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# Students' wellbeing during the primary-secondary school transition and transition practices – A literature review



# **Students' wellbeing during the primary-secondary school transition and transition practices - A literature review**

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# **1. Executive summary**

## **1.1. Background**

The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief literature review of students' wellbeing during the transition from primary to secondary school and best transition practices to support wellbeing during this process. Commissioned by the Commissioner for Children and Young People of Western Australia, students' wellbeing was examined in association with peer relationships, teacher-student relationships, school belonging, parental relationships and expectations, and academic stress. An additional focus was to identify any programs addressing the needs and issues surrounding the documented vulnerability experienced by female students during and post primary-secondary school transition.

The review examined international and Australian literature and narrowed the scope of the literature to primary-secondary school transitions in mainstream education in Australian settings and other settings with similar schooling systems. The literature review addressed the following questions:

1. What are impacts of the primary-secondary school transition on students' wellbeing in general and gender-specific wellbeing in particular?
2. What are best practice approaches to assist male and female students with transitioning from primary to secondary school and support their wellbeing?
3. What are the guiding principles for primary-secondary school transition practices?

## **1.2. Students' wellbeing during the primary-secondary school transition**

The literature shows that social relationships, new school environments, and possible pressure from subjects and workload in secondary school are students' major concerns during the school transition. Social relationships and parental involvement in the transition are reported to be the major influential factors in supporting students' wellbeing.

### **- Friendships:**

- Friendships are identified as students' most concern during the transition from primary to secondary school.
- Positive peer relationships help to increase the feelings of happiness and safety and facilitate secondary school adjustment.
- Peer relationships appear to have more impact on students' sense of belonging than other relationships.
- More female students are concerned about friendships than male students.

### **- Teacher relationships:**

- Close relationships with teachers in both primary and secondary school can predict a positive transition to secondary school.

- Students acknowledge teachers' understanding and connectedness in creating a safe and supportive learning environment.
  - Girls are more likely than boys to be worried about relationships with teachers when they transfer to secondary school.
  - Teacher-student relationships are perceived as a more common protective factor for girls than boys.
- School belonging:
- School belonging is associated with positive mental health outcomes before and after the school transition.
  - There is a decline in students' feelings of school belonging after the transition to secondary school.
  - More girls than boys report concerns about school activities and changes during the school transition.
  - School culture and school climate have important roles in providing feelings of safety and connectedness.
- Parental relationships and expectations:
- Positive parental relationships, parents' involvement, and expectations play an important role in facilitating the transition from primary to secondary school.
- Academic stress:
- Differences in primary and secondary schooling cause students to have feelings of academic stress and pressure during the transition from primary to secondary school.
  - Female students are more likely to experience stress and anxiety at schoolwork than their male peers.

### **1.3. School transition practices**

There is limited literature about transition programs and practices to support students' wellbeing during the primary-secondary school transition. Transition practices that aim to address gender differences were not found. The identified transition practices are categorised into four groups:

- Community-level practices: A number of school transition research studies adopt the community-level approach which involves members from the wider community in the transition practices in addition to the participation of individual students, parents, and the school. This approach emphasises the collaboration of different sectors and highlights the benefit of diverse expertise from professionals, researchers, organisations, and community agencies.
- School-based transition practices: The literature shows positive results of transition practices developed and implemented by schools and their local authorities. School-based transition practices emphasise the important role of schools and teachers who are directly and actively

involved in designing and organising transition programmes, activities, and events at their schools. These practices also involve collaboration with primary schools and primary teachers to address issues with curriculum continuity and students' concerns in their specific contexts.

- Participatory approach: This approach values students' voice and direct contribution to the transition practices. It also emphasises the active involvement of students in the planning and designing process of transition interventions. Transition practices from this approach help support students' wellbeing via enhancing learner agency and developing the sense of ownership, self-identity development and inclusion.

- Technology integration focus: With the increasing use of technology among young people and the availability and accessibility of technological benefits, several studies use technology as the primary means to implement transition strategies. Some examples of technology integration include online communication between primary and secondary school students to share experiences in secondary school environments, the development and dissemination of online resources related to cyber safety, and the development of a website to support students during the transition from primary to secondary school.

#### **1.4. Guiding principles for school transition practices**

Based on the evidence of transition practices and the impacts of school transitions on students' wellbeing, this review provides a number of guiding principles to support students' wellbeing during primary-secondary school transitions. They include:

- Students' voice: As students are the direct beneficiaries of transition programs, their direct participation and contribution to the planning and designing process are necessary.

- Family engagement and well-informed parents: Family engagement should be taken into consideration in planning any transition programs. Parents need to be well informed of the significance of the school transition practices, have access to related information and guidelines, and be involved in specific activities.

- Early and long-term transition programs: Transition practices should be established well before the transition (early) and also on a long-term basis. A long-term plan of ongoing intervention is necessary to support students throughout the whole process, from pre- to post-transition.

- Primary-secondary school collaboration: Collaboration between primary and secondary schools is important to create consistency and continuity in awareness and practices.

- Involvement of multiple stakeholders: Each stakeholder has an important role in different intervention stages in any transition process, so the active involvement of multiple stakeholders is beneficial and necessary for transition practices. Successful transition programs benefit from

support networks external to the school and interdisciplinary partnerships with agencies, community organisations, and researchers to design and implement a holistic program.

- Active communication and shared information: A holistic model of communication, understanding and collaboration between sectors is necessary. Information-sharing networks also contribute to effective communication.

- Teacher education: Ongoing professional development and training are necessary to improve teachers' knowledge regarding developmental stages and wellbeing during middle school years. It is also important to enhance teacher capabilities to identify students' needs for support during the primary-secondary school transition period.

- Gender-specific strategies: Literature shows male and female students have different concerns and face different challenges during the primary-secondary school transition. It is necessary to have specific programs targeting the acute needs of female students given their documented vulnerability. Consideration should also be made around how best to support non-binary students but the papers included in this brief review did not address this issue.

- Transition evaluation criteria: It is necessary for transition practices to include an evaluation scheme in their planning to ensure achievement of objectives and to measure school transition success. Guidelines for evaluating the training of transition process are also necessary for transition practices.

## 2. Introduction

The transition from primary school to secondary school is considered as a significant transition period in a person's life, which can have long-term impacts on an individual's healthy lifestyle (World Bank, 2007). This is a challenging period in which students simultaneously experience physical changes (e.g., puberty), psychological and cognitive changes, environmental changes such as the school environment, and social changes such as expectations and responses from parents, teachers and the community towards young people as teenagers rather than children (Rice et al., 2021; Waters et al., 2014b).

Research has shown that students have varied experiences of the transition from primary school to secondary school. For many students, this is an exciting time, and they manage the transition successfully; for others, they struggle having a variety of concerns, fear, and worries (Waters et al., 2014b; West et al., 2010). The transition from primary school to secondary school can result in students feeling vulnerable (Hanewald, 2013) which can influence mental health and academic attainment (Rice et al., 2021; Riglin et al., 2013) and lead to disengagement or even disconnection from schooling (Johnson, 2019). Some adolescent students who find the transition challenging can experience high levels of depression and anxiety (West et al., 2010) and poor social and emotional health (Waters et al., 2012). Students with existing difficulties or who are at risk of disengagement may have a higher likelihood of developing emotional difficulties (West et al., 2010). In contrast, students who have a positive experience of the transition from primary to secondary school have shown lower levels of depression, anxiety and victimisation than those with a negative experience (Waters et al., 2012). A positive transition also has the benefit of improving students' confidence and self-esteem and can help them settle well into the secondary learning environment (Lester et al., 2016).

A recent large-scale survey by the Commissioner for Children and Young People in WA (2021) indicated the transition from primary school to high school is a significant milestone for many students and can be a period when students' sense of wellbeing, belonging and academic engagement is challenged. Female high school students reported significantly lower wellbeing across multiple indicators than female primary school students. For example, more female than male students in Year 4-6 reported that they liked school a lot (48.6 per cent vs. 36.5 per cent). The rating was opposite in secondary school with more female students (28.1 per cent) than their male peers (19.7 per cent) reporting they did not like school (p. 101). Similarly, more female than male students in Year 4-6 asserted that there was a teacher or another adult caring about them at school (52.2 per cent vs. 46.1 per cent). The difference was reversed in Year 7-12 with more female (13.7 per cent) than male students (10.0 per cent) reporting it was not true at all (p. 107).

