



**How can mainstream schools support successful  
transitions into Year 1 for children with special educational  
needs and disabilities?**

**A reflexive thematic analysis exploring the views and  
experiences of school staff and parents/carers**

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# List of Common Acronyms

<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Definition</b>
BPS	British Psychological Society
CR	Critical Realism
CYP	Children and Young People
DfE	Department for Education
ECE	Early Childhood Education
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
ELG	Early Learning Goal
EP	Educational Psychologist
EPS	Educational Psychology Service
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
GLD	Good Level of Development
HCPC	Health and Care Professions Council
KS1	Key Stage One
LA	Local Authority
MAT	Multi-Academy Trust
NC	National Curriculum
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SEND CoP	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice
SLR	Systematic Literature Review
TA	Teaching Assistant
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist
Y1	Year 1

# Abstract

When transitioning from one school year to another, children enter an unfamiliar environment, with new people and expectations. These changes can be unsettling if not appropriately managed. The transition from Reception to Year 1 (Y1) is recognised as a particularly challenging transition due to a lack of continuity, and evidence suggests it can be especially difficult for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Despite this, little research has explored children's experiences of this transition, with no English studies completed since COVID-19. Furthermore, the 'school readiness agenda' continues to dominate conversation surrounding the transition to Y1. This rhetoric places the responsibility of being 'ready' for Y1 upon children, disadvantaging those who do not achieve the expected standards at the end of Reception.

The current research provides insight into the experiences of children with SEND during the transition to Y1. The study adopts a bioecological viewpoint, exploring how mainstream schools can support successful transitions from an environmental perspective. Five semi-structured focus groups were facilitated, two with parents/carers of children with SEND in Y1 or Y2, and three with relevant members of school staff. Transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006/2022).

Participants considered the transition more challenging for children with SEND, mainly due to the formal teaching approaches of Y1. However, increased transition support was seen to enable more successful transitions. The transition was recognised as a difficult time for parents/carers, and the long-term impact of COVID-19 was acknowledged. Environmental factors seen to influence transition success included: consistent relationships, the physical environment, collaboration between stakeholders, flexibility of curriculum delivery, and Y1 staffs' knowledge of early development. The findings are discussed in relation to existing literature and theory. The research has implications for schools, Educational Psychologists and the government with regards to developing inclusive transition practices and 'ready' Y1 classrooms.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Research Aims

The success of school transitions is considered a critical factor in shaping children and young people's (CYP's) future academic and social development (Ghaye & Pascal 2006, Hacıibrahimoğlu & Kargın, 2017, Chadwick & Kemp, 2002). The transition to Year 1 (Y1) is considered one of the major challenges children face during early education (Fisher, 2009), and research suggests it can be particularly difficult for children with special educational needs and disabilities (Sanders et al., 2005). However, there is no official guidance regarding how schools should support children during this time. Past research is dominated by the 'school readiness' rhetoric, which promotes a within-child view of transition success, placing the responsibility of being 'ready' for Y1 upon children (Kay, 2018). There has been little consideration of how the systems around children can be adapted to develop 'ready' Y1 environments, particularly within the English context. There has also been no research exploring children's experiences of the transition to Y1 following COVID-19, despite research demonstrating a significant impact of the pandemic upon children's early development (e.g., Best Beginnings et al., 2021).

This research aims to gain insight into the experiences of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) during the transition to Y1 within mainstream English schools. The study adopts a bioecological perspective, exploring environmental factors which can facilitate and/or hinder successful transitions, to help schools develop inclusive transition practices and 'ready' Y1 classrooms. Educational Psychologists (EPs) have a key role in supporting the inclusion of CYP with SEND within mainstream schools, at both an individual and systemic level (Lambert & Frederickson, 2015). As successful transitions are an essential element of inclusive practice (Chadwick & Kemp, 2002), identifying ways to promote positive transitions to Y1 for children with SEND is highly relevant to the EP role.

Stakeholder views, particularly those of parents/carers, are largely missing from existing research and policy, despite the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice (SEND CoP, Department for Education [DfE] & Department of Health [DoH], 2015) emphasising the importance of collaborative

transition planning for children with SEND. This research will gather the views of parents/carers and relevant members of school staff, to provide an insight into transition experiences from multiple perspectives.

## **1.2 Research Approach**

Five semi-structured focus groups were facilitated, two with parents/carers of children with SEND who transitioned to Y1 in September 2023/2024, and three with members of school staff involved in planning/managing the transition to Y1 for children with SEND within mainstream schools. Focus groups were transcribed and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA, Braun & Clarke, 2006/2022). RTA is a qualitative methodology, which involves the identification of themes across a dataset (Byrne, 2021). RTA emphasises the role of researchers' experiences and views in shaping findings, therefore reflexivity is essential (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The researcher's positionality and motivation in relation to the current research topic is outlined in section 1.3, and the topic of reflexivity is considered further in Chapters 3 (3.3.5.1) and 5 (5.3.4). The researcher also kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process, examples from which are presented in Appendix W.

## **1.3 Researcher Positionality and Motivation**

The researcher's professional interest in the research topic emerged whilst working as a Reception and Y1 teacher within a mainstream English school. Teaching in Reception developed their knowledge of the role of child-led learning within early development. The researcher began teaching in Y1 in September 2021 and was shocked by the many changes children faced when joining Y1. This cohort missed a significant proportion of their Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) education due to COVID-19 lockdowns, which appeared to exacerbate their transition difficulties, particularly for children with SEND. Consequently, the researcher adapted Y1 provision to include more child-led learning, which appeared to enable smoother transitions for many children.

The researcher's interest developed further during their time as a Trainee EP (TEP). Whilst completing placements at Educational Psychology Services (EPSs) across the Midlands, they gained insight into the experiences of children with SEND

and their families during the transition to Y1. Through their studies at the University of Nottingham (UoN), the researcher also developed knowledge of bioecological and interactionist theories and began to consider how transition experiences are shaped by the systems around children.

The researcher's interest in the topic is also impacted by a personal and professional drive to promote inclusion. As a TEP, the researcher feels a responsibility to support all children to learn and thrive alongside their peers, with the appropriate support. In addition to their work on placement, this research offers a way for the researcher to contribute towards the development of inclusive education, by identifying ways for mainstream schools to establish more inclusive transition practices.

