Supporting Students' Mental Health and Wellbeing as They Transition from Primary School to Secondary School

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The transition from primary school to secondary school is an important milestone for young people and the challenges that students face at this time have been widely researched. However, there seems to be a gap in how schools proactively support students to prepare for the transition to ensure that their mental health and wellbeing is at the forefront of decision-making. With one in seven young people diagnosed with mental health problems, and puberty occurring around the time of transition, it is critical that schools consider the impact of this period of change on their students. Through a comprehensive literature review and desktop-based research, this current paper explores how schools can impact this time of heightened vulnerability by considering the importance of sense of belonging, relationships between students, staff and parents, and positive school climate. The results will reflect these areas and show that a proactive approach to mental health teacher training and whole-school programmes that develop students' social and emotional skills, resilience and relationships are key to students thriving during this transition from primary school to secondary school. This paper concludes with recommendations for schools to implement to better support the transition period to enhance the wellbeing of its students as well as suggestions for future research.

Background and Purpose

Research consistently shows that mental ill health in children and adolescents continues to be a burden for families, schools, and the health system in Australia and internationally (Allen & McKenzie, 2015; Houghton et al., 2022). Data reveals that approximately 20% of adolescents report experiencing a mental health problem in any given year (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2014), with depression being the most significant burden of all mental health conditions worldwide (Friedrich, 2017; Patel et al., 2007; Whiteford et al., 2013). With the

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average age of mental illness onset becoming much younger schools have a significant part to play in the identification, prevention, promotion, and intervention of mental health (Allen & McKenzie, 2015; Commissioner for Children and Young People [CCYP], 2020; Giles-Kaye et al., 2022).

Evidence suggests that negative mental health can be prevented, and positive mental health protected (Clarke et al., 2011). This has led to a growing focus on positive psychology over the past decade and what this means, especially in the developmental context of school-aged children. Furthermore, it has been argued that focusing on positive mental wellbeing has the potential to alleviate loneliness, worry and disconnection through to clinical mental illness (Allen & McKenzie, 2015). If young people are not well mentally, they are unable to participate and thrive in their families, schools, and communities. Educational research consistently shows that students who participate in wellbeing programmes at school and who have positive or higher levels of wellbeing are more likely to connect positively with their peers, less likely to be risk-takers, more likely to seek mental health support when required, are better engaged and motivated at school, more likely to achieve academically and have lower rates of mental illnesses (Australian Education Research Organisation [AERO], 2023; CCYP, 2020; Korpershoek et al., 2020).

Increases in mental health concerns in young people over the last two decades has led to schools adopting programmes that promote positive education (Kern et al., 2015; Rickard et al., 2023; Seligman et al., 2009) and sense of belonging (AERO, 2023; NSW Department of Education, 2020), and have a better awareness of school climate (Lester & Cross, 2015; Riekie et al., 2017). This approach aims to enhance students' wellbeing and support young people in being help seekers and advocates for their social and emotional development (Teng et al., 2017).

Through the adolescent years, young people experience significant physiological, emotional, cognitive, and social development, particularly with the onset of puberty (Lester et al., 2013). The transition between primary and secondary schooling adds another layer of complexity via

changes to structures, authority figures, peers and academic expectations (Lester & Cross, 2015). Consequently, it is a period that can impact young people's social and emotional health positively and/or negatively. It can create uncertainty, disconnection between peers, and anxiety in young people (Allen & McKenzie, 2015; Lester et al., 2013). With mental health issues on the rise among adolescents (Houghton et al., 2022), it is important to consider how this transition has an impact on young people's psychosocial development and how schools can better support this important stage of growth.

The aim of the desk-based research presented in this paper was to better understand the additional supports required to enhance the wellbeing and mental health of students as they transition from primary school to secondary school. The literature review undertaken to address the aim examined: the prevalence of mental health in young people and the impact on their everyday functioning, the role schools currently play in supporting and promoting mental health, and the challenges that are presented to students and staff when the former transitions from primary school to secondary school. The specific focus of the review was on the role of sense of belonging in supporting students' mental health and wellbeing, and the significant impact that school climate can have on a young person's psychosocial development, particularly during transition. This research culminates in key recommendations for schools about how they can implement programmes and strategies to create an environment for students that facilitates personal development and academic endeavour, especially as they transition to secondary school.

This desktop-based research was conducted via a thorough critical review of the literature specific to mental health and wellbeing, primary school to secondary school transition, sense of belonging and school climate. Literature that was published within the past decade worldwide (but primarily within Australia) was the focus. The review was set within the PRISMA framework (Page et al., 2021). The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement was designed to help systematic reviewers transparently report why the review is being done, what the authors did, and what they found. Searches were undertaken via UWA One Search, ERIC, EBSCO, Google

Scholar, Pro-Quest Psychology/Education Journals, PsycINFO, Sage Journals online, and Wiley online. Keywords for this present study are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1
Keywords used for literature searches

Keywords	Alternatives and Related Words
Transition	School change, moving
Secondary school	High school, senior school, middle school, intermediate years, junior high school
Primary school	Junior school, early years
Adolescent	Young people/person, child/ren, student/s, peers, teenager/s
Mental health	Wellbeing, mental illness, flourish, life satisfaction
School climate	School culture, school environment
Sense of belonging	Connectedness, relationships, belonging

Note: This table includes keywords and their alternatives or related words used by the researcher when searching for relevant literature.