Similar situations have been reported in other parts of Australia and globally. For example, Year 6 to Year 7 female students reported a decline in the sense of belonging in a study undertaken in New South Wales (Australia) (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2017). A study in Belgium reported higher scores in psychological distress and anxiety among young girls than boys (Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2018). UK-based studies also reported higher

symptoms of mental health problems among young girls than boys in England (Mental Health Foundation, 2017) and adolescent girls' increased emotional problems and lower levels of wellbeing than their male peers in Scotland (Walsh, 2019).

Even though such wellbeing issues commonly happen during the primary-secondary school transition and/or puberty, little is known about whether there is a relationship between the school transition experience and wellbeing issues of female students. A Scotland-based study reported limited literature on the causal link between school transitions and a decline in students' wellbeing in junior high school (West et al., 2010). A recent literature review by Spernes (2020) also indicated a decline in the research published about the primary-secondary school transition during 2016 and 2018. Notably, several earlier studies investigated the influence of school transitions on a single aspect, academic attainment, with cross-sectional results related to wellbeing (e.g., Hanewald, 2013; Topping, 2011; Spernes, 2020). However, many of these studies did not provide comprehensive findings regarding transition impacts on female students' wellbeing. More recent studies (Bharara, 2020; Jindal-Snape et al., 2020; Svane et al., 2019; van Rens et al., 2018) analysed and discussed the literature on different aspects of school transitions and students' wellbeing issues in general, but on an international scale mixing with heterogeneous educational systems, which has its limitations of nuance and insight into particular social and cultural contexts. Evidence related to gender-specific wellbeing before and after the school transition is still limited.

Due to the significance of the primary-secondary school transition period in students' wellbeing, research has pointed to the need for transition programmes to provide students with timely and comprehensive support during this critical time (Johnson, 2019; Riglin et al., 2013; Waters et al., 2012). The role of schools in partnership with the broader community as well as the active involvement of parents and other stakeholders has been highlighted (Riglin et al., 2013; Waters et al., 2014b). Factors that may impact school transitions (e.g., student genders, social relationships, socio-economic status, or family traditions) have also been emphasised (Armstrong & Boothroyd, 2008; Bacete et al., 2014; Bharara, 2020).

Although school transition programs are seen as effective ways to support students during the school transition process, there is minimal literature about transition practices (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008; van Rens et al., 2018). A recent study investigating wellbeing interventions in K-12 school settings worldwide (van Rens et al., 2018) found few studies specifically focused on primary to secondary school transition interventions for students. Insightful results about effective gender-specific transition practices, therefore, are more difficult to find. In addition, although many schools have transition programmes to support students, most programmes are considered to be administrative and organisational procedures rather than addressing students' and parents' concerns about personal and social issues (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008).

This literature review aims to further identify the impacts of the primary-secondary school transition on students' wellbeing with additional attention to gender differences, explore best practice approaches for managing school transitions to support wellbeing, and on that account,

propose guiding principles for successful school transitions. The following research questions guide the literature review:

1. What are impacts of the primary-secondary school transition on students' wellbeing in general and gender-specific wellbeing in particular?
2. What are best practice approaches to assist male and female students with transitioning from primary to secondary school and support their wellbeing?
3. What are the guiding principles for primary-secondary school transition practices?

### **3. Methods**

During February and March 2022, a literature search across several databases such as Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar was conducted. The keywords used included "school transition(s)", "students' wellbeing", "primary school", "elementary school", "secondary school", "lower secondary school", "middle school", and "junior high school". Particular focus was paid to topics that addressed gender differences, female students, girls, and wellbeing. Eligible studies for inclusion in this review were peer-reviewed journal articles (both qualitative and quantitative studies), book chapters, and non-peer-reviewed papers such as reports undertaken by educational research organisations. All literature was written in English, produced within the time frame of 2005 up to the present, and were aimed at mainstream schooling and students. Studies excluded from the review were those written in other languages, about participants with chronic pre-existing health conditions, disabilities, in gifted programs or specific curriculum areas such as literacy or second languages. Studies that mainly focused on academic outcomes and neglected students' wellbeing were also excluded.

### **4. Results**

After screening the titles, abstracts, and then full texts of the papers from search results, papers that were conducted outside the mainstream education systems, in other languages and settings beyond the scope of interest of the study were excluded. After removing duplications, there were a total of 59 peer-reviewed papers. Most were conducted in Australia (n = 24). The remaining were undertaken in the United Kingdom (n = 12), the United States of America (n = 10), Canada (n = 1), Denmark (n = 1), The Netherlands (n = 1), the European Union (n = 1), Italy (n = 1), New Zealand (n = 1), and literature reviews of mixed education systems (n = 7). These were augmented by 10 non-peer-reviewed reports conducted by universities, organisations, or government departments in Australia (n = 7) and the UK (n = 3).

Only 19 papers discussed gender differences in students' wellbeing before and after the school transition period. Most gender-specific findings were partial components of whole study results. Only one study focused mainly on female students (Burns et al., 2019). Most of the articles were longitudinal studies investigating stakeholders' perceptions or self-reported experiences of the primary-secondary school transition. Transition programmes or practices were presented in only 20 papers. Again, because this literature review aims to better the

understanding of (1) primary-secondary school transition impacts on students' wellbeing, (2) best transition practices, and (3) guiding principles for primary-secondary school transitions, the following sections present findings of these three major areas.

## **4.1. School transitions and their impacts on students' wellbeing**

Studies reveal students have mixed experiences of the transition from primary to secondary school. While many students have positive transition experiences, many express worries, uncertainties and emotional problems (Sniedze-Gregory et al., 2021; Waters et al., 2014b). Social relationships, new school environments, and possible pressure from subjects and workload in secondary school are students' major concerns during the school transition (Rice et al., 2011; Rice et al., 2021; Waters et al., 2014b). Social relationships and parental involvement in the transition are reported to be the major influential factors to support students' wellbeing (Burns et al., 2019; Coffey, 2013; Darmody et al., 2012; Mackenzie et al., 2012). Although relationships with peers, teachers, parents, and schools all contribute to the sense of school connectedness, peer friendships appear to have more impact on students' sense of belonging than other relationships (Gowing & Jackson, 2016; Rice et al., 2015; Topping, 2011; Waters et al., 2014a).

Gender differences are reported in a small number of studies, with common issues in more female students (than male students) being concerned about friendships, teacher relationships, school connectedness, and academic demands (Burns et al., 2019; Waters et al., 2014b). The depressive symptoms and concerns girls have in general after the transition to secondary school are reported to increase while they tend to generally reduce for boys (Centre for Adolescent Health-Murdoch Children's Research Institute, 2018). Girls also have a higher possibility of being vulnerable and feeling stressed when relationships are affected (Martínez et al., 2011; Waters et al., 2014b). The following sections discuss the impact of influential factors on students' wellbeing in detail, with a focus on peer relationships, teacher-student relationships, school belonging, parental support and expectations, and academic stress.

### **4.1.1. Friendships**

When students transition from primary to secondary school, the process may present challenges to established friendships and to the friend-making process in the new environment. Peer relationships become increasingly important to students when they enter adolescence because they rely more on social relationships and seek less dependence on parents (Topping, 2011). High quantity and quality of friendships have been associated with better emotional adjustment, reduction in sadness and negative emotions, and protection against victimisation (Heinsch et al., 2020).

A longitudinal study exploring the important relationship between peer connectedness and youth mental health during primary-secondary transition showed positive peer relationships increased the feelings of happiness and safety and facilitated secondary school adjustment (Heinsch et al., 2020). Specifically, students reported they needed friends to talk to and this

reduced the potential loneliness, stress, or boredom in the new school environment. They also insisted that “having their own people” (i.e., friends) would make them feel safe because friends were their allies and protectors. Similar findings were also reported in an Australian study which concluded that the feelings of vulnerability could be reduced if students felt that they were accepted as part of a group and had their allies (Coffey, 2013).