The researcher acknowledges that their personal and professional interest in the topic will shape research findings, particularly their preference for adopting a bioecological view of transitions, rather than a within-child view. The impact of such views upon the research process and outcomes is considered further within the researcher's reflexive journal (see Appendix W).

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Review Aims**

This review aims to explore literature and policy surrounding the transition to Y1 in mainstream English schools, with a focus upon pupils with SEND, in order to identify themes and gaps within the literature and inform future research. The review is presented in two sections: a narrative literature review and a systematic literature review (SLR).

The narrative review begins by exploring the concept of transitions more widely, before discussing key characteristics of the transition to Y1, as well as factors thought to support this transition. SEND is defined, and the concept of inclusion is explored, in relation to historic and current policy and practice. Psychological frameworks, including the Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) are discussed in relation to the transition to Y1.



Finally, the relevance of this topic to EPs' practice is explored. The narrative review does not provide an exhaustive account of these areas but draws upon research relevant to the research topic.

The SLR provides an in-depth exploration of research exploring school staff and parent/carers' views of the transition to Y1 in mainstream English schools. A systematic search of the literature is completed, before results are screened against inclusion criteria. Each included study is evaluated using the Weight of Evidence framework (Gough, 2007), before a thematic synthesis is completed to identify themes across the literature (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Limitations of the evidence base are discussed, with reference to a rationale for future research.

## **2.2 Context**

The current research is being conducted within the context of the English education system. Throughout the narrative review, international literature is drawn upon, as previous studies have identified themes across international contexts (Einarsdóttir, 2003). However, the structure of education systems varies across the world, and between nations within the United Kingdom (UK). As transitions are socio-cultural processes, embedded within cultural, political and social contexts (Webb et al., 2017), the SLR draws solely upon English research, to avoid the decontextualization of findings and ensure included studies are relevant to the current research.

## **2.3 Narrative Literature Review**

### ***2.3.1 School Transitions***

Compulsory education in England includes three phases: EYFS (birth to five years, compulsory from the term after a child's fifth birthday), primary (five to 11 years) and secondary (11 to 16 years, GOV.UK, 2016). As CYP progress through their education, they experience many transitions. There is no single definition of the term 'transition' within the educational context; however, it is generally understood as the process of CYP moving between educational settings, phases of education, or year groups (Fabian, 2007). Within this review, 'transition' will be used to describe a move from one educational phase to another, within the same setting. Such

transitions typically include a physical move from one classroom to another and a change of teacher (Fabian, 2007). Historically, school transitions have been constructed as single events, but more recently they have come to be understood as complex processes, which occur over time and involve multiple stakeholders (Boyle et al., 2018). This conceptualisation is adopted within the current research.

#### **2.3.1.1 Policy and Legislation.**

Previously, transition was a mandatory area of consideration for schools; a self-evaluation tool was implemented by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2007), requiring schools to report transition processes during inspections. However, within the current inspection framework, there is no requirement for schools to report measures taken to support pupils and families during transitions (Ofsted, 2019). It is therefore the responsibility of individual settings to develop transition policies, causing variation in practice (Mumford & Birchwood, 2021).

#### **2.3.1.2 Key Challenges.**

Transitions can mark an exciting time for CYP, as they enter a new phase of education (Fabian, 2007). However, a dominant theme within the literature is that transitions can be unproductive and unsettling, if not appropriately managed (Fisher, 2009). Transitions represent phases of increased and accelerated developmental demand, regulated by social structures (Fthenakis, 1998). During transitions, CYP are removed from a familiar environment and routine, entering a new environment, with new people, roles and expectations (Harper, 2016). For some, these changes can cause anxiety, discomfort, confusion and exhaustion (Fabian, 2007). Due to the impact of transition success upon CYP's future outcomes (e.g., Ghaye & Pascal, 2006, Hacıbrahimoğlu & Kargın, 2017, Chadwick & Kemp, 2002), transitions have been a key area of focus for educational researchers and policy makers. Much of this interest has centred around the transition to Reception from home or nursery (at four years old, e.g., Ofsted, 2017) and the transition from primary to secondary school (at 11 years old, e.g., Mumford & Birchwood, 2021). However, little research has explored the transition to Y1, despite it being considered one of the most significant and potentially difficult educational transitions (Fisher, 2009).

### **2.3.2 The Transition to Year 1**

The EYFS was introduced as a distinct phase of education in 2000 (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority & Department for Education and Employment, 2000). Children transition from Reception (the final year of the EYFS), to Y1, (the first year of Key Stage One [KS1]), at five years old. Key characteristics of the two educational phases are described below.

#### **2.3.2.1 Reception.**

Whilst many children access pre-school provision, the Reception year is often their first experience of full-time education (Ofsted, 2017). The Reception curriculum is guided by the EYFS Statutory Framework (DfE, 2023a), which was first introduced in 2008 (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008). The framework outlines seven areas of development which guide teaching and learning, including three prime areas (Communication and Language, Physical Development and Personal, Social and Emotional Development), and four specific areas (Literacy, Mathematics, Understanding the World [UtW] and Expressive Arts and Design [EAD]). Teaching and Learning in Reception is also shaped by the three 'characteristics of effective learning': playing and exploring; active learning; and creating and thinking critically. Although Reception is the final year of the EYFS, many stakeholders (e.g., parents) recognise this as the first year of formal education (Ofsted, 2017).

#### **2.3.2.2 Year 1.**

Children in Y1 follow the National Curriculum (NC, DfE, 2013), which was first introduced in 1989 and outlines the statutory guidelines for state-funded schools. The NC is organised into four key stages: KS1 (Y1-Y2), KS2 (Y3-Y6), KS3 (Y7-Y9) and KS4 (Y10-Y11). The KS1 curriculum includes three core subjects (English, Mathematics, Science) and seven foundation subjects (Art and Design, Computing, Design and Technology, Geography, History, Music and Physical Education), as well as Religious Education and Relationships Education. The NC aims to build

knowledge, understanding and skills for future education and employment, resulting in a more formal approach to teaching (White & Sharpe, 2007).