Following the review of the literature, the researcher identified key areas that schools are addressing to support young people during the move from primary school to secondary school as well as identifying the gaps that existed and required attention. Based on this information, recommendations were made for strategies that schools can implement as well as recommendations for further research.

The main research question posed: "How can schools better support students' mental health and wellbeing during transition from primary school to secondary school" allowed a focus on the importance of mental health and wellbeing in adolescents, recognising that transitions are challenging, and adolescents require additional support during this time. Two sub-questions were formulated:

• What is the role of sense of belonging in supporting transition?
• How can a positive school climate support transition?

Mental Health in Adolescence

Mental health is defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2013, p. 38) as a "state of wellbeing in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her own community". The term mental health represents a continuum, ranging from mild circumstances such as stress, worry and loneliness, through to clinical issues including depression, anxiety, and psychosis (Allen & McKenzie, 2015; Beyond Blue, 2022; National Mental Health Commission, 2021). Schools nowadays encourage students to be proactive in understanding mental health, protecting their wellbeing, and seeking help to prevent the development of significant negative mental health outcomes that will impact their academic success, relationships, and ability to cope with challenges (Allen et al., 2017).

Prevalence of mental health problems among young people

Internationally, the prevalence of mental health disorders in adolescents is increasing (Houghton et al., 2022) while the age of onset is decreasing, thereby calling for continued investment into mental health research, prevention, and promotion strategies for young people (Lawrence, et al., 2016a). In Australia, results from The Young Minds Matter (YMM): the second Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (Lawrence et al., 2016b) indicated that one in seven (13.9%) young people aged between 4 and 17 years experience a mental health condition in any given year. According to Lawrence et al. (2016b) the four most parent/carer-reported disorders were: attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (7.4%), anxiety disorder (6.9%), major depressive disorder (2.8%) and conduct disorder (2.1%). Of these children, almost one-third experienced co-morbidity with one or more other disorders within the previous 12 months (Lawrence et al., 2016b). This is not surprising since in conditions such as ADHD comorbidity is common. The YMM (2016) data reported separation anxiety as the most common anxiety disorder in 4 to 11 years (4.9%) while in 12 to 17 years it was social phobia and separation anxiety disorder being equally most common (3.4%). This shows that there is a slight shift between primary

school-aged children and young adolescents in secondary schools when considering anxiety. Since COVID-19, however, longitudinal studies in Australia (e.g., Houghton et al., 2022; Magson et al., 2021) have revealed that internalising conditions such as anxiety and depression have increased significantly among 10- to 20-year-olds.

It should be noted the YMM survey used parent/carer reports to assess seven common mental disorders using diagnostic scales aligned with DSM-5 criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and it is unknown if children had received official diagnoses. However, the Speaking Out Survey (2021) indicated that students in secondary school experience "poor life satisfaction, low self-esteem, high levels of stress and the feeling they can't cope with life's challenges" (CCYP, 2021). Thus, the evidence is clear that a significant proportion of young people experience mental ill health that leads to immediate and longer-term adverse social and educational outcomes (Lawrence et al., 2019; UNICEF Office of Research, 2017) as well as decreased life satisfaction and a diminished sense of wellbeing (Christensen et al., 2017).

Gender differences

The Speaking Out Survey (2021) reported that females consider their wellbeing less favourably than their male peers, with one in four females reporting concerns about poor life satisfaction, low self-concept, relationship issues, conflict, personal safety, and independence. The survey found that in primary school there are no significant differences according to gender regarding mental health self-reporting; however, there is a substantial gap in how females and males report across multiple wellbeing domains once in secondary school. Specifically, older adolescent females (16 - 17 years) experience the highest rates of major depressive disorder (19.6%) compared to younger females (11 - 15 years) who self-reported major depressive disorder (7.2%). This links to self-reported self-harm and non-suicidal self-injury, with one in 12 females reporting that they had engaged in self-harm in the previous 12 months. Conversely, one in 12 older males self-reported major depressive orders compared to one in 35 younger males. Similar differences were reflected in the self-harm statistics where it was noted that self-harm was more

common among girls, particularly in the older age group (Lawrence et al., 2016b).

Impact of mental health on everyday functioning

Major depressive disorder has been identified as having the greatest impact on a child's wellbeing when considering school, friends and social activities, family, and impact on self. Of adolescents who have depression, 42.8% reported it as having a severe impact on their lives and this was directly related to school refusal and absenteeism (Lawrence et al., 2016b). Children with mental health problems are known to miss more school days, experience three times the rate of suspension and exclusion from school, are more likely to drop out of school, and have lower rates of attendance and educational achievement (Dalsgaard et al., 2020; Houghton, et al., 2022). Furthermore, children with anxiety and/or depression were more likely to have time off school than those peers with conduct disorder (Lawrence et al., 2016b).

There is no doubt that mental health disorders impact adolescents' ability to connect with their peers, manage peer rejection and respond to peer victimisation (Allen & McKenzie, 2015). It is well-documented that students with mental health disorders find academic motivation, achievement and engagement challenging and that they are at a disadvantage to their peers (Allen et al., 2017; Dalsgaard, et al., 2020). Furthermore, mental health issues can impact one's ability to sleep well and eat healthy, having a physical impact on their wellbeing (CCYP, 2021).