A Western Australian (WA) study found students did not receive significant protective benefits from friends in the first year of secondary school because they seemed to lose the peer relationships experienced in primary school and might need up to two years to develop new peer support (Lester & Cross, 2015). A Scottish study reported that a poor school transition would predict a poor peer transition together with high levels of depression and low self-esteem (West et al., 2010). A study conducted with Dutch students found shy and withdrawn students tended to form friendships with similar students who were marginalised by the peer groups when they entered a new school following a transition (Güroğlu et al., 2012).

Several studies identified friendships as students’ biggest concern during the transition from primary to secondary school (Bagnall et al., 2020; Coffey, 2013; Gowing & Jackson, 2016; Rice et al., 2011; Topping, 2011). A survey of approximately 2000 UK students stated losing old friends was only the fifth concern before the school transition but it became the top concern at the beginning and end of Year 7 (Rice et al., 2015). To manage peer relationships in primary school before transferring to secondary school, it was reported students tried to get closer to those who were enrolling in the same secondary school (Bagnall et al., 2020). Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 to 2021), the missed opportunity to say goodbye to primary school friends caused feelings of loss and sadness to students and made the school transition harder (Bagnall et al., 2022).

Two Australia-based studies reported a similar role of friendship as the key factor in students’ sense of belonging, trust, and security during school transition (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2017; Longaretti, 2020). Students are likely to feel more school-connected if they have fewer problems in their peer relationships (Waters et al., 2014a). A study based in Ireland found students who felt they were liked by their friends were more likely to feel positive about themselves than those who did not feel popular (Darmody et al., 2012). In contrast, without friendships, school life would “lose meaning and significance” (Longaretti, 2020, p. 38). Undesirable consequences included feelings of loneliness, discomfort, loss of confidence, distraction in class, low self-esteem, poor emotional adjustment, and school disengagement (Longaretti, 2020). Further, a study in England (Gibbons & Telhaj, 2016) showed students’ academic engagement at age 14 was influenced by their new peers’ early age achievement, therefore peer relationships across the transition can influence school engagement.

Research has shown male and female students have different preferences in their friendships. Boys tend to have big groups of less intimate friends (e.g., via sport-related activities), while girls are more likely to prefer a small number of intimate and close friends (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Girls also tend to have higher levels of communication with friends (Commissioner for

Children and Young People WA, 2021) and a greater possibility of disappointment due to close relationship breakdowns (Benenson & Christakos, 2003).

Girls are reported to have greater expectations for close friendships as well as reliance on social relationships when transitioning to secondary school (Lester et al., 2013; Mackenzie et al., 2012; Waters et al., 2014a, 2014b). In a UK-based study, the maintenance of existing friendships and the construction of new ones were higher on the girls' personal agendas than boys' in the last year of primary school (Pratt & George, 2005). That is, girls had the tendency to establish closer friendships with girls of another group within their class who were going to enrol in the same secondary school. A US-based study showed girls' perceived close friend support declined notably across the 1-year transition from elementary to junior high school (Martínez et al., 2011). The study explained this issue might be due to girls experiencing a short-term decrease in close friend support early in junior high school while they expected an increase in quality and quantity of new friendships. This finding coincides with four Australian studies which reported girls' higher concerns, expectations for, and reliance on social relationships (e.g., meeting new people, having new friends, and being worried about people not liking them or not making friends) when transitioning to secondary school (Lester et al., 2013; Mackenzie et al., 2012; Waters et al., 2014a, 2014b). Even though students' concerns about losing old friends were found to gradually decline across the primary-secondary transition period, this decline was still significantly slower for girls than boys (Rice et al., 2021). These findings emphasise the importance of being sensitive and responsive to female students and their social relationships so that they feel more supported and nurtured.

Several studies conducted in WA have highlighted the role of primary schools as well as the collaboration between primary and secondary schools in supporting students' wellbeing via friendship support during the school transition (Lester & Cross, 2015; Lester et al., 2013; Waters et al., 2014a). Based on the data from the same project and cohort of WA students (see project detail in Section 3.2.1), these studies showed friendships established in the last year of primary school were the most influential factor before the transition to set positive expectations of the transition to secondary school (Lester & Cross, 2015; Lester et al., 2013; Waters et al., 2014a). In particular, peer-connectedness in primary school predicted less depression in secondary school for girls and therefore, was more important to girls than boys prior to moving to a new school context (Lester et al., 2013).

Several studies conducted in different parts of the world (e.g., Ireland, Scotland, and Australia) emphasise the positive influence of having an older friend or a sibling at secondary school in helping students to make new friends and reduce the feelings of threat and anxiety (Darmody et al., 2012; Mackenzie et al., 2012; Maher, 2010; West et al., 2010). An old friend or acquaintance at the new school would be a supportive connection for students to get to know more about the new learning environment and be more prepared for it. Two UK-based studies concluded that being able to transfer with existing friends was more significant than any other concerns related to structural changes in the secondary school for both boys and girls (Bagnall et al., 2020; Pratt & George, 2005). With the contribution of peer relations to students' wellbeing, researchers have called for the need of transition practices that can enhance peer

support both in the pre-transition period and during the first year of secondary school (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2017; Heinsch et al., 2020; Lester & Cross, 2015).

To date, there are inconsistent findings in peer relationships between students who stay with the same cohort of friends in primary school across the school transition and those who move to secondary school and establish new friendships. A study in the US compared students who transitioned to a new school with those who stay at the same school and found students with the transition to middle school reported better peer relationships than those who did not move to a new school (Farmer et al., 2011). These students with transitions to a new school also considered ‘a supportive peer community’ a protective factor in middle school. Similarly, in another comparative study, Australian students who experienced a transition to secondary school reported opportunities to make friends with a larger group of students while the Danish group reported social and emotional issues when they stayed with the same peers who they did not have positive relationships with (Nielsen et al., 2017). In contrast, two comparative studies conducted in the US provided evidence that the transition to secondary schools affected friendship stability, increased social distance between students and created the feeling of isolation that had a negative impact on students’ academic performance (Felmlee et al., 2018; Temkin et al., 2018). Programs addressing the heightened needs of female students were not reported in these studies.

#### **4.1.2. Relationships with teachers**

Teacher-student relationships are often seen as the mediator to assist students’ wellbeing at school, providing them with motivation and protection against social-emotional challenges (Tennant et al., 2015). When students move from primary to secondary school, teacher-student relationships may have an impact on student wellbeing due to the differences in the role teachers have in primary and secondary schooling. For example, heterogeneous classes connected due to age with a single class teacher in primary school are generally replaced by classes by subject discipline with specialist teachers who may have different pedagogical approaches (van Rens et al., 2018). Students’ worries about such changes before the school transition period have been presented in a number of studies, some examples include worrying about lots of different teachers (Rice et al., 2021), unfriendly teachers and hard/disciplined teachers (Waters et al., 2014b). An ethnographic study in the UK explored students’ experiences of relationships with their new teachers in secondary school and found that students perceived a lack of courtesy from secondary teachers (Tobbell & O’Donnell, 2013). Students in this study also reported they had more teachers of subject expertise and each of them had different rules and expectations. These changes and variations in teacher behaviours were considered to add more stress and burden to the students during the first term of transition (Tobbell & O’Donnell, 2013).

Studies about experiences of the transition and post-transition from primary to secondary school have shown that close relationships to teachers in both primary and secondary school can predict a positive transition to secondary school. A longitudinal study by Waters et al. (2014a) investigated the support children received before the school transition finding that

teacher connectedness at primary school, together with peer connectedness and parent support, helped predict positive expectations and experiences of the school transition process. A UK-based study indicated that students' relationship with primary teachers may help to predict students' responses to managing various relationships in secondary school (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013).

Another Australian study acknowledged the importance of teachers' helping students to settle into a new school context to create a safe and supportive learning environment (Coffey, 2013). Students in a UK-based study reported that teachers' extra support at school helped them manage their emotions over the school transition (Bagnall et al., 2020). In contrast, students in another UK-based study found the primary-secondary transition more challenging when teachers focused on delivering the secondary school curriculum objectives and spent little time talking with students and exploring their issues (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013).

Various studies call for more attention in school systems and practices to provide opportunities for the formation of teacher-student relationships (Coffey, 2013; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). Professional development for teachers is also recommended. Two studies focusing on professional development for teachers to support students' social networks in their first year of middle school showed that teachers were more likely to identify students' peer groups and help them have a sustained positive school adjustment during the school transition period if they received sufficient training in school transitions (Farmer et al., 2010; Hamm et al., 2010).

