-structured interviews with 10 early years Coordinators/Reception teachers in October-November 2020 after children started school.

Key findings

Key challenges of early years to primary transition

- Respondents noted a lack of face-to-face contact with children and families and expressed a concern that this would affect the building of relationships and the children’s preparation for transition.
- There were reduced opportunities for children and their families to visit the primary school or the class and familiarise themselves with the environment, meet their teacher and peers.
- Much early years provision was closed or staff were furloughed. This meant in many cases that it was not possible to have contact between settings.
- Respondents noted a general lack of government guidance, and a lack of specific guidance on early years transition. Lack of clarity, late arrival of advice, and constant changes in guidance were all mentioned as a challenge.
- For children with SEND, the difficulties in planning transition were magnified for a number of reasons. It was not possible to observe children in their preschool setting. Furthermore, there was no access to keyworkers and information, or to face-to-face meetings with services offering specialist support to build important relationships. Lack of face-to-face interventions sometimes meant that it was difficult to access medical or Speech and Language Therapy or educational specialists’ reports.
- The data indicated that many ‘typical’ transition activities had been curtailed by the pandemic. Responses in September 2020 showed significant reductions in terms of: Inviting pre-school pupils to come physically to the setting (46% to 0%); inviting Early Years Coordinators/Reception Teachers to meet a child (92% to 12.5%); and liaison between pre-school and primary staff (92% to 67%).

Key facilitators for transition

- When it worked well, technology and moving online helped to facilitate transition. Three-quarters of participants reported making videos for incoming children, holding virtual meetings with families, and with other professionals.
- In terms of communication, respondents noted the usefulness of having accurate and available contact lists.
Impacts of COVID-19 on children, families, and early years practitioners.

- Removal of or disruption in pre-school provision was reported as having an impact on children’s Language development and communication; social development; emotional wellbeing, risk taking and resilience; independence skills; physical development, especially fine and gross motor skills; and early learning skills.
- Data showed that the negative impact of the pandemic on children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children with SEND has been much greater.
- Food poverty and food insecurity were highlighted in some responses as key impact on families. Feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, stress were mentioned in relation to the emotional wellbeing of parents.
- Impact on early years practitioners: Some teachers had felt unprepared and unskilled to respond to the new technical and digital demands made on them. The learning curve was steep. The most significant impact related to teachers’ emotional wellbeing. Our interviewees talked about feeling stressed, overworked, and incredibly concerned about the children and families they work with. Emotional stress derived from the fact that teachers were trying to minimise the impact of the pandemic on children and support them and their families as best as they could.

Conclusions and recommendations

- Early years transition as revealed in this study was varied, albeit with several commonly shared practices. However, planning and execution appeared to be largely reliant on individual professionals’ initiatives and actions. There was, however, little evidence of a clearly articulated, consistent and systematic approach to transition across all settings.
- Recommendation 1: Clearer expectations in relation to key components of transition to school are needed to ensure all settings can support smooth and positive transitions to school.
- The importance of building strong relationships between schools and early years settings was evident in our study. Our data suggest that systems and established practices of effective communication across settings are not always in place. Communication that does exist, is again reliant on individuals’ energy and willingness to make links and build relations with professionals working in other settings.
- Recommendation 2: All settings should be supported to develop and establish agreed methods and systems of communication so that transition can be jointly considered and planned. Local Authority leadership and support could ensure this is effected.
- The most common transition activities reported related to achieving productive relationships with families. Our findings support a growing base of evidence highlighting the importance of parental engagement in promoting school success among children. Uses of online/digital communication, although seen as less desirable than face-to-face interactions were very effective in achieving engagement, sometimes more effective for families who have English as an Additional Language.
- Recommendation 3: A focus on building positive relationships with parents prior to children starting school could support children’s transition to school and promote school success. It would be useful to evaluate the effectiveness of online/digital communication and incorporating successful aspects of this into working with parents to prepare planning for transition.
- Planning transition for children with SEND was particularly challenging.
- Recommendation 4: There is a need for an early and targeted focus on planning for transition of children with SEND.
- In relation to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children’s first year of schooling, there was a noticeable ‘regression’ of skills. This impact was greater for children with SEND and children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Recommendation 5: Careful assessment of need and provision of support will be required during Reception and into Year 1. More research is needed on the impact of the pandemic on children’s first year at school.
- Findings from this research highlight the importance of support networks for early years professionals, alongside a supportive school system, that can promote reflection and evaluation of good practice in relation to transition as well as emotional support in times of need.
- Recommendation 6: Leadership in schools should be informed about the best early years practice in relation to supporting transitions and supportive of processes which encourage reflection, evaluation, and teacher wellbeing.

Contact

- Any readers interested in hearing more about a new follow-on research project, ‘The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Children’s First Year at School’, can contact Dr Ioanna Bakopoulou: ioanna.bakopoulou@bristol.ac.uk.

Further details for the research can be obtained by contacting Dr Bakopoulou (see above)