Factors impacting mental health

Multiple factors can impact an adolescent's mental health including exposure to adversity, peer pressure, identity exploration, bullying, significant life changes and the quality of their home life (Beyond Blue, 2022; WHO, 2021). Bor et al.'s (2014) systematic review of mental health problems increasing in the 21st-century outlined the following as factors impacting adolescents: parenting styles, split families, Western culture, increased exposure to screens, internet and social media, and

parental mental health history. It is widely researched that not being connected positively with peers has a detrimental impact on adolescents' mental health including increased feelings of loneliness, low mood, emotional distress, and psychosocial disturbance, all of which can lead to anxiety and depression (Allen & McKenzie, 2015).

The transition from primary school to secondary school can have a significant impact on a child's psychological, social, and intellectual wellbeing and is a challenging time in which schools try to match the developmental needs of students with the school structures and programmes (Engels et al., 2019; Lester & Cross, 2015; Waters et al., 2014b). It is a time when there can be increased feelings of loneliness, isolation, victimisation, disengagement, and negative behaviours by students (Beatson et al., 2022, Jindal-Snape et al., 2020; van Rens et al., 2018). Adolescents shift from a reliance on their parents to wanting autonomy and responsibility over various aspects of their lives (Engels et al., 2019; Holt et al., 2022; Waters et al., 2014a).

Physical and environmental factors that impact students in both positive and negative ways include changes in class size, changes to the structure and routine of the school day, the variety of teachers, social hierarchy, larger cohorts, and new resources and buildings (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020; Lester & Cross, 2015). This present research explores how children perceive these changes and the protective factors that can assist children at this vulnerable time, including for example, sense of belonging (AERO, 2023), positive expectations (Waters et al., 2014b), relationships (Coffey, 2013) and positive school climate (Lester & Cross, 2015). Although this research paper does not focus on students with specific learning difficulties, it is important to note that students in need of learning support and with disabilities require "a more personalised approach and a longer period of transition support than their typically developing peers" (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020, p. 550).

Factors Associated with Primary to Secondary Transitions: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

To date, research has focused primarily on the negative factors associated with the transition from primary to secondary school and how they contribute to the perceptions, anxiety and experiences of students. Lester et al. (2013) stated that there is a reduced sense of connectedness when students first enter secondary school. This is of significant concern as a lack of connectedness can be associated with symptoms of poor mental health, in particular anxiety and depression (Allen & Kern, 2020; Bharara, 2020; Lester et al., 2013). Depending on the context of the school, some students will be changing schools entirely and having to make new peer connections, whilst others will be transitioning into secondary school within the same school that has all year levels (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020).

Research suggests that the environment of the school can cause stress and anxiety for some students because they have problems managing the larger setting, fear getting lost when moving between classes, experience anxiety from negative interactions with teachers, and often misconceive expectations from teachers (Bharara, 2020; Jindal-Snape et al., 2020; van Rens et al., 2018). The research consistently supports the finding that the stress and anxiety felt by adolescents in the lead-up to transition and during this period could be their perceptions rather than lived experience. For example, students may develop the perception that secondary teachers are stricter than primary teachers, that teachers will have different pedagogical approaches and show a negative attitude towards students (Lester & Cross, 2015). Furthermore, the research has found that the transition period is a time of decreased academic engagement and achievement, increase in absenteeism, decline in mental health, and increased disconnect and conflict with peers (Bharara, 2020; van Rens et al., 2018).

Research has tended to focus on the positive factors that can contribute to a successful transition and enhance the experience for adolescents and their families in recent times. Jindal-Snape et al. (2020), in their systematic review of the transition in schools around the world, outlined

a strong bias towards focusing on what works and why, rather than a deficit model. This has shifted the focus to examining the social and emotional capabilities that adolescents require to manage the transition. Through reviewing nine different studies, Jindal-Snape et al. (2020) discovered that students' ability to control negative emotions and solve problems to deal with a variety of social and contextual factors, along with their adaptability can assist before, during and post-transition. This is supported by Bharara's (2020) systematic review that focused on the positive education paradigm and identified that schools that focused on the preparation of students' character strengths, self-efficacy, personal safety, and competencies were best positioned for a positive transition experience.

The research that focuses on the positive aspects of transition has explored how students enjoy the autonomy and variety of moving between classes, experiencing different academic subjects and being part of a larger school population with greater opportunities to make more friends (Coffey, 2013; Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). Some students enjoy the structure and routine of the secondary school environment rather than feeling overwhelmed by these changes (Holt et al., 2022; Lester & Cross, 2015).

The importance of relationships during transition

Relationships and engagement in school, whether it be with peers, teachers or families are important factors to a successful transition. Applying Self-Determination Theory (Ryan, 2023) to the school context demonstrates the need for relationships with all stakeholders to promote positive wellbeing and mental health outcomes (Lester et al., 2013). Current research indicates that relationships in primary school with peers is critical for setting positive expectations and perceptions of the upcoming transition, and this continues into the first year of secondary schooling (Coffey, 2013). However, Waters et al. (2014a) argued that the parent's relationship with the child and presence at home before and after school are the most influential factors for the actual experience rather than just the expectations; however, it must be noted that this research was limited to Catholic Schools in Western Australia.

Peer-to-peer relationships

The transition from primary school to secondary school can present opportunities for students to widen their friendship group, create new friendships and opportunities to make friends with older students (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). This can be a cause for worry for some students, particularly those who experienced negative interactions with peers and who may have been bullied in primary school (Lester & Cross, 2015). The research consistently shows that peer relationships are the most significant protective factor for mental and emotional wellbeing, not just during transition but through the adolescent years (Houghton et al., 2022). Therefore, there must be a focus before transition on developing competencies such as social skills, ability to make new friends, resilience, and good communication skills (Coffey, 2013; Lester & Cross, 2015). Positive peer relationships help adolescents feel connected and safe in the school environment (Virtanen et al., 2020).