Research suggests that teacher-student relationships are a more common protective factor for girls than boys. A recent study in Australia, focusing on the role of a positive teacher-student relationship during the period of adolescent development found girls disengagement was reduced during the primary-secondary school transition and over time in secondary schooling (Burns et al., 2019). Similarly, a US-based study investigated students' ratings of teacher support and academic and social-emotional wellbeing which showed teacher emotional support was significantly associated with all of the social-emotional aspects of wellbeing for boys and girls; however, girls rated emotional and appraisal support from teachers as more important than boys (Tennant et al., 2015). Another US-based study found a significant decline in perceived teacher support for girls across the transition to secondary school while it was not the case for boys (Martínez et al., 2011). Two studies reported girls were more likely than boys to be worried about relationships with teachers when they transferred to secondary school and these studies emphasised the significance of teachers' social and emotional support as well as developing a positive teacher-student relationship to reduce female students' disengagement during the transition and later years in secondary school (Burns et al., 2019; Waters et al., 2014b).

#### **4.1.3. School belonging**

The various differences between primary and secondary schools may cause students to have feelings of fear and uncertainty when they transfer from primary to secondary school (Sutherland et al., 2010). In fact, students have reported numerous concerns related to school-

related factors before the primary-secondary school transition. These concerns included school size (i.e., bigger school size compared to primary school), timetable, break time, safety, moving between classes, or getting lost, to name a few (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020; Rice et al., 2011; Rice et al., 2021; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). Though many of these concerns seemed to decrease over time after the school transition period, some remain and affect young people's levels of anxiety post school transition (Evangelou et al., 2008; Rice et al., 2021).

Research and identified published reports have investigated school connectedness from different perspectives and revealed various aspects that may contribute to students' feeling of school connectedness. For example, a recent study in Australia explored students' perspectives of school belonging and found that students themselves perceived the sense of belonging as "being a part of the school, the classroom and friendship groups", "knowing" and "feeling" of being supported, and "acceptance from peers" (Longaretti, 2020). Similar findings of school connectedness from students' perspectives were found in another Australian study (Gowing & Jackson, 2016). Major themes of connectedness from students' perspectives in this study included enjoyment in being a member of the school community, the number of subjects a student liked and was passing, availability of an adult to talk to, truancy for a whole school day, and smaller distance lived from school. A US-based study reported three different dimensions of school belonging from students' perceptions and they were interpersonal relationships (teacher-student and student-student relationships), learning/academic community, and school facilities or activities (Nichols, 2008). A UK-based study revealed the sense of school belonging via students' liking school and low levels of loneliness at school (Rice et al., 2015).

A number of studies have reported a decline in students' feelings of school belongingness after the transition to secondary school. For example, a survey conducted by the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2017) indicated that a decline in Australian students' sense of school belonging was associated with a drop in their school engagement and valuing of school outcomes. Another study by Jindal-Snape et al. (2020) reported evidence of the decline in school connectedness and school belongingness after the transition to secondary school and this decline affected students' mental health and school engagement. There are different explanations for the decline in students' feelings of school belongingness in secondary school. One might be the poor fit between students' developmental needs and school environments. Additionally it may be the schools' inadequate responses to students' needs for belonging and support (Johnson, 2008; Longaretti, 2020). Another explanation may be students' having greater concerns at secondary school. A UK-based study by Rice et al. (2011) suggested students who had more worries at secondary school would likely have less positive attitudes towards school and lower level of school liking. This finding was similar for both female and male participants of the study.

Research has shown that school connectedness is closely linked with students' experience of the transition from primary to secondary school. Students who feel disconnected at the start of secondary school are more likely to still be disconnected later on, beyond the immediate transition period (Waters et al., 2012). Further, an increase in school connectedness is linked

with a decrease in depression and anxiety (Lester et al., 2013). School belongingness is also associated with positive mental health outcomes before and after the school transition, as reported in a study conducted with Australian students (Vaz et al., 2014). Another study conducted with Australian students in their first year of secondary school concluded that feeling safe and connected to school were students' perceived most protective factors of mental and emotional wellbeing (Lester & Cross, 2015). The STARS (School Transition and Adjustment Research Study) project concluded that a sense of belonging to the school together with academic adjustment and behavioural involvement in school are two main indicators of a successful school transition (Rice et al., 2015). A UK-based study indicated that if students received help from the secondary school (e.g., via booklets, school visits, induction days, or procedures to help them adapt), students were more likely to have positive experiences of school transition (Evangelou et al., 2008).

In Denmark, students commence and remain in the same school until age 15. Nielsen et al. (2017) compared the impact of school transition experience in Australia to Danish students and their sense of school connectedness. The authors noted a decrease in the feelings of school connectedness from the young age group of Australian students to those in the transition year group, but this difference was not statistically significant. However, feelings of low school connectedness significantly increased with age in the group of Danish students who did not experience the school transition. The comparative study concluded that the differences in school systems impact students' sense of school connectedness in their later years of secondary school.

Research has also highlighted the importance of school connectedness established in primary school to support school belonging during the primary-secondary school transition. In a study conducted in Australia, students who reported higher levels of school belongingness in the final year of primary school also reported higher levels of mental health functioning a year later at secondary school (Vaz et al., 2014). In a survey with Australian students, students who reported positive relationships with peers and teachers in primary school were more likely to report a positive sense of belonging in early secondary school (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2017). High levels of school connectedness in primary school were seen as the predictor of connection to secondary school and helped to reduce the negative impact of the school transition on their depression and anxiety (Lester et al., 2013). Students with low school engagement in late primary years may have low learning outcomes in secondary school years (Centre for Adolescent Health-Murdoch Children's Research Institute, 2018). These findings suggest the need to foster school belongingness and positive social relationships at primary school to support students' sense of belongingness in secondary school.

Studies have reported inconsistent results regarding gender differences in students' sense of school belonging during the primary-secondary school transition. A study by a group of WA researchers indicated more girls than boys found the school transition difficult, which implied that girls' feelings of school connectedness and loneliness were linked to a poor school transition (Waters et al., 2012). However, a contrasting perspective has been found in many other studies, where it was reported that female participants reported higher scores of school

belongingness and school liking than male students (Nichols, 2008; Rice et al., 2011; Waters et al., 2014b). Another study reported a higher proportion of male than female students with depressive symptoms at the beginning of secondary school and anxiety symptoms at the end of Year 8 (Lester et al., 2013).

In terms of pre-transition concerns, more girls than boys reported concerns about school activities and changes in social dynamics in secondary school (Rice et al., 2011; Waters et al., 2014b). A longitudinal study with 266 Australian students examined the changes in students' perceptions of school belongingness between pre- and post-transition and found student perception of school belongingness was stable across the transition for both boys and girls (Vaz, Falkmer, Ciccarelli, Passmore, Parsons, Black, et al., 2015). The study did not find any significant influence of gender or other personal student factors on students' perception of school belongingness. Despite the limited findings related to gender differences, other studies emphasise the importance of gender-specific strategies to support and maintain students' school connectedness after the transition period (Rice et al., 2011; Waters et al., 2014b).

Two studies identified school facilities and physical learning spaces as being important factors when nurturing students' feelings of school belonging as well as students' wellbeing (Hughes et al., 2019; Nastrom-Smith & Hughes, 2019). For example, Year 7 students in Hughes et al.'s (2019) study related wellbeing places with areas that supported their needs for emotional comfort, interaction, and safety such as open-air spaces, eating areas, and stone circles. They felt unsafe among older students in pathways, stairwells, and sports fields. These studies did not report any gender-specific preferences for school learning spaces to support their wellbeing in secondary school.

Other studies highlight the importance of school culture (Johnson, 2019) and school climate (Lester & Cross, 2015) during the primary-secondary school transition. According to Lester and Cross (2015), school climate includes factors such as the feelings of safety and connectedness to teachers and the school, peer support, school policies and practices. In Johnson's (2019) study, school culture meant having a holistic approach to attending to the needs of the whole child rather than relying on particular intervention. To enable this kind of school culture, the leadership role of the principal is crucial in establishing positive school culture and requires ongoing professional development for staff to ensure beliefs and values are shared by both the leadership team and teaching staff.