### **2.3.2.3 Key Differences Between Reception and Year 1.**

The transition to Y1 generally involves a move away from play-based, exploratory pedagogies, towards more formal, subject-based learning (White & Sharpe, 2007). In a review of the EYFS, Tickell (2011) stated that “[the] transition between the EYFS and Year 1 should be seamless” (p.35). However, research suggests the transition to formal learning for English pupils is in fact “abrupt” (Ofsted, 2004, p.2). Sanders et al. (2005) interviewed 66 children prior to and following their transition to Y1 as part of a research project funded by The Department for Education and Skills. During each interview, children were asked to draw themselves in their current class and discuss their drawing with the researcher. Themes within their descriptions of Reception included play-based, active, child-led learning, whilst themes identified in descriptions of Y1 included work-based, static, adult-led learning, with an emphasis on listening and writing. These findings were in line with Ofsted’s (2004) earlier conclusions.

In 2005, the National Assessment Agency published ‘Continuing the Learning Journey’; guidance to help schools better manage the transition to Y1. The report suggested features of EYFS practice should be introduced within Y1, to increase continuity. However, despite several updates to the NC and EYFS Statutory Framework since this report, the dichotomy between the two educational phases remains (Fisher, 2022). In many European countries, the transition to primary school coincides with the transition from play-based to formal learning. However, in England, these transitions occur separately, as most children join primary school in Reception. White and Sharpe (2007) question whether this reduces the emphasis placed upon the transition to formal learning for English pupils, as they already appear settled within the primary school environment.

### **2.3.3 Factors which Influence Transition Success.**

Nicholson (2022) suggests “a successful transition from Reception to Year One has occurred if a child feels a sense of belonging in their new setting and

participates in the opportunities, requirements and challenges optimally” (p.24). A scope of the literature identified no research aiming to quantify the prevalence of transition success or difficulties in England since the EYFS was introduced in 2000. However, some small-scale studies have explored the topic qualitatively (e.g., Sanders et al., 2005, Howe, 2013). Research exploring factors which impact the success of transitions to Y1 is also scarce, although some general themes are evident within the wider literature, as discussed below.

#### **2.3.3.1 Continuity.**

Docket and Einarsdóttir (2017) define continuity in the context of education as “experiences and learning that build upon what has gone before” (p.133). This includes not just curriculum content, but environments, relationships and resources (Ballam et al., 2017). Within the wider literature, continuity is considered an essential component of transition success (Fisher, 2020, Niesel & Gabriel, 2007). Within Sanders et al.’s (2005) study, the importance of continuity during the transition to Y1 was referenced by both children and school staff. However, whilst continuity is important during transitions, change and discontinuity are also inevitable, important aspects of development (Dockett & Einarsdóttir, 2017). It is desirable therefore, not to eliminate change, but to balance it with continuity. Peters (2004) reiterates this point with reference to Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD, 1978), suggesting successful transitions depend upon adults scaffolding children to manage changes beyond their independent capacity. Despite increased understanding of the place of continuity and change during transitions, balancing these concepts continues to pose challenges for educators (Fisher, 2022).

#### **2.3.3.2 Individual factors- School Readiness.**

Sanders et al. (2005) also interviewed 59 Reception and Y1 teachers to explore their views of the transition to Y1. Y1 teachers perceived the transition to be more difficult for particular groups of children, including those who speak English as an additional language, summer born children and those with SEND. The idea that children’s individual characteristics impact transition success is the driving force behind the ‘school readiness agenda’. Within literature and policy, some researchers

use the term 'school readiness' to refer to starting Reception, and others to starting Y1 (Nicholson, 2022). Within this research, the term is used in the context of the transition to formal education (Y1).

There is no single definition of 'school readiness'; Scott-Little et al. (2006) define it as "a fixed or prerequisite set of physical, intellectual, and/or social skills needed in order for children to be able to fulfil the requirements of the school environment" (p.154). In England, a child's 'readiness' for Y1 is measured according to their attainment across 17 Early Learning Goals (ELGs), which span across the seven areas of learning. At five years old, children are therefore grouped by 'ability' and classified in relation to the performance of their peers (Kay, 2018). Consequently, children who do not achieve the expected standard at the end of Reception may enter Y1 in a 'deficit position', whereby they are considered not to possess the skills required to manage the transition to formal learning (Kay, 2018).

The school readiness agenda, which has become a staple of early childhood education (ECE) policy (e.g., Ofsted, 2014), aims to provide children "with a head start into compulsory education" and "close the learning gap" through the provision of high-quality ECE (Kay, 2022, p.172). However, the construct has come under criticism for its reductionist nature (Kay, 2022), and contradiction of the view that "children develop and learn at different rates" (DfE, 2023a, p.6). The school readiness rhetoric can also lead to the assumption that some groups of children find the transition to Y1 easier (Docket & Perry, 2014), when in fact any child may experience transition difficulties (Peters, 2010, p.2). It can be argued therefore, that transition success does not depend upon children's school readiness, rather the quality of provision available to meet their individual needs (Bingham & Whitebread, 2012).

### **2.3.3.3 Environmental Factors- Ready Schools.**

The concept of 'ready schools' challenges the school readiness rhetoric, highlighting the importance of appropriate provision in enabling successful transitions (UNICEF, 2012). The topic of ready schools is yet to be explored within an English context; however, the concept has gained popularity in Australia and the USA, leading to a clearer understanding of what 'ready schools' look like within these contexts (e.g., The National Educational Goals Panel, 1998, Dowker et al., 2007). It

is important to note that, in these countries, the transition to formal education coincides with the transition to primary school (at 5-years-old in Australia and 6-years-old in the USA) and therefore entails a change of school. This reduces the relevance of the literature to the English context. The lack of English research in this area reinforces White & Sharpe's (2007) suggestion that the transition to formal education in England is underestimated due to it usually occurring within the same setting.