Fostering resilience and peer connections into the new secondary environment is important in promoting engagement in studies, positive expectations, and attendance; however, this may not necessarily assist those who are going to different schools than their primary school peers (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020; Virtanen et al., 2020). Many secondary schools offer peer support or mentor programmes to aid students in their transition. This often involves students from older year groups working with younger students, helping them learn the school routines and expectations, thereby easing the transition (Coffey, 2013; Jindal-Snape et al., 2020; Riekie et al., 2017).

Teacher-to-student relationships

The change in relationship between teachers and students is significant when students move from primary school to secondary school. In primary school, teachers spend more time with the same group of students, providing an opportunity to gain a different perspective and insight into the psychosocial development of a child (Giles-Kaye et al., 2022). The perceived relationships with secondary school teachers can be both

positive and negative for adolescents. There can be a perception that secondary teachers are stricter, have higher expectations and rules, and have less time for understanding an individual child's needs (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). A challenge can be having to meet the expectations of many teachers and those teachers not communicating regarding homework or other common areas of concern (van Rens et al., 2018).

Conversely, a positive teacher and student relationship can be a protective factor for the emotional wellbeing of a child (Lester & Cross, 2015). Jindal-Snape et al. (2020) suggested that teachers can foster a positive relationship with students by responding to mistakes with patience, focusing on individual student's achievements and encouraging self-efficacy. Some students enjoy the variety of pedagogical approaches and subjects on offer as well as the independence that comes with the nature of timetables and routines in secondary school (Waters et al., 2014). When children feel safe at school and supported by the teachers, they are more likely to engage academically and socially and experience positive mental health and wellbeing (van Rens et al., 2018).

Parent and school partnerships

When all stakeholders – students, teachers, and parents – are actively engaged in the transition process, any challenges are more likely to be addressed positively and, consequently, students have a smoother transition (van Rens et al., 2018). In the adolescent years, there is a move away from family to peers, with a significant change from relying on parents to relying on peers (Lester & Cross, 2015; Waters, Lester, & Cross, 2014a); however, children with parents who are responsive and involved in their schooling have a more positive experience (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). Adolescents who have a positive relationship with their parents are more likely to have decreased problem and risk-taking behaviours, substance use and depression (Waters et al., 2014a).

Through a systematic literature review, van Res et al. (2017) examined parent involvement with their child's schooling and the positive impact they can have on transition. They specifically examined the lead-up to the transition as well as the continuing support following transition.

Three areas of support that parents can provide were outlined: direct participation, academic encouragement, and expectations for attainment (Chen & Gregory, 2009). Parents who monitored homework completion, discussed the school experience with their child, monitored their child's friendships, assisted with the changes in routine and provided an appropriate study space helped to support the transition and academic engagement and achievement of their child as well as their mental health and wellbeing (Chen & Gregory, 2009; Giallo et al., 2010; van Rens et al., 2018).

Jindal-Snape et al. (2020) examined how parents can positively engage with schools before, during and after the transition process. This included attending transition information evenings, sharing information with the school about the child's psychosocial development, speaking positively about transition with their child and encouraging autonomy and independence at home (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). Parent involvement in the transition process was identified as a protective factor for children's mental health and wellbeing, and, consequently, a successful and supported transition. Furthermore, effective communication between home and school helps to support a child in their psychosocial and academic development (Coffey, 2013; van Rens et al., 2018). With some students moving from a primary school to a new secondary school, such communication becomes even more important with parents needing to share information about their child's development to ensure the appropriate support is provided at the new school (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020).

School Climate as an Important Factor in Reducing the Impact of Transition

The construct of school climate, along with its definition, has varied greatly over time and has evolved from being unidimensional to multidimensional because research has developed to include a wide range of factors (e.g., school participation, engagement, emotional and physical safety, physical environment, relationships, discipline, school structures and connectedness: Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Bear, 2020; Coelho et al., 2020; Lester & Cross, 2015; Thapa et al., 2013).

Upon reviewing and analysing several frameworks that address school climate, Bear (2020) summarised school climate into four domains: social and emotional support, structure, student engagement, and safety. Similarly, Thapa et al. (2013) outlined five essential dimensions of school climate: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, institutional environment, and the school improvement process. Although each domain has its own clear meaning and purpose, they are interlinked and together support students' learning engagement and outcomes, as well as their social and emotional learning and development (Bear, 2020; Thapa et al., 2013). Conversely, Aldridge and McChesney (2018, p. 122) defined school climate as "encompassing the norms, expectations, and beliefs that contribute to creating a psychosocial environment that determines the extent to which people feel physically, emotionally, and socially safe". Furthermore, Lester and Cross (2015) summarised a positive school climate as one that helps to foster students' social and emotional growth, mental health, and academic outcomes whilst supporting both their physical and social safety. On the other hand, a negative school climate can create disengagement and feelings of not being safe, and enhance risk-taking behaviours (Aldridge et al., 2016; Coelho et al., 2020). Despite the definitions and domains varying, research suggests there are common factors that contribute to a positive school climate and consequently an environment that supports students' emotional wellbeing and mental health.

What contributes to a positive school climate?