#### **4.1.4. Parental expectations and supports**

A number of studies have shown that positive parental relationships, parents' involvement and expectations play an important role in facilitating the transition from primary to secondary school. Students with parents and family who listen to them are likely to experience a positive primary-secondary school transition (Waters et al., 2014a) and have fewer anxiety symptoms across the transition (Duchesne et al., 2009). An Ireland-based study noted that students who had positive relationships with their parents were likely to have positive relationships with their teachers in secondary school (Darmody et al., 2012). A longitudinal study with nearly 2000

Western Australian students concluded that parent and family closeness was the most important protective predictor for an easy school transition (Waters et al., 2014a).

Parents' expectations and parenting styles may also have an impact on students' wellbeing during the school transition process. Students whose parents have high scholastic expectations for them in primary school are more likely to have sense of belonging when transitioning to secondary school (Vaz, Falkmer, Ciccarelli, Passmore, Parsons, Tan, et al., 2015). If parents and children share and talk regularly about their worries related to the school transition, students tend to have lower concerns when they start secondary school (Rice et al., 2015). In contrast, students, whose parents are over-controlling and less encouraging of autonomy, are more likely to report negative transition experiences that include lower self-esteem and higher levels of depression (West et al., 2010). A study by Coffey (2013) further added that controlling parents found their children less communicative in secondary than primary school and they tended to seek independence and did not want to be seen in the company of their parents. Year 7 students in a UK-based study reported strains in student-parent relationships in secondary school because their parents wanted to know "every detail" at secondary school and this made the students uncomfortable (Bagnall et al., 2020). Students also added they were more comfortable communicating with their parents in primary schools than in secondary schools (Bagnall et al., 2020).

Parents' involvement in the primary-secondary school transition has the potential to facilitate a positive school transition. A study conducted with eight European Union (EU) members asserted parents' active engagement in the transition process could have a positive impact on their children's school transition (Davis et al., 2015). Another Australian study highlighted when parents were involved in the transition process, they were more likely to actively participate in their children's secondary schooling (Coffey, 2013). Parent-led transition processes and parent-teacher partnerships were found to enhance students' positive transition experiences (Davis et al., 2015; Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). A study by Davis et al. (2015) indicated transition practices which included parent partnerships enabled students to communicate their problems with teachers and parents. This study also highlighted parents' involvement in the school transition practices because parents could see "a difference between making the child change to fit into existing processes and changing the system to enable inclusion for the child" (p. 41).

A longitudinal Australian study with 395 students and their parents found parental engagement in primary school activities had the potential to support students' sense of belonging post transition from primary to secondary school. If parents had some involvement in primary school activities such as volunteering in school events or classroom trips, students were likely to have more of a sense of school belonging which would continue in secondary school (Vaz, Falkmer, Ciccarelli, Passmore, Parsons, Tan, et al., 2015).

Although studies have shown the significant role of parents in school transitions, a study by Jindal-Snape et al. (2020) reported schools did not always involve parents in the planning and preparation for students' school transitions. Parents valued being informed about the school

and transition procedures and they appreciated the opportunity to meet with other parents through school events because their children were making new friendships (Coffey, 2013). Research findings suggest that school practices should involve parents in their transition practices (Coffey, 2013; Jindal-Snape et al., 2020).

Finally, family backgrounds and characteristics also have certain impacts on students' transition from primary to secondary school. An Ireland-based study concluded children of parents from professional backgrounds were more likely to report their parents had discussed school choice with them and often selected schools based on academic criteria rather than geographic locations (Darmody et al., 2012). Students from single-parent families had the likelihood to have more school concerns (e.g., size of the school, different teachers, and workload) as part of the school transition experience (West et al., 2010), whereas students with both biological parents reported fewer worries about school transitions than their peers from single-parent or blended families (Duchesne et al., 2009). Catering to the needs of female students during and post primary-secondary school transition were not addressed in these studies.

#### **4.1.5. Academic stress**

When students move from primary to secondary school, they face major changes in the curriculum and learning schedules such as more specialised subjects, a greater volume of homework assigned by several teachers to be completed in the same time frame, more challenging work, and greater personal responsibility in academic performance (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020; Rice et al., 2011; Rice et al., 2021). Research has shown such changes have caused students to have feelings of academic stress and pressure before and after they transfer to secondary school. A UK-based study indicated that homework concerns, including being able to do the work, were among students' five highest concerns of both pre- and post- transition (Rice et al., 2011). Similar findings were found with Western Australian students. Worries about academic changes such as academically challenging classes and more homework were among the primary concerns of WA students before the transition period (Waters et al., 2014b). Another study in Australia reported students' pre-transition feelings of pressure and anxiety about not doing well in tests and examinations at secondary school (Mackenzie et al., 2012). A study conducted with 210 Italian students aged 14 to 16 reported a close link between academic pressures of secondary school and increasing rates of school burnout, which in turn was associated with mental health difficulties (Fiorilli et al., 2017). A US-based study revealed an increase in school absence from Year 7 to Year 10 in parallel with a decline in academic grades (Benner & Graham, 2009). An Australian study found a decline in enjoyment and positive attitudes toward learning and an increase in anxiety, particularly in mathematics, over the primary-secondary school transition period (Deieso & Fraser, 2019).

Research has shown that female students are more engaged and do better in academic performance, and they are also more likely to experience stress and anxiety at schoolwork than their male peers (Lam et al., 2012; Wiklund et al., 2012). Studies focusing on primary-secondary school transitions have also reported similar findings of gender differences in

academic concerns during the school transition period. A study conducted in Australia pointed to concerns about the volume of homework and assessment as girls' top concerns when they transferred to secondary school (Mackenzie et al., 2012). This study also indicated more academic pressure would be added for girls if they had an older sibling at the same school who had high academic achievements or high academic performance (Mackenzie et al., 2012).

After the transition to secondary school, these concerns about homework were found to decrease at a greater rate among boys than girls (Centre for Adolescent Health-Murdoch Children's Research Institute, 2018). A UK-based study similarly found more girls than boys were concerned about homework prior to the school transition and they continued to have more concerns post primary to secondary school transition (Rice et al., 2011). A study conducted in the US concluded girls' academic achievement advantages over boys imposed greater psychological distress for girls due to worrying about academic demands (Benner & Graham, 2009). According to this study, this was also one of the reasons girls found the school transition more difficult than boys. In summary, research has pointed to a link between the primary-secondary school transition and academic stress among students. There are also gender-specific findings regarding the influence of academic stress on wellbeing over the transition period.

## **4.2. School transition practices**

From all selected papers on transition practices in this review, they mainly differed in the approach that involved the scope of audience, the primary roles of stakeholders, and the means of intervention. The selected studies were, therefore, categorised into community-level practices, school-based practices, and participatory approach practices. A small number of studies emphasised the importance of technology integration in transition programmes as the major means of intervention rather than the approaches they adapted. These studies were grouped into the technology integration focus group. The following sections discuss the four categories in detail.

### **4.2.1. Community-level practices**

A number of school transition studies have adopted the community-level approach that was based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of development (e.g., Vaz et al., 2015; Lester et al., 2016). In this approach, in addition to the participation of individual students, parents, and the school, members from the wider community are involved in the transition practices. The community-level approach has been applied in studies in different parts of Australia and reported positive results. For example, Johnson (2019) reported on a pilot program on various intervention strategies for at-risk young people in regional Gippsland, Victoria, Australia. The programme was a partnership between the East Gippsland Schools Network, the Schools Focused Youth Service, Gippsland Lakes Community Health, and Federation University's School of Education (Gippsland campus). The pilot program included various activities such as mentoring programmes (one to one with an adult), 'special friends', breakfast clubs, transition programs between primary and secondary schools, enrichment, or extension programmes, either within curriculum areas or through the provision of

extracurricular activities, and other activities. The study concluded that the ‘whole-of-child’ or ‘child-first’ priority, and student-teacher relationships were signifiers for the quality and success of the programme. The study also pointed out some limitations in this model of partnerships which included the high turnover of staff in some agencies, funding restrictions, short-term funding for issues that required long-term interventions, and a need for effective communication between sectors.