Dowker et al. (2007) define a ready school as "a comprehensive vision of what a school can do to ensure that all children who enter its doors fulfil their potential as learners" (p.68). They recommend a more inclusive definition of readiness, which considers how school practices and policies support the success of all children. Burke and Burke (2005) identify three components to be addressed when developing 'student ready schools': the school community, teachers, and the curriculum. Firstly, the authors emphasise the importance of establishing a caring school community, which reflects the larger community it serves, avoiding deficit views and valuing each child and family's culture and experiences. Secondly, the authors recommend teachers use formative assessments, which build upon what children know, to guide pupils through their learning journey, rather than compare them to others. This contradicts the current English system, which uses summative assessment to classify children before they enter Y1. The authors also suggest the implementation of ready curriculums, which are inquiry-based and incorporate pupil interests. Within the English context, Fisher (2022) explored KS1 teachers' views of inquiry-based learning through a widescale survey. Of 537 respondents, 100% believed it is important for Y1 children to access play and inquiry-based learning. However, 397 suggested children in Y1 do not get this opportunity, mainly due to a lack of support from leadership, time pressures, and lack of resources. The disparities between Burke and Burke's (2005) definition of 'ready schools' and the practice described within English research (e.g., Fisher, 2022) reinforces the idea that English policy and research remains dominated by the within-child construct of school readiness.

### ***2.3.4 Transitions for Pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities***

In order to develop 'ready' Y1 classrooms, the reasons for some groups of children disproportionately experiencing difficult transitions must be understood. Transition experiences differ depending upon CYP's past experiences, relationships and interactions with their environments (Dunlop, 2014), and research suggests transitions can be especially complex for children with SEND (Janus, 2011). Despite this, little guidance is provided within the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) regarding how CYP with SEND can be best supported during transitions. The guidance directs schools to include "planning and preparations between phases of education" for pupils with SEND, in collaboration with CYP and their parents (p.102), and stresses the importance of information sharing when CYP move to new schools or settings. However, there is no reference to information sharing for within-school transitions. This lack of guidance once again places the responsibility of planning and managing transitions upon individual settings.

#### **2.3.4.1 Defining Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.**

In England, children are considered to have special educational needs (SEN) if they have "significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age" and require "special educational provision", which is "additional to or different from that made generally for other children or young people of the same age by mainstream schools" (DfE & DoH, 2015, p.16). The SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) conceptualises SEN according to four broad areas of need: Communication and Interaction, Cognition and Learning, Social, Emotional and Mental Health, and Physical and Sensory development. However, CYP often have needs across several or all areas, and their needs may change over time. CYP with a disability have "a physical or mental impairment which has a long-term and substantial adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities" (DfE & DoH, 2015, p.16). Not all CYP with a disability have SEN, but there is a significant overlap between disabilities and SEN.



When CYP are identified as having possible SEN, schools must act to remove barriers to learning and provide effective support, through implementing the 'graduated approach' (DfE & DoH, 2015). Provision funded solely by a school/setting is described as 'SEN Support'. SEN support means educational provision that is additional to, or different from, that generally made available for other CYP of the same age (GOV.UK, 2024a). Where CYP require a greater level of support, schools, parents/carers or CYP over 16 years old can apply for an Education, Health and Care (EHC) Needs Assessment, which may result in an EHC Plan (EHCP) being issued (GOV.UK, 2024a). This document outlines the provision CYP require to meet their SEN and ensure they achieve the best possible outcomes in education, health and social care (DfE & DoH, 2015).

In the academic year 2023/2024, 4.8% of pupils in England had an EHCP, and 13.6% received SEN support. These figures represent 11.6% and 13% increases respectively since 2022/2023 (GOV.UK, 2024a). The government's priority is to promote and support the inclusion of CYP with SEND within mainstream schools (DfE & DoH, 2015). This commitment is supported by legislation, including the Children and Families Act (2014) and the Equality Act (2010).

#### **2.3.4.2 What is Inclusion?**

Despite being a staple of UK educational policy, the term 'inclusion' is not universally defined within the literature (Williams-Brown & Hodkinson, 2021). In the broadest sense, inclusive education aims to "identify and dismantle barriers to education for all children so that they have access to, are present and participate in and achieve optimal academic and social outcomes from school" (UNESCO, 2018, p.2). Although the concept of inclusion applies to all CYP, the focus within this research is the inclusion of CYP with SEND. In relation to SEND, inclusive practice secures "the right of all children to access, presence, participation and success in their local regular [mainstream] school" (UNESCO, 2018, p.8), allowing pupils with SEND to learn alongside peers of the same age, with appropriate support and resources (Gilhool, 1989). Successful inclusion depends upon the development of practice, policies, curriculums and cultures which allow diverse needs to be met within mainstream classrooms (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2002).

#### **2.3.4.3 The History of Inclusion in England.**

During the twentieth century, CYP with SEND were educated predominantly in special schools, away from 'typically developing' peers, however, this segregated system faced criticism from the 1960s (Lambert & Fredrickson, 2015). In 1978, The Warnock Report introduced the policy of 'integration' across the UK. The report suggested CYP with SEND should be educated within mainstream schools if this was consistent with parents' wishes, their needs could be met, and the education of other students would not be disturbed (Graham-Matheson, 2012). In 1994, The Salamanca Statement shifted focus from 'integration' to 'inclusion', asking all countries who signed the agreement to "adopt the principle of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise" (UNESCO, 1994, p.8). The key difference between inclusion and integration is the idea that school environments must adapt to meet the needs of CYP, rather than expecting CYP to 'fit in' to mainstream education (Williams-Brown and Hodkinson, 2021). This expectation was later written into UK law (Special Educational Needs and Disability Act, 2001, Children and Families Act, 2014).