A key contributor to a positive school climate is relationships, including connections between students with their peers, students with their teachers and self-concept (Thapa et al., 2013). Students who feel connected at school are less likely to engage in antisocial behaviours and are more engaged in learning (Aldridge et al., 2016; Thapa et al., 2013). Kutsyuruba et al. (2015) explored the connection between relationships and school climate and found a positive correlation between positive relationships and behavioural outcomes. Ultimately, this leads to students feeling safe and respected at school (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). A focus on positive connections can assist in mitigating violence and

bullying in schools and increasing students' sense of belonging (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Thapa et al., 2013).

Feeling safe is a fundamental human need (Maslow, 1943) and contributes to a positive school climate. Safety encompasses social, emotional, and physical safety and can be fostered through a school's structures, rules and norms, values, and prevention programmes (Aldridge et al., 2016; Kutsyuruba et al., 2015; Lester & Cross, 2015; Thapa et al., 2013). Thapa et al. (2013) examined this notion through a literature review and discovered that many students do not feel safe within the school environment, and this negatively impacted their perception of the school climate. A focus on relationships and sense of belonging can therefore assist in combating this feeling of being unsafe and can reduce the likelihood of bullying and aggressive behaviours (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015).

Consistent and fair rules and expectations, as well as learning environments that foster respect, cooperative learning, and mutual trust, contribute to a positive school climate (Thapa et al., 2013). This is evidenced in the level of support provided by teachers for all learning needs, their expectations for student achievement, and the quality of pedagogical approaches (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015; Lester & Cross, 2015). A positive school climate promotes academic success for all students and, as a result, improved academic and behavioural outcomes ensue (Thapa et al., 2013).

The importance of a positive school climate to support transition

The research is clear that a positive school climate is instrumental in being a protective factor against mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and stress, as well as improving academic outcomes (Lester & Cross, 2015). At a time when students are most vulnerable during transition from primary school to secondary school and at the time of the onset of puberty, a positive school climate can provide a safe, supportive, and connected environment for students to flourish (Aldridge, et al., 2016; Kutsyuruba et al., 2015; Waters et al., 2010). Individuals' experiences during transition can be impacted by the quality of

relationships between them and their peers, teachers and school community, the quality of teaching and learning, and the structures in place to support them in their growth and development. The students' perceptions of these factors and the school climate are pivotal in the outcome of their experience of transition and whether they flourish during this period (Aldridge, et al., 2016). The research supports that the main components of school climate that impact adolescents during transition are relationships, connectedness, and a sense of safety, all of which can assist in academic achievement, consistent attendance, friendship formation and social and emotional development (Lester & Cross, 2015).

Sense of Belonging is Essential for Positive Transitions

One key contributing factor to students experiencing a healthy level of wellbeing and, ultimately, thriving at school, is a sense of belonging. Belonging is a basic human psychological need and is defined by Goodenow and Grady (1993, p. 60-61) as "the extent to which they (students) feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others". Belonging can also be referred to as connectedness and is defined by Chung-do et al. (2013) as a multi-dimensional construct encompassing behavioural, cognitive, and affective factors. The desire of humans to be loved and accepted is not a new concept and is supported by Maslow's 'A Theory of Human Motivation' (1943) in which he discusses the hierarchy of needs and identifies belonging as one of the fundamental desires of human beings.

Research supports that a positive sense of belonging is a protective factor against mental health illnesses including depression and anxiety and can be a key indicator of how a student is coping with the social, emotional, and academic pressures of adolescence (Allen & Kern, 2020; Longaretti, 2020; Marraccini & Brier, 2017; Newman et al., 2007; Slaten et al., 2016). It also shows that students who feel connected to their peers and community have greater academic success, better peer and teacher relationships, better self-esteem, and greater life satisfaction (NSW Department of Education, 2020). Furthermore, students who have a positive sense of belonging are less likely to participate in behaviours

such as self-harm, suicidal ideation, absenteeism, vandalism, bullying, fighting, substance abuse, and disruptive behaviours (Allen & Kern, 2020; Marraccini & Brier, 2017).

Most of the research has explored the positive aspects of sense of belonging, however, it must be considered that sense of belonging is a spectrum and the opposite (i.e., negative aspects) is also possible (Allen & Kern, 2020). In response to this, some research (Allen & Kern, 2020; Arslan, 2021) has examined the impact of students having little or no sense of belonging and findings revealed these students felt detached and isolated from their peers. The other aspect of this research was that as sense of belonging strengthened for the majority, the minority were further isolated and consequently their sense of belonging weakened (Allen & Kern, 2020; Arslan, 2021). If a student does not have a strong sense of belonging within the school community this will negatively impact their engagement, academic achievement, attendance, decision-making, interactions with their peers and relationship with their teachers (Allen & Kern, 2020; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Marraccini & Brier, 2017).

The link between belonging and students' engagement, mental health, wellbeing, and academic outcomes is supported unequivocally in the research. The literature outlines several key components that schools address when focusing on belonging: positive teacher-student relationships, positive peer relationships, and involvement in co-curricular activities (CCYP, 2020; NSW Department of Education, 2020; Slaten et al., 2016). This is further supported by research that has examined students' perceptions and perspectives on the role of belonging during transition to secondary school. Students reported that belonging is a feeling and relates to the positive connections with teachers, social acceptance and feeling safe at school (Longaretti, 2020; Sime et al., 2021). Moreover, research suggests that students who report a reduced sense of belonging or connectedness in the initial stages of transition tend to have poorer emotional, academic, and social outcomes (Lester et al., 2013). This is supported by Jindal-Snape et al.'s (2020) systematic review, however, it is noted that this stabilises after a short period of time and is not an ongoing concern, provided the right supports are in place.