The Creating Meaningful Connections project is another example of an evidence-informed intervention as a result of collaboration (community partnership) between social work academics, social work students at an Australian university and a regional secondary school in NSW, Australia (Heinsch et al., 2020). The focus of the project was to develop a community hub of services for young people of the school, the aim of which was to raise awareness and build capacity for school staff about mental health and student connectedness, so as to support students’ needs. A planning group was established to facilitate the hub development, with the involvement of social work staff and students at an Australian university. The project reported major impacts of positive peer relationships on students’ increased happiness, feelings of safety, and school connectedness. The project also highlighted the potential of the collaboration between social work and education to enhance peer relationships, mental health and school belonging during the transition from primary to secondary school.

Another example of a successful community-level approach was the Rock Up program, implemented in Melbourne, Australia, as a result of the partnership between educational sectors and community sectors (Carmen et al., 2011). In order to respond to identified risk factors associated with disengagement from formal education, the program provided intensive transition support for students in year levels 5, 6, and 7 aiming at five key risk factors of disengagement in school: academic, social, emotional, behavioural, and school absence. The Rock Up program consisted of three models – an individual model that included working with the students, their families and school to identify areas of need, a group model that consisted of two primary settings with similar needs from the same age cohort, and a combination of individual and group model where students from the group model receive ongoing individual supports. The program evaluation data revealed positive feedback and appreciation from students, their parents, teachers, and the facilitator. The Rock Up program is another example of collaboration of different sectors and illustrates how community agencies can provide valuable and cost-effective support to complement the work of educators (Carmen et al., 2011).

The community-level approach was also adopted in the Supportive Schools Project conducted in Western Australia more than a decade ago (Cross et al., 2005). Based on the literature which suggested that bullying increased following the transition to secondary school due to the change of friendship structures and fewer close relationships between students and staff, a group of researchers at Edith Cowan University in partnership with the WA Health Promotion Foundation conducted the Supportive Schools Project with 20 Perth metropolitan Catholic secondary schools (Cross et al., 2005). The aim of the project was to prevent bullying and hence, to reduce feelings of loneliness and mental unwellness, and increase students’ sense of safety, happiness, and connectedness to the school. The project had participation from multiple

stakeholders including academic researchers, experts, representatives from organisations presenting health and education, staff, parents, and students. Resources and materials were developed for the program and included mechanisms to manage students' behaviours, a school action journal, parents' guides on friendship and transition, magazines on friendship and transition, project team training, and parents/staff presentations. The study also applied a whole-school approach that can be integrated into the classroom and secondary organisational teaching and non-teaching structure. Data from this project were used in a series of publications to investigate student mental health and school connectedness during the transition from primary to secondary school (Lester & Cross, 2014; Lester & Cross, 2015; Lester et al., 2013; Waters et al., 2014a; Waters et al., 2014b).

Also in an Australian context, *Joining the Dots (JTD)* was an action research project initiated by the Yarra Education Youth Commitment (YEYC) with the participation of twenty-three stakeholders including The Inner Northern Local Learning Employment Network (INLLEN), the City of Yarra, local community agencies, representatives from the Department of Education and Training, schools, and Catholic Education Melbourne (CEM) (Johns, 2018). The project aimed to develop, implement, and evaluate a primary-secondary school transition model for young people, families, schools, and the community in the City of Yarra. A model was developed with five dimensions consisting of (1) Strategic Approach, (2) Community Partnerships, (3) Building Capacity, (4) School Based Programs and (5) Support for Individual Students and Parents. The project evaluation showed the programme enhanced student engagement in learning, improved connection between primary and secondary schools, the Department of Education, and community agencies, increased awareness about the importance of a good transition, improved structures for the school transition process, and increased family engagement in transition practices (Johns, 2018).

Regarding gender-specific strategies, none of the identified transition practices included specific strategies tailored to a gender. However, research findings from the dataset of some community-level practices have provided certain evidence of gender differences in expectations and real-life experiences related to school transitions (Waters et al., 2014a, 2014b). Therefore, it is necessary to consider the nuances of female students needs and vulnerability in planning and designing transition practices.

#### **4.2.2. School-based transition practices**

Many studies in Australia and the UK reported positive results of transition practices developed and implemented by schools and their local authorities. A project exploring the transition practices in six local authorities in England reported a range of common transition practices across schools including school visits, booklets, taster days, joint social events between schools, bridging materials, open days, talks and meetings by secondary teachers, and sample lessons - the main aim of which was to help students and their parents to be familiar with the new secondary school (Evangelou et al., 2008). The study included in-depth interviews, case studies and surveys. Results showed a school transition was successful if students had: (1) expanded new friendships and improved self-esteem and confidence, (2) settled well in

secondary school without raising concerns to their parents, (3) showed increasing interest in school and schoolwork in comparison to primary school, (4) got used to new routines and school organisation with ease, and (5) experienced curriculum continuity. The study also concluded if students had problems with bullying or dealing with subjects and different teachers, they were more likely to experience a negative transition.

A research report by the Nuffield Foundation revealed a number of school-based transition practices by primary and secondary schools in the UK which had positive effects based on students' self-reports (Rice et al., 2015). Specifically, primary schools which used systematic strategies to build connection and continuity between primary and secondary schools such as bridging units, long-term projects across the transition period, and peer support groups with students going to the same secondary school. Secondary schools employed various strategies which included extended induction periods, teaching groups of students set by ability for some subjects, or sharing primary school information with tutors to support individual students' needs. In addition, based on the project findings of students' most common concern about losing old friends during the school transition period, some secondary schools implemented additional strategies including friendship monitoring to support friendships and social relationships. The findings proposed using a whole school approach to support school transitions and the employment of strategies to address the common concerns of the majority of students alongside accessible materials, booklets, and questionnaires to assess transition success and interventions (Rice et al., 2015).

The case study of Homebush West Public School in New South Wales, Australia is another example of a school-based intervention to help Year 5 and Year 6 students prepare for the transition to high school (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2019). In this intervention, students were required to follow their individual timetables to change classrooms, classmates, and teachers according to ability and subject in a similar way to high school students. The strategy was reported to develop students' ability to adapt and be flexible in engaging with different teachers with different teaching styles and teacher expectations. They also learnt to build relationship with more than one teacher. Students of the case study appreciated the chance to get "a taste" of what secondary school was going to be like.

A study by Hopwood et al. (2016) involved asking Australian teachers' to evaluate the best practices for a successful transition to secondary school. The study reported some most common practices from the school-based approach including activities such as orientation days, activity days, transition programs, supporting students at risk. The teacher participants also reported their active roles in preparing students for school transition such as designing and organising transition programmes, activities, events, and contacting primary teachers. From the teachers' perspective, the study identified three essential factors to facilitate positive transition experiences for students: curriculum continuity, communication between primary and secondary schools, and adequate teacher support.

Despite students' common stress in negotiating the changes during the primary-secondary school transition period, there are limited studies on student emotional wellbeing interventions

to support students during this critical time (Bagnall, 2020). For this reason, Bagnall (2020) initiated a school-based emotion-centred intervention called “Talking about School Transition (TaST)”. This intervention was led by the schoolteachers in the UK with the aim to enhance the children’s emotional resilience and coping strategies in preparation for the primary-secondary school transition. The intervention took place in five weeks and was integrated into the Year 6 curriculum of Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE). Guided lesson plans, PowerPoint lesson slides and workbooks were given to teachers who delivered them in one-hour lessons. These materials were designed based on the five underpinning concepts of Resilience theory which were reflected via a variety of individual, group, and class-based activities (Bagnall, 2020). The study emphasises the important role of schools in supporting students’ wellbeing and concluded this model of intervention could be promising in nurturing students’ ability to adjust their emotions during the short-term school transition period and long-term resilience. In addition, it was argued that teacher-led school-based interventions would be more effective in terms of students’ responsiveness and teachers’ confidence in delivering the program than researcher-delivered interventions.

The project implemented by the Australian Council for Educational Research (Sniedze-Gregory et al., 2021) also identified many school-specific resources, booklets, guidelines developed by schools and made available on their websites for students, parents, and staff to support the primary-secondary school transition process. Government departments also provide resources related to transition practices for their schools (e.g., NSW Department of Education, 2022; Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2014). Although the school-based approach was found to be beneficial, many studies using this approach targeted at a small number of participants and it was difficult to compare intervention outcomes (Svane et al., 2019). Svane et al. (2019) suggested more consensus around best practices for wellbeing interventions during school transitions and called for further evidence-based research to provide more evidence for the development of school transition practices.