#### **2.3.4.4 The Current Context.**

In the academic year 2023/2024, 54.4% of CYP with an EHCP and 91.17% receiving SEN support attended mainstream settings, whilst 36.75% of CYP with an EHCP and 0.1% receiving SEN support attended state-funded or non-maintained special schools (GOV.UK, 2024a). These figures suggest the majority of CYP with SEND in England are educated in mainstream settings, in line with the government's drive for inclusion. However, views regarding the presence of true inclusion within mainstream English schools vary. Williams-Brown and Hodkinson (2021) compared the outcomes of two identical studies completed in 2010 (Brown, 2016) and 2019 (Williams-Brown & Hodkinson, 2021). The studies gathered mainstream primary school teachers' views of inclusion via a Q-sort. Similar themes emerged across the studies, including confusion regarding the difference between inclusion and integration; feelings of uncertainty regarding how to meet the needs of CYP with SEND whilst meeting other standards; negative views of the impact of standard objectives upon pupils with SEND; and a lack of training, experience, resources and

funding. These findings suggest little development in teacher understanding and implementation of inclusive practice throughout the decade. However, in 2019, the view that the inclusion of pupils with SEND ‘hindered’ the education of others did not emerge, showing some development in attitudes towards inclusion.

#### **2.3.4.5 Implications for the Transition to Year 1 for Pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.**

Chadwick and Kemp (2002) consider successful transitions the first step of inclusive practice, therefore it is crucial Y1 classrooms are set up to meet the needs of all pupils from the outset. However, evidence suggests balancing inclusive practice with standard objectives continues to pose a challenge for teachers (Williams-Brown and Hodkinson, 2021) and CYP unable to meet these objectives can be ‘excluded’ despite attending mainstream settings, for example, being continually segregated from peers to complete interventions (Glazzard, 2013). At the end of Reception, children are assessed against the ELGs; those who meet the criteria in all areas (excluding UtW and EAD) are deemed to have achieved a ‘Good Level of Development’ (GLD). In the academic year 2023/2024, 67.7% of all pupils achieved a GLD. However, only 24.9% of children receiving SEN support and 3.8% with an EHCP achieved this standard (GOV.UK, 2024b). Past research suggests school staff consider the transition to Y1 particularly difficult for children who do not achieve the expected standard at the end of Reception (Quick et al., 2002). Children with SEND account for a large proportion of this group, raising questions regarding the inclusiveness of the transition to Y1.

#### **2.3.5 Theoretical Frameworks**

Transitions can be viewed through a range of theoretical lenses. The framework applied by a researcher is reflected within their chosen methodologies and measures (Dunlop, 2014). Existing literature suggests theories of transition fit primarily into two broad categories: intrapersonal, developmental theories, which suggest transition success depends upon CYP’s individual competences; and bioecological, interactionist theories, which view development in context, considering the capacity of systems to accommodate and support transitions and the interactions

between these systems and individual development. The focus of transition research and policy is guided by the theoretical views of its researchers and influencers (Dunlop, 2014).

#### **2.3.5.1 Intrapersonal Framework.**

Research which explores school readiness and focuses upon CYP's individual strengths, difficulties and abilities to adapt to new environments adopts an intrapersonal, developmental view of transitions (e.g., Hughes et al., 2015, Purdam et al., 2024). When viewing transitions through this lens, researchers typically draw upon positivist methodologies, comparing CYP's development to a pre-defined trajectory (Evans, 2015). This theoretical position is underpinned by theories such as Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development (1964) and Erikson's Psychosocial Development Model (1963), which propose that CYP move through a series of linear stages as they develop, each stage providing a foundation for the next. Such theories suggest successful transitions are dependent upon children developing the skills required to manage the Y1 environment. This belief continues to dominate English literature and policy surrounding children's transition to formal schooling through the school readiness agenda (Kay, 2018). However, critics argue intrapersonal viewpoints and the construct of school readiness can be problematic for children with SEND, who may not develop in line with 'typical' trajectories (Lynch & Soni, 2021).

#### **2.3.5.2 Bioecological Framework.**

Researchers who consider the interactions between CYP and the systems around them during transitions adopt a bioecological, interactionist viewpoint (Dunlop, 2014). These studies generally use qualitative or mixed methods designs, to gain a rich picture of CYP's development in context (e.g., White & Sharpe, 2007, Fisher, 2009). A theory applied frequently to transition research is the Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), which suggests development is influenced by four components:

1. Processes- interactions with people and objects within the ecological systems (e.g., attachments with caregivers).

2. Person- individual attributes (e.g., emotional competencies).
3. Context – made up of four interconnected ecological systems:
  - Microsystem- environments people interact with directly (e.g., home and school).
  - Mesosystem- interrelations between the microsystems.
  - Exosystem- events which have indirect influence upon development (e.g., education policies).
  - Macrosystem- wider societal influences (e.g., political climate).
4. Chronosystem/time- historical period, or length of a process.

This model expanded upon Bronfenbrenner's earlier Ecosystemic Model (1979), which emphasised the role of context in shaping development but did not acknowledge the influence of the child themselves. Webb et al. (2017) suggest the Bioecological Model can help researchers understand variation in CYP's transition experiences. This view is shared by Dunlop (2014), who believes the Bioecological Model can act as a single framework, within which other theories can be applied to help understand transition experiences.

In line with a bioecological view, UNICEF (2012) frame school readiness as a construct made up of three elements: 'ready families' (parental attitudes/involvement in transition), 'ready children' (individual knowledge/skills), and 'ready schools' (environments/practices which support transition). By framing school readiness as a product of the interactions between these dimensions, as well as wider political and cultural influences, UNICEF (2012) promote a move away from intrapersonal frameworks of transition, towards bioecological and interactionist theories.

### ***The Impact of COVID-19.***

The Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) encourages researchers to consider the impact of the wider political and cultural context upon transitions. The COVID-19 pandemic was a global event which influenced many areas of child development, including educational attainment, social skills, mental health and school readiness (Mulkey et al., 2023). Children in Reception during the academic year 2023/2024 were between 18 and 30 months old during the first COVID-19 lockdown (March 2020) and between 34 and 46 months old at the end of the final lockdown (July 2021), a critical time in child development (Colson &

Dworkin, 1997). Research suggests the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns upon children of this age included reduced access to health and social care professionals (Best Beginnings et al., 2021) and reduced opportunities for social interactions, particularly with peers (Charney et al., 2020). Evidence indicates that CYP with SEND in England were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Services such as Speech and Language Therapy (SALT) were unavailable for many (Ofsted, 2021), leading to growing waiting lists which continue to impact access today (NHS England, 2025). Additionally, children were less likely to attend ECE settings during the pandemic, reducing opportunities for early identification of SEND (Ofsted, 2021). International research also suggests the pandemic resulted in increased stress, depression and anxiety amongst some parents/caregivers (Calvano et al., 2021).