System-Level Factors that Contribute to Wellbeing and Mental Health in Schools

A number of system-level factors have also been demonstrated to be essential for supporting the transition of students from primary school to secondary school. These are summarised in the present section.

Whole-school approaches

The Australian Student Wellbeing Framework (2018) was developed to support schools in the development of whole-school approaches to wellbeing, to systematically address several elements of student wellbeing and "create the conditions for positive wellbeing outcomes for students and staff" (CCYP, 2020, p. 11). The research literature indicates that although many schools, particularly those associated with the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA) and Catholic Education Western Australia (CEWA), have whole-school approaches to student wellbeing and understand the importance of addressing it, none of the education sectors have a system-wide framework (CCYP, 2020), that is until recently when the CEWA 2022 Strategic Wellbeing Framework (Allison et al., 2021) was released.

A literature review conducted by CCYP (2020) for the project 'Supporting student wellbeing in WA schools' outlined the key elements for whole-school approaches: leadership, strategy and planning, support for students, social and emotional learning for students, student voice, student safety, partnerships with support agencies, and training for teaching staff. Some of the challenges associated with implementing these practices included a lack of resources and funding, lack of support, inconsistent application of wellbeing approaches, and difficulty assessing the impact of programmes (CCYP, 2020; Exner-Cortens, et al., 2022; Langley et al., 2010).

It seems to be the case that individual schools are choosing a variety of programmes that are whole-school approaches for transition into secondary school, anti-bullying, social and emotional literacy, help-seeking behaviours, peer support programmes, and child-safe practices

(CCYP, 2020; Giles-Kaye, et al., 2022; Langley et al., 2010; Shepherd et al., 2016). The research supports that targeted approaches are required to have a more significant impact on students' wellbeing. This may include a focus on students with disabilities, students at educational risk, indigenous students, culturally and linguistically diverse students, students with mental health needs, students with challenging behaviours, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and asexual students. Adopting this more targeted approach recognises that whole-school approaches do not address all students' support needs (CCYP, 2020)

Through a literature review focusing on positive transitions from primary to secondary school, Bharara (2020) discovered that whole-school approaches are required to support a positive transition, encourage achievement, and support students' wellbeing. If students are prepared and supported through specific programmes before and through the transition, there is a greater opportunity for a successful transition that grows students' psychosocial development (Bharara, 2020).

Positive Education

Research shows that many schools in recent years have focused their wellbeing programmes on a Positive Education framework that combines positive psychology and best teaching practices to help students flourish (Allen & McKenzie, 2015; Kern et al., 2015). The PERMA framework developed by Seligman (2011) outlined the five domains of flourishing: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment, and many schools are adopting this to develop programmes and direct operational decisions within schools to maximise students' wellbeing and social and emotional literacy (Allen et al., 2017; Kern et al., 2015; Rickard et al., 2023). Through adopting a Positive Education approach, schools can provide students with the tools and strategies to flourish. When this is done in the lead-up to the transition, students may have the skills to better cope with the change, adapt to different structures and be more resilient when faced with new challenges (Bharara, 2020). The impact, both short and long-term, of high levels of wellbeing or flourishing on academic achievement, engagement, connectedness, and behaviour is well-documented and this

supports the implementation of Positive Education programmes in schools (Rickard et al., 2023). However, the research also shows that the success of these programmes has been varied and if students are not provided with the tools and knowledge to develop their social and emotional learning and understand the importance of it, the effectiveness of it to impact students' wellbeing is compromised (CCYP, 2020; Evidence for Learning, 2022).

Mental health promotion

According to the WHO (2021), mental health promotion involves interventions that improve overall wellbeing, link people to mental health support agencies, enhance social and emotional literacy and encourage positive behaviour changes. Increasingly schools are being used for mental health promotion and prevention to remove barriers for adolescents accessing support and helping to minimise those who need clinical and professional mental health intervention (Anderson et al., 2019; Ohrt, et al., 2020; Langley et al., 2010). Effective mental health promotion can assist with identifying and responding to the mental health needs of students and consequently avoid issues such as school refusal, and by promoting help-seeking behaviours by minimising the stigma of mental health issues and normalising accessing support (Allen & McKenzie, 2015; Anderson et al., 2019; Teng et al., 2017). Mental health promotion can involve specific programmes and focus on issues such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and depression (Ohrt et al., 2020), or the promotion of support available to students as being advocates for their personal wellbeing and mental health (Teng et al., 2017).

Teacher training

Due to the nature of the school environment and the frequency of contact that teachers have with students, teachers are well-positioned to identify signs of distress, changes in behaviour and initial signs of mental illnesses (Exner-Cortens et al., 2022; Kelly, et al., 2011; Shepherd et al., 2016). However, many teachers lack the knowledge and confidence to address these concerns or even to identify them in the first instance

(Allen & McKenzie, 2015; Ohrt et al., 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Research supports that early intervention can decrease the impact of mental health illnesses on individuals and can promote help-seeking behaviours (Anderson et al., 2019; Teng et al., 2017).