Despite the variety of school-based transition practices, no gender-specific programs were identified. Activities, events, and materials of the transition programs aimed to generally support students and did not consider or address the differences and exacerbated vulnerability documented by female students during and post the primary-secondary school transition.

#### **4.2.3. Participatory approach practices**

Many school transition practices have adopted a participatory approach emphasising the active involvement of students in the planning and designing process of transition interventions. This approach values students’ voice and direct contribution to the planning and implementation process because it considers students as the critical agents in the decision-making process (Hughes et al., 2019; Nastrom-Smith & Hughes, 2019). When students are active participants in decision making and planning, their personal wellbeing is also enhanced through the participation process (Hughes et al., 2019).

The project implemented by the Australian Council for Educational Research is an example of effective transition practices from the participatory approach that involves students in raising their voice about their own school transition experiences via Student Forums (Sniedze-Gregory et al., 2021). Student Forums included data activities such as introduction-to-data-collection activity and survey activity and drawing, group, and individual activities to help students share their school transition experiences and brainstorm solutions for the challenges. In total, the project conducted 82 forums with 444 students across 15 schools. Data collected from Student Forums revealed significant findings of students' perspectives about school-based transition programs, perceptions and feelings of the school transition, challenges students had and their solutions for the challenges. Students of the project expressed their desire to solve problems themselves and be their own "agents of change" (Sniedze-Gregory et al., 2021, p. 6).

A study in Queensland engaged students in a Junior Secondary Precinct project to contribute students' views in designing the school spaces to support their wellbeing needs in their transition from primary to lower secondary school (Nastrom-Smith & Hughes, 2019). The purpose of the project was to create a learning environment that responded to the wellbeing needs of middle year students who experienced challenges transitioning to secondary schools. Students in this project were invited to take part in the "envisioning process" and evaluate the design plans via their free-hand notes and diagrams. The design outcome was a social learning hub with indoor and outdoor spaces that supported contemporary pedagogy and valued adolescent learners' wellbeing needs. The wellbeing outcomes were reported as students' enhanced sense of belonging, self-identity development, changing relationship dynamics, and positive experiences of the transition to secondary school.

A study conducted in Brisbane, Queensland engaged students in designing a learning environment to support students' wellbeing needs in their transition from primary to lower secondary school (Hughes et al., 2019). Based on the assumption that the transition to unfamiliar physical spaces of secondary school may affect students' wellbeing and put them at the risk of disengagement from learning, the authors investigated the relationship between school transition, students' wellbeing, and school spaces. The study involved Year 7 students in various data-collecting activities such as drawing, discussions, mapping, and student-led tours. The study indicated students associated wellbeing spaces with spaces that made them feel safe, happy, comfortable, and having friends. Results of the study indicated spaces that were less supportive of wellbeing did not make students feel safe and lacked emotional comfort and interaction. This study demonstrated the potential of the participatory approach in enhancing students' sense of positive wellbeing, sense of community belonging, learning engagement, and sense of ownership. The study also suggested providing students with a variety of school spaces that nurtured individuals and allowed for individual differences rather than one-size-fits-all solutions (Hughes et al., 2019).

A study by Davis et al. (2015) compared three different approaches to school transition practices (professional-led, parent-led/parent partnership, and child-led/peer-supported transitions) in 8 EU members and reported findings of the child-led approach which are similar to the participatory approach. According to Davis et al.'s (2015) study, students in the child-

led transition practice reported increased feelings of inclusion and quicker adaptation when they had the opportunities to take part in the buddy systems, lead social activities and deliver presentations. Children who were given opportunities to lead processes of transition expressed strong feelings of increased confidence and commitment to lead the process further. The study also revealed children's preference for the child-led approach because they had the opportunity to communicate their problems, whereas the professional-led transitions often neglected students' views and had strong age-related ideas that children were too young to be involved in decision-making. Children in this study also identified the child-led approach with notions of rights, a common sense of belonging, enhanced community-based relationships, and allowing for differences. They expressed their wishes to be included in activities, to be listened to, and to experience equality.

#### **4.2.4. Technology integration focus**

With the increasing use of technology among young people and the availability and accessibility of technological benefits, many studies have integrated technology in their transition practices. For example, Maher (2010) investigated the use of the internet as a communication tool to facilitate interactions between primary school and secondary school students as a way to support school transition for a group of students in suburban Sydney, Australia. The main intervention of the study was The High School Project, in which students from the primary school and high school would communicate online with each other, sharing information about the high school life. There were four 40-minute Internet sessions each week and one school visit. The study provided positive results. Via online interaction, students formed friendships, expanded their social networks, felt more a part of the high school community, and their anxieties about transferring to high school decreased. The study suggested that providing students with social interactions would offer the opportunity for the primary school students to be prepared and have more positive transition experiences. However, the project had a few technological challenges such as the architectural constraints of online spaces and identity issues (i.e., students changed their names online and this affected identity construction among participants).

Aiming at encouraging cyber safety as part of a positive primary-secondary transition for Australian young people, The "Cybersafety and Transition" project was implemented at a community-level approach with the participation of representatives from the local government, university, community leaders, youth organisations, students, parents, and teachers (Lester et al., 2016). The project involved 7 stages of community engagement process from forming a steering committee and reviewing the literature to developing and disseminating online resources related to cyber safety. Young people who lived in the local government area were recruited for a Youth Advisory Board which provided a voice for young people to contribute their ideas for resources and feedback to the steering committee. With the increasing use of technology as a part of young people's social life, the project indicates that equipping students with skills to use technology appropriately would minimise problems from cyber aggression and contribute to a positive school transition.

Another example of technology integration was in an Australian context, the development of a mobile-optimised website to support students during the transition from primary to secondary school (Chambers & Coffey, 2013). The website content covered six areas: Getting Ready (preparing for new settings), Friendships (social skills), Planning and Organisation (e.g., study skills, homework tips, test tips, Cyber Safety, Frequently Asked Questions, and My Info (e.g., information about classes and teachers). Although the paper did not include evaluation information, it anticipated the wide use of the website by a variety of schools in Australia, the US and Canada (Chambers & Coffey, 2013).

A project report by the Australian Council for Educational Research (Sniedze-Gregory et al., 2021) identified multiple technology-based resources developed by individuals, organisations, health foundations, or government departments to support school transitions. They include interactive video conferences, podcasts, webpages, videos, online magazines, and online resources for different audiences like students, parents, and teachers. Although most resources can be accessed easily or freely, they differ in their approaches and may not be implemented immediately at schools (Sniedze-Gregory et al., 2021). However, they may be helpful in providing an overview of certain aspects related to the primary-secondary school transition and students' wellbeing. This review has found there were no gender-specific programs that used technology to particularly address female students' wellbeing concerns in the primary-secondary school transition.

### **4.3. Guiding principles for school transitions**

The evidence-based transition practices and empirical evidence of the impacts of school transitions on students' wellbeing have revealed valuable guiding principles for school transitions to support students' wellbeing during primary-secondary school transitions. Despite the differences in approaches to transition practices, empirical evidence shows that best transition practices function well if they can directly involve students and their parents in multiple stages from planning to implementing transition practices, listen to students' voices, allow for individual differences as well as gender differences, have early and long-term planning, are collaborative with multiple stakeholders, community organisations and professionals with different expertise, pay attention to staff training, and have suitable transition evaluation criteria. The guiding principles are explained in detail as follows:

- *Students' voice*: As students are the direct beneficiaries of transition programs, their direct participation and contribution to the planning and designing process are necessary. Research has also shown that when students can contribute their voices, their sense of belonging and ownership is enhanced (Davis et al., 2015; Hughes et al., 2019; Nastrom-Smith & Hughes, 2019). Involving students in solving their own challenges during the school transition process may also help to build up student agency and self-reliance and support their wellbeing (Sniedze-Gregory et al., 2021). However, most transition practices have mainly focused on administrative and organizational procedures and not fully engaged students who are more concerned about personal and social issues (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Accordingly, programs and resources need to be developed based on the individual needs of students and the

preferences identified by the students themselves (Johnson, 2019; NSW Department of Education, 2022; Sniedze-Gregory et al., 2021; Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2014).