Mulkey et al. (2023) recommend teachers consider the impact of CYP's COVID-19 experiences upon their development and acknowledge that the needs of these children may vary from previous generations. Initial research suggests the pandemic has had a long term impact upon various aspects of child development, including communication and language development (Zuniga-Montanez et al., 2025, Pejovic et al., 2024) and children's 'readiness' to start school at aged four (Bakopoulou et al., 2021). The 2024 school readiness survey (Kindred<sup>2</sup>, 2025) found that of 1034 teachers, 49% believed an increasing number of children are "not ready" for Reception when they begin school at four years old, and 39% considered reduced time in early education settings during COVID-19 lockdowns to be a contributing factor, particularly due to the closing of essential services. Parents also reported feeling that the pandemic has impacted upon school readiness, commenting that their children missed out on early opportunities to develop social skills. Children's experiences of the transition to Reception are likely to directly impact upon their experience of the transition to Y1. However, no research has considered the long-term impact of the pandemic upon the transition to Y1, for children with or without SEND. Up to date research exploring this area is therefore required to produce findings relevant to the post COVID-19 context.

## **2.3.6 Relevance for Educational Psychologists**

### **2.3.6.1 Supporting Inclusion.**

EPs' work is guided by the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015), which outlines the government's commitment to inclusive education. Whilst EPs continue to support the inclusion of individual children through casework (Lambert & Frederickson, 2015), in recent years, there has been a shift in the EP role to include more systemic work (DfE, 2023b). Such work can involve supporting schools to develop curriculums, cultures and systems which promote inclusion (Lambert & Frederickson, 2015). As the demand for systemic work increases, the role of EPs in shaping transition processes may also increase, as successful transitions are an essential element of inclusive practice (Chadwick & Kemp, 2002). To contribute towards the development of inclusive transition practices, EPs must have an evidence base to draw upon, as the delivery of evidence-based practice is a key element of their role (Health and Care Professions Council [HCPC], 2023). Developing knowledge of the factors which facilitate and/or hinder successful transitions to Y1 for children with SEND will therefore support EPs in the delivery of evidence-based practice in this area.

### **2.3.6.2 Gaining Stakeholder Views.**

Transitions are significant not only for CYP, but also for educators and parents/carers (Dockett & Perry, 2004). Webb et al. (2017) explain how parents experience a role shift when their children first start school; taking on new responsibilities, establishing new relationships and adapting to new routines. Similar changes are likely to occur when children transition to formal schooling (Y1). The Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) suggests stakeholder views directly impact CYP's transition experiences, therefore it is important school staff and professionals understand the difficulties faced by parents/carers during transitions and identify ways to support them (Webb et al., 2017).

A significant number of studies have explored stakeholder views of the transition to Reception in England (e.g., Shields, 2009, Webb et al., 2017). International research also provides insight into stakeholder views of transitions to formal schooling across the world (e.g., Fleisz-Gyurcsik, 2021). However, few

studies have considered stakeholder views of the transition to Y1 in England, particularly for children with SEND. This is despite the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) emphasising the importance of gaining and acting upon the views of CYP and parents/carers.

Gaining the views of stakeholders is another key element of the EP role. EP practice is directed by ethical and practice guidelines outlined by the HCPC (2016/2023) and the BPS (2017/2021a), which emphasise the importance of working in collaboration with service users and stakeholders, valuing their views and wishes. EPs therefore have a role in supporting the development of an evidence base built upon stakeholders' views, to ensure their voices are represented within literature and policy.

### **2.3.7 Summary**

This narrative review explored literature relating to the transition from Reception to Y1 in England, with a focus on children with SEND. Evidence suggests educational transitions can be unsettling and anxiety-provoking for some CYP if not appropriately managed, and the transition to Y1 can be especially difficult due to a lack of continuity between the EYFS and KS1 (Fisher, 2009). Despite research suggesting the transition can be more difficult for children with SEND (Sanders et al., 2005), the review highlights limited consideration of how children with SEND can be best supported during this time. The literature also indicates that ECE policy in England is largely informed by the school readiness agenda, which places the responsibility of being 'ready' for formal learning upon children (Kay, 2018). This rhetoric can disadvantage pupils who do not meet the expected standards at the end of Reception, which includes many children with SEND (GOV.UK, 2024b).

This narrative review highlights a need for research which challenges the school readiness rhetoric, by considering how environmental factors can facilitate and/or hinder successful transitions to Y1 for children with SEND. In order to provide further context, it would be beneficial to complete a SLR exploring stakeholder views of the transition to Y1 more broadly, to develop a greater understanding of the changes children face during this transition and the provision in place to support them. Completing a SLR will also allow a more comprehensive evaluation of the current evidence base and identify gaps to inform future research (Lame, 2019).



## **2.4 Systematic Literature Review**

### **2.4.1 Introduction**

#### **2.4.1.1 Aims of a Systematic Literature Review.**

SLRs draw together research and highlight gaps in the evidence base, identifying areas where little or no research has been conducted. Methodological factors are considered within the evaluation of studies, ensuring single studies are not given more weight than they warrant. Through completing a SLR, reviewers can develop a broad understanding of existing evidence to direct future research (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008).

#### **2.4.1.2 Qualitative Syntheses.**

Traditionally, SLRs have employed meta-analyses to evaluate the outcomes of quantitative studies (Bearman & Dawson, 2013). However, qualitative approaches are growing in popularity, particularly in educational research (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). It is important that qualitative studies are evaluated and synthesised in a way which reflects the nature of qualitative research (Booth et al., 2021). A qualitative synthesis brings together findings from qualitative research in a systematic way, to “enable a richer interpretation of a particular phenomenon, set of circumstances, or experiences than single primary qualitative research studies can achieve” (Flemming & Noyes, 2021, p.1).

Qualitative syntheses have been criticised for their subjective nature and potential for bias (Bearman & Dawson, 2013). However, these limitations can be addressed through ensuring transparency when reporting the synthesis process (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). A further critique of qualitative syntheses relates to the context specific nature of qualitative research. It can be argued that, by synthesising qualitative studies, reviewers de-contextualise findings, assuming generalisability (Campbell et al., 2003). However, reviewers can preserve context by providing sufficient detail about included studies to allow readers to judge contextual similarities and differences, and by highlighting differences within the synthesis, considering whether any themes can be attributed to a particular group or setting

(Thomas & Harden, 2008). The completion of a thorough and balanced qualitative synthesis can support the development of knowledge and inform evidence-based practice and policies (Davies, 2000).

### 2.4.1.3 Review Question.

The SLR question was formulated using SPIDER (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research Type), a tool created by Cooke et al. (2012) to support the development of qualitative review questions. Table 2.1 provides a summary of characteristics considered in the formulation of the following review question:

*What does existing research say about school staff and parent/carer views of the transition from Reception to Y1 in mainstream English schools?*

**Table 2.1**

*A Table to Show SPIDER Characteristics of the Review Question*

<b>SPIDER Element</b>	<b>Scope of Review</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
Sample	School staff involved in the transition to Y1. Parents/carers of children who are transitioning/have transitioned to Y1. (In mainstream English schools).	School staff and parents/carers are key stakeholders in the transition to Y1. Considering the views of both groups will provide a range of perspectives.
Phenomenon of Interest	The transition to Y1 in mainstream English schools.	To explore existing literature relevant to the current research topic.
Design	Interviews, focus groups or open-ended questionnaires.	To ensure the availability of qualitative data and enable the

		identification of themes across the literature.
Evaluation	Stakeholder views.	To explore the representation of stakeholder views within the existing evidence base.
Research Type	Qualitative research.	The review is a qualitative synthesis.

## 2.4.2 Methodology

### 2.4.2.1 Search Strategy.

In July 2024, a systematic literature search was undertaken using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021). Three databases were used to identify peer reviewed journal articles: Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC, selected due to its focus on educational research), PsychInfo (due to its psychological content) and Web of Science (for its inclusion of a broad range of peer-reviewed literature). A hand search of Google Scholar was also completed to identify missed articles. The search terms used in each database are summarised in Table 2.2. Truncations and Boolean Operators were used to increase the retrieval potential of searches (see Appendix A for a rationale of the chosen search terms).

**Table 2.2**

*A Table to Show the Search Terms used in the SLR*

	Search Terms	Fields
Topic	("transition*" OR "move" OR "transfer")	Title/Abstract
Educational Phase	("reception" OR "early years" OR "early childhood education" OR "early years foundation stage" OR "EYFS" AND "year 1" OR "year one" OR "key stage one" or "key stage 1" or "KS1" OR "infant	Title/Abstract

	school" OR "primary education" OR "primary school" OR "national curriculum")	
Participants	("parent*" OR "carer*" OR "family" OR "families" OR "school staff*" OR "teacher*" OR "headteacher" OR "teaching assistant*" OR "senior leader*" OR "SLT" OR "SENCO" OR "special educational needs coordinator" OR "SENDCO" OR "special educational needs and disabilities coordinator")	All Fields

Initial searches identified 86 records (14 from PsychInfo, 19 from ERIC, 49 from Web of Science). Four additional records were identified through Google Scholar. Screening for duplicates removed 20 records, leaving 66.

#### **2.4.2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.**

A description of the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied during the search is provided in Table 2.3. Title and abstract screening against these criteria removed 58 studies. The remaining eight studies were screened at full-text level. One study was removed as it focused upon the transition from nursery/pre-school to Reception, one was removed due to the research context (Scotland) and two were removed as they discussed Y1 practice but did not refer directly to the transition to Y1. This left four studies to be included within the review (see Figure 2.1 for a flowchart describing this process and Appendix B for a list of studies excluded at the full-text level).

**Table 2.3***A Table to Show Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for SLR Studies*

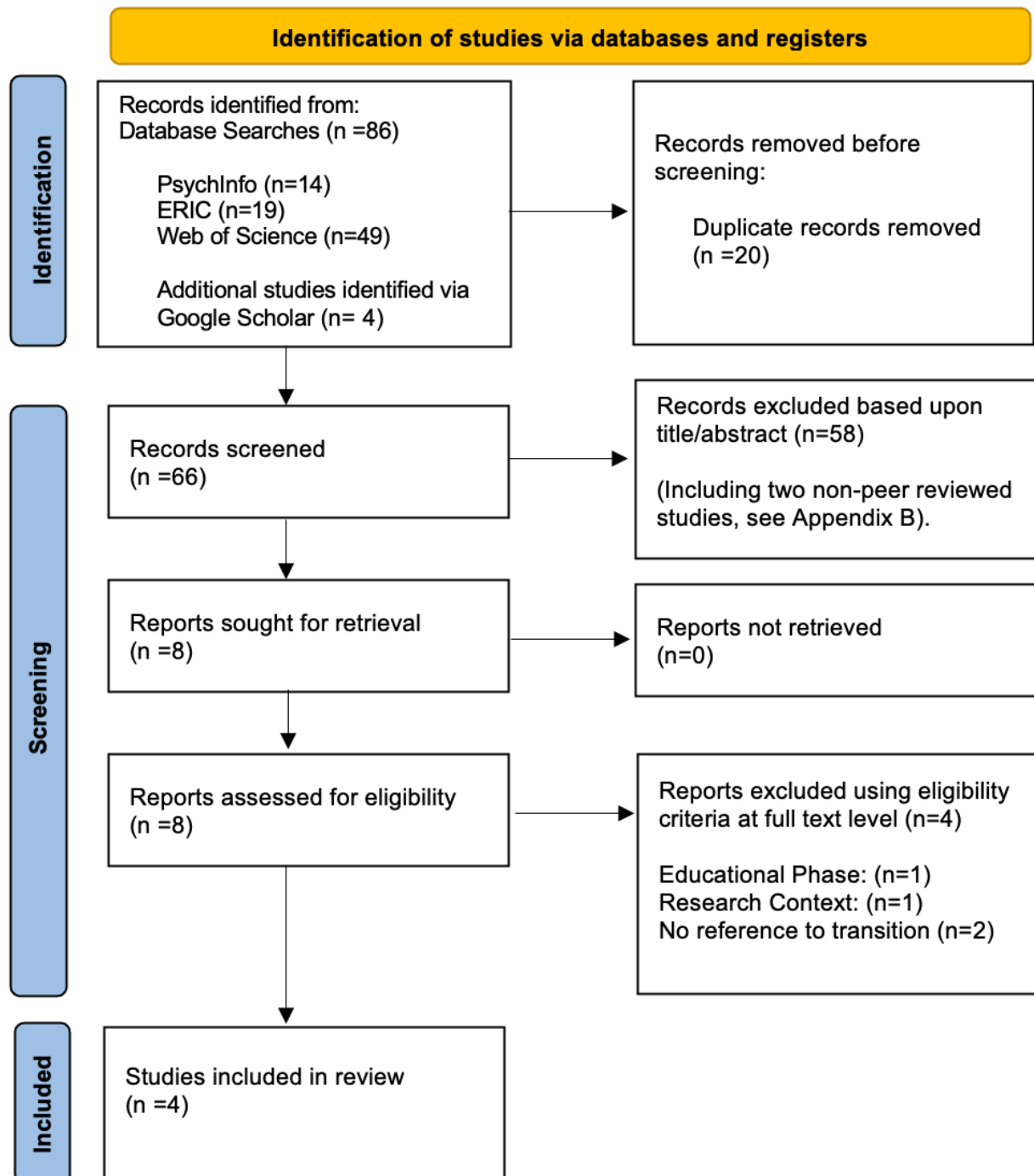
	<b>Included</b>	<b>Excluded</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
<b>Context</b>	Studies completed in mainstream English schools.	Studies completed in other countries (including other UK nations) or in non-mainstream settings.	The structure of the education system differs across countries.  The review will focus upon the transition to Y1 in mainstream schools, in line with the drive for inclusion.
<b>Participants</b>	Parents/carers of children who are transitioning/have transitioned to Y1. School staff involved in supporting the transition to Y1 (in mainstream English schools).	Any other participants.	The review aims to explore school staff and parent/carer views of the transition to Y1 in mainstream English schools.
<b>Educational Phase</b>	Reception to Y1.	Any other educational phase.	The review seeks to explore the transition from Reception to Y1.
<b>Outcome</b>	School staff and/or parent/carer views of the transition to Y1.	Alternative stakeholder views. No views reported.	The review aims to explore school staff and parent/carer views.
<b>Type of Publication</b>	Studies from peer reviewed journals.	Secondary data (e.g., reviews) or non-peer reviewed research.	Peer reviewed journals use screening procedures to ensure high quality research

			and reduce the likelihood of bias.
<b>Publication Date</b>	2000 – July 2024.	Before 2000.	The foundation stage was introduced as a distinct phase of education in England in 2000.
<b>Study Design</b>	Mixed Methods or Qualitative Designs.	Quantitative Designs.	The SLR will use a thematic synthesis to explore stakeholder views, therefore qualitative data is required.
<b>Language</b>	Available in English.	Not available in English.	No translation services available.

It is acknowledged that the publication date range for included studies is larger than usually seen in SLRs. This decision was made for three key reasons. Firstly, due to a lack of up-to-date research in this area. Secondly, because the EYFS was introduced as a distinct phase of education in 2000, making this a logical date range for the review. Finally, because research included within the narrative review suggests little change in Reception or Y1 practices and pedagogies since the EYFS was introduced in 2000 (e.g., Sanders et al., 2005, Fisher, 2022). Potential limitations of the date range are considered further in section 2.4.5.

**Figure 2.1**

*PRISMA Flowchart of the Searching and Screening Process*



### 2.4.2.3 Data Extraction.

A list of included studies is provided in Table 2.4. Each study was systematically reviewed, and a description of key outcomes was obtained, as presented in Appendix C.

**Table 2.4**

*List of Studies Included in the SLR*

Included Studies
1. Bulkeley, J., & Fabian, H. (2006). Well-Being and Belonging During Early Years Transitions. <i>International Journal of Transitions in Childhood</i> , 2, 18-31.
2. Fisher, J. A. (2009). 'We used to play in Foundation, it was more funner': investigating feelings about transition from Foundation Stage to Year 1. <i>Early Years</i> , 29(2), 131-145.
3. Nicholson, P. (2019). Play-based pedagogy under threat? A small-scale study of teachers' and pupils' perceptions of pedagogical discontinuity in the transition to primary school. <i>Education 3-13</i> , 47(4), 450-461.
4. Nicholson, P., & Hendry, H. (2022). A pedagogical meeting place or a problem space? Extending play-based pedagogy in Year One. <i>Education 3-13</i> , 50(2), 184-196.

### 2.4.2.4 Quality Appraisal.

The quality and relevance of each study was critically evaluated using the Weight of Evidence (WoE) framework (Gough, 2007). WoE evaluates research using three dimensions to determine how much 'weight' should be provided to each included study.



WoE A is a “non-review specific judgement about the coherence and integrity of the evidence in its own terms” (Gough, 2007, p.11). WoE A considers the trustworthiness of each study in relation to predetermined quality criteria. Within this review, WoE A judgements were informed by the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist (2017), which provides 10 quality criteria for qualitative research. Each study is given a score of ‘yes’, ‘no’ or ‘can’t tell’ for each criterion. Studies were considered high quality (3) if they met eight or more criteria, medium quality (2) if they met five to seven, and low quality (1) if they met four or fewer. WoE A judgements are presented in Appendix D, alongside CASP scores and coding information.

WoE B provides a “specific judgement about the appropriateness of that form of evidence for answering the review question” (Gough, 2007, p.11). As the review sought to explore stakeholder views, studies were rated high (3) if they used interviews or focus groups, as evidence from such studies is thought to provide richer qualitative data and have the potential to make larger contributions to a qualitative review (Noyes et al., 2019). Studies were rated medium (2) if they applied a mixed methods design, including interviews alongside other methods from which qualitative data could not be extracted (e.g., closed questionnaires). Studies were rated low (1) if they only used other methods aside from interviews to gain qualitative data