Professional learning is essential to provide teachers with the skills, strategies, and confidence to respond to the increasing need for mental health and wellbeing support in schools (Allen & McKenzie, 2015; Anderson, et al., 2019; Giles-Kaye et al., 2022; Jorm et al., 2010; Kelly, et al., 2011). Training also plays an important role in reducing the stigma and attitudes of teachers towards mental health issues and the impact it has on students and ultimately their engagement and achievement at school (Anderson et al., 2019; Ohrt, et al., 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Anderson et al.'s (2019) systematic review of mental health training in secondary schools reported that training programmes were valuable in increasing the knowledge and attitudes of staff towards mental health; however, there was no conclusion as to whether training staff improved help-seeking behaviours of the students or the quality of the help that teachers provided the students. This was primarily due to the research being around increasing the knowledge and attitudes of teachers rather than a focus on the application of this knowledge and this being difficult to assess (Anderson et al., 2019).

Recommendations

The present research examined a critical time in the lives of young people when they may be particularly vulnerable to adverse impacts on their mental health and wellbeing, namely the transition from primary to secondary school. Based on prior research, as outlined in the literature review, there are key areas that schools should focus on with greater intensity to ensure that young people are supported during this transitory period of their lives.

The importance of sense of belonging, positive school climate and personal relationships as protective factors against mental health problems is prominent in this present paper. Schools need to consider

how they can build the capacity of their students to manage peer conflict and to have the confidence and social skills to initiate friendships prior to the transition point. This can be achieved through evidence-based social and emotional whole-school programmes such as URSTRONG (URSTRONG, 2023) that promote healthy relationships, build resilience, teach social and emotional competencies, and help students manage conflict. Programmes such as this should be utilised in both primary and secondary schools, not only in preparation for the transition or just when students have transitioned. In further support of this, schools should review how structures in the school create a sense of belonging. This can include, for example, pastoral structures that promote connections among students across year groups, co-curricular programmes that support the interests and skills of students, peer support programmes that connect the younger students with older student leaders, and leadership opportunities that promote student voice and agency.

Schools have access to an abundance of programmes that explicitly teach social and emotional learning, character strengths, resilience, and healthy relationships. It is important that evidence-based programmes are used, and they are implemented as part of a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing rather than as isolated programmes. Examples of initiatives and programmes that schools have access to and are successfully using include:

- Be You (Beyond Blue, 2023) – an initiative of Beyond Blue to provide evidence-based professional learning, tools, and resources to educators to support the mental health and wellbeing of their students. This resource is funded by the Australian Government and was developed in collaboration with headspace and Early Childhood Australia.
- Mentally Healthy Schools (Mentally Healthy WA, 2023) - a framework and resources to support the Act-Belong-Commit message in classrooms and schools to promote and improve the mental health of the school community. This programme was an initiative of Curtin University in partnership with the Mental Health Commission of Western Australia.

- Positive Education Enhanced Curriculum (Institute of Positive Education, 2023) – an explicit curriculum developed by the Institute of Positive Education in partnership with Geelong Grammar School to teach students the key concepts of wellbeing through a positive psychology lens to help students to thrive.
- Life Ed's Guide to Thrive (Life Ed, 2023) – professional development for teachers, classroom resources and parent resources to prepare students for the transition to secondary school. Developed in partnership with the Australian Government and Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).
- The Resilience Project (The Resilience Project, 2023)– a whole-school approach to wellbeing through explicit curriculum, surveys and digital presentations to help prevent mental ill-health and build young people's capacity to deal with adversity. This programme's effectiveness has been evaluated by the University of Melbourne and the University of Adelaide.

Although it is not feasible in all schools to find a substantial amount of time to deliver these programmes, the research supports that programmes that are evidence-based and delivered well can have a significant impact on young people's social and emotional competencies. Therefore, schools must prioritise time in the school day to regularly teach these programmes as well as to train staff to implicitly include wellbeing strategies and approaches in their pedagogy.

Due to the prevalence of mental health concerns in young people and the impact it can have on their everyday functioning, schools must provide support for students in the way of pastoral care staff. This might include year coordinators, chaplains, counsellors, and psychologists to assist students' academic engagement and achievement, their ability to respond positively to challenging situations, and to promote healthy help-seeking behaviours. This can be challenging for schools due to limited budgets and staffing, or location, such as schools in rural and isolated areas. It is also possible that support staff are at capacity and unable to help students with low-level needs. Therefore, it is crucial that teaching staff and

education assistants are provided with the appropriate training to identify mental health concerns and the knowledge of how to assist students who are in mental health crises. This may include Youth Mental Health First Aid (Jorm et al., 2010; Kelly et al., 2011; Mental Health First Aid Australia, 2023), or for key pastoral care staff, Gatekeeper Suicide Prevention Training (Exner-Cortens et al., 2022; Mental Health Commission, 2023). For students who do not have mental health illnesses but require support for their social and emotional learning or peer conflicts, schools could consider training staff to have growth and strength-based coaching conversations. Training can be provided by organisations such as Growth Coaching International (Growth Coaching International, 2023) who provide educators with key coaching skills to assist students with goal setting and building self-awareness and emotional intelligence. Positive psychologists and researchers such as Robert Biswas-Diener support the integration of positive psychology and coaching to support teacher and student wellbeing (Growth Coaching International, 2022). With the knowledge that mental health issues are so prevalent among young people, it is essential that universities also consider how they are preparing graduate teachers to support students in their social and emotional growth, and that they have the confidence and skills to identify and provide support for mental health concerns.

Research examined in this literature review largely focused on students' transition from primary school to secondary school without any focus given to whether students stay at one school that caters for both primary and secondary, or whether they change from a primary school to a new secondary school, or if they change sectors (e.g., from a public school to private school). In a school that has primary and secondary students where there is a mix of present students and incoming students, different points of vulnerability and change might impact these students compared to a secondary school where all students are new and experiencing the climate and structures at the same time. Therefore, further research is necessary to examine the potential different trajectories of transition for young people.

It has been outlined by some researchers (e.g., Bharara, 2020; Jindal-Snape et al., 2020) that schools focus on the transition as a point in time

rather than an ongoing process. More focus is required in preparing students (i.e., Year 6 in Australia), to ensure that they have the skills required to make new friends, manage the changes in staffing and friendships, adapt to a new environment with different structures and routines, and manage their expectations. This could be supported by research-based programmes such as Life Ed's Guide to Thrive (2023) which focuses on four key areas of transition: communication and social skills, managing schoolwork expectations, change and uncertainty, and new school environment. There needs to be more than one transition day a few months before the move. There needs to be an ongoing commitment from the schools, both primary and secondary, to strengthen the transition point. This is an easier process for schools with primary and secondary phases that may have whole-school approaches to social and emotional learning, anti-bullying programmes and school climate, but will be a challenge for students moving to a different school or across educational sectors. There is an opportunity for schools within the same sector to better connect in the lead-up to the transition and provide a more consistent approach to the move. In local areas, there could be more conversations between schools and sectors about how best to support this transition for all students in primary school with the joint goal of improving the mental health and wellbeing impact of the transition. Conversely, ensuring that the transition process is continued throughout the first year of secondary school and is not only addressed in the first weeks of Year 7 is critical. This can mean ongoing peer support programmes, social and emotional programmes that continue to encourage the development of healthy relationships and connections, and specific programmes for Year 7s that promote their sense of belonging within the new environment.

As argued by Waters et al. (2014b), the parent relationship is the most influential factor for a positive transition to secondary school. It is essential then that schools consider the involvement of parents during the transition period and that they encourage parents to be present through this time rather than stepping back like many adolescents may be requesting that they do. Schools should hold information sessions in the lead-up to the transition and throughout the first year of secondary schooling to promote social, emotional, mental health and wellbeing

skills, literacy and knowledge as well as discuss the challenges of adolescence (e.g., the use of technology and social media and their impact on the adolescent brain and, consequently, their wellbeing). Schools need to encourage open communication between school and parents to ensure that all stakeholders are involved in the academic, social and emotional development of the child. Organisations such as headspace (headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation Ltd, 2023) and ReachOut (ReachOut Australia, 2023) provide programmes and resources for students and parents to support them in preparation for the transition time, as well as resources to support mental health and wellbeing. Life Ed's Guide to Thrive (2023) provides parents with modules to work through with their child in preparation for transition, as well as conversation starters and checklists that can be used in the lead-up to the change.

To ensure a positive school climate in which students feel safe and supported, there are some implications for policies and practices within the school. The students and parents need to feel supported by policies such as anti-bullying, behaviour management and social media use. If they are readily available for parents to access and are implemented consistently and fairly by all staff, parents will feel confident in the safety of their children when at school and the students will feel supported. This is ratified by Bear's (2020) work in promoting positive school climate and reducing behavioural problems in schools.

As in most research, the current research has limitations that must be acknowledged. For example, reviewing literature mainly from 2010 onwards may mean that key literature has been missed that may have either weakened or supported the argument for the recommendations made. However, the period that was researched included some key literature reviews from Jindal et al. (2019) and Bharara (2020) that were thorough reviews of existing research, thereby allowing comparison of what schools were doing internationally, as well as in Australia, to support students during this critical time in their lives. Another limitation was the limited focus on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on transition, sense of belonging, school climate and relationships. Longitudinal research (e.g., Houghton et al., 2022) has established the

adverse impact that COVID-19 school-related disruptions had on young people. However, there appears to be no research specifically examining the impact of COVID-19 on students' experience during transition from primary school into secondary school.

Conclusion

Transition to secondary school is a significant milestone for young people as they move away from the environment of the primary school classroom with only a few key teachers, flexible routines, and a familiar peer group, into, in most cases, a larger setting with more autonomy, new subjects, a variety of teachers, different peers and new structures and expectations. This transition can be both challenging and exciting. However, with the increase in mental health issues and young people reporting poorer life satisfaction and wellbeing, as well as this occurring as puberty begins, schools need to understand the impact that this change can have on its students and support them in the preparation, point of transition and the years beyond it. If schools prioritise promoting sense of belonging, developing a positive school climate and developing programmes that support transition, they will be giving students the best opportunity to improve their mental health and wellbeing and, ultimately, thrive in secondary school. This proactive approach needs to involve all stakeholders – schools, staff, parents, and students – so young people's academic engagement, wellbeing and mental health outcomes are better supported at this critical time in their schooling.

Brief Author Biography

After graduating from the University of Western Australia in 2006 with a Bachelor of Music Education, Rebecca Weddikkara began at Peter Carnley Anglican Community School in 2007 as a foundation staff member. She is currently the Director of Pastoral Care and Wellbeing and oversees the pastoral care programmes and student wellbeing from Years 7 to 12. In 2023, she completed her Masters in Education (Mental Health and Wellbeing) at the University of Western Australia.

Acknowledgements

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