- *Family engagement and well-informed parents*: Research has reported the importance of parents' active involvement in contributing to a positive primary-secondary school transition process. Therefore, family engagement should be taken into consideration in planning any transition programs (Centre for Adolescent Health-Murdoch Children's Research Institute, 2018; Davis et al., 2015; Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2014). Involving parents can be completed via informing parents of the significance of the school transition practices, providing access to related information and guidelines of how they can provide support to their children, and inviting parents to collaborate with teachers and participate in specific, relevant activities. Strategies also need to be developed to maintain parents' engagement in their children's learning and social and emotional development.

- *Early and long-term transition programs*: Transition practices should be early enough and on a long-term basis. Intervention practices should be forefront and timely in the early years of primary school, not when students leave primary school or as at the conventional intervention time of the primary-secondary school transition (Bagnall et al., 2022). Earlier transition practices also help to avoid the common situation of intensive transition activities in secondary schools while pre-transition students need to be well-prepared well before the transition from primary school to reduce fear, concerns, and feelings of uncertainty (Sniedze-Gregory et al., 2021). Earlier transition practices may also help to create a sense of belonging to the secondary school, when students are introduced to the new secondary school environment at an earlier stage (Sniedze-Gregory et al., 2021). This assumes that students and parents have decided on the specific secondary school their child will be attending. In addition, research has indicated that many wellbeing issues may still exist till post-transition and later years of secondary schooling. Social relationships need time to be established, maintained, and developed in a new learning environment. Therefore, a long-term plan of ongoing intervention is necessary to support students throughout the whole process from pre- to post-transition. Detailed transition planning timeline, resources, checklists for different tasks, and description of key people's roles need to be tailored in parallel with contact planning for involved stakeholders (Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2014). Many effective transition practices identified in this literature review have developed good sample resources, planning templates and assessment tools that have been piloted, implemented and evaluated to support successful transition planning.

- *Primary-secondary school collaboration*: Many studies have highlighted the importance of primary school in establishing social connections, maintaining the sense of connectedness and providing support for school transitions (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2017; Lester & Cross, 2015; Lester et al., 2013; Waters et al., 2014a). Therefore, collaboration between primary and secondary schools is important to create consistency and continuity in awareness and practices. Evangelou et al. (2008) emphasise the curriculum continuity, bridging materials, and information exchange between primary and secondary schools. Sutherland et al.

(2010) highlight the two-way information exchange about pupils between primary and secondary schools instead of the dominant one-way from primary to secondary schools only.

- *Involvement of multiple stakeholders:* Research has shown that each stakeholder has an important role in any transition process, so the active involvement of multiple stakeholders is beneficial and necessary for transition practices. Evidence-based successful practices have emphasised the significant contribution of strong peer networks (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020; van Rens et al., 2018), same-age peer affiliation (Topping, 2011), teachers and parents (Burns et al., 2019; Cross et al., 2005; Lester et al., 2016; van Rens et al., 2018; Waters et al., 2014a), school counsellors (Waters et al., 2012), school policies (Lester & Cross, 2015), school principals (Johnson, 2019), transition coordinators (Coffey, 2013; Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2014), local authorities (Sutherland et al., 2010), and the students themselves (Hughes et al., 2019; Nastro-Smith & Hughes, 2019). Each stakeholder plays a part in different intervention stages to provide students with comprehensive and all-rounded support. In addition, successful transition programs benefit from support networks and interdisciplinary partnerships with agencies, community organisations, and researchers to design and implement a holistic program (Lester et al., 2016; Topping, 2011). In that way, transition practices will receive contributions from various sources of expertise, resources, and perspectives at all levels (Davis et al., 2015). Community-university partnership model can be an example of an effective interdisciplinary partnership in supporting schools and their students with the transition process (Felmlee et al., 2018; Spoth et al., 2007; Temkin et al., 2018).

- *Active communication and shared information:* For practices involving partnership of different agencies, organisations and schools, there needs to be a holistic model of communication, understanding and collaboration between sectors (Coffey, 2013; Johnson, 2019). Active communication between primary and secondary school is also important to ensure continuity and enable parents to be more engaged in supporting their children during the school transition period (Waters et al., 2014a). Information-sharing networks in communities also contribute to effective communication (Davis et al., 2015). Shared information between parents and both primary and secondary schools is considered as one of the key factors during the school transition period (Bagnall et al., 2022).

- *Teacher education:* With the teachers' important role in supporting students and in developing positive student-teacher relationships, ongoing professional development and training are necessary to improve teachers' knowledge regarding developmental stages and wellbeing during middle school years and enhance teacher capabilities to identify students' needs for support during the primary-secondary school transition period (Centre for Adolescent Health-Murdoch Children's Research Institute, 2018; Farmer et al., 2010; Hamm et al., 2010; Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2014). Professional development is also needed to ensure the school culture and transition strategies are transferred from the leadership team to teaching and support staff who are directly involved in transition practices (Johnson, 2019).

- *Gender-specific strategies*: Even though this literature review provides limited findings of gender differences in students' wellbeing during school transitions, it is clear that male and female students do have different concerns and face different challenges during primary-secondary school transitions. Research has called for the need of gender-specific strategies to provide specific and individualised support for each gender (Burns et al., 2019; Waters et al., 2014b). For example, girls need more support with social relationships to reduce their difficulties of making new friends or levels of depression. Up till now, there is limited research aiming at providing support specifically for girls or enriching the understanding of patterns and issues in female students' wellbeing during school transitions (Burns et al., 2019).

- *Transition evaluation criteria*: Depending on the approach and specific purposes of each transition program, evaluation criteria indicators may vary in success markers or program scope markers (Sniedze-Gregory et al., 2021). It is necessary for transition practices to include an evaluation scheme in their planning to ensure the achievement of their objectives and measure school transition success (Evangelou et al., 2008; Sutherland et al., 2010). Guidelines for evaluating the training of transition process are also necessary for transition practices (Evangelou et al., 2008).

## **5. Conclusion and suggestions for future research**

In summary, the primary-secondary school transition may have significant impact on students' wellbeing, particularly with peer relationships, teacher-student relationships, relationships with their schools and parents, and academic pressure. Peer relationships are reported as the most influential factor that affects students' wellbeing and sense of belonging during the school transition period. Transition practices need to create an environment of meaningful and mentoring relationships to assist students in navigating their ways to secondary school. Teachers and parents also play important roles in supporting students' wellbeing; therefore they should be well-informed and actively involved in the school transition period.

Regarding school transition practices, most studies to date have focused on stakeholders' perceptions of school transitions, comparing expectations and experiences of pre- and post-transition. Some studies examined interventions or transition programs to support students' wellbeing during the school transitions. However, the findings showed effective transition practices may involve a collaboration of different stakeholders, organisations, community agencies, and researchers. School-based transition practices emphasise the collaboration between primary and secondary schools, continuity in the transition programs and curricula, and family engagement. Studies also highlight the role of students' active participation in the decision-making process, designing and planning transition initiatives. Students' direct involvement has benefits in supporting their wellbeing, sense of ownership, engagement, and positive emotional outcomes. Technology may be a resource to facilitate interpersonal communication and assist the transition process for students, particularly in an era where digital technologies have become an integral part of daily life and students' digital engagement may pose risks and challenges to their wellbeing.

Research has shown female and male students have differences in their concerns and issues before and after the transition from primary to secondary school. Even though evidence shows that female students experience worse wellbeing outcomes during and post the transition, transition practices which specifically supported female students were not found. The design of transition programmes and approaches to specifically support female students' wellbeing needs to occur and then be subsequently and iteratively evaluated.

Based on the findings related to the impact of school transitions on students' wellbeing as well as evidence-based transition practices, this review provides several guiding principles to enable positive primary-secondary school transitions. Given the gap in addressing the acute needs of females during and post the primary-secondary school transition, researchers, schools, and organisations are urged to re-consider current transition programs and approaches and pay more attention to female students, as they are more vulnerable across multiple dimensions.

The improvement of primary-secondary school transitions can be iteratively improved through ongoing evaluations to demonstrate success. Tailoring approaches to the needs and issues surrounding how female students experience primary-secondary school transitions is paramount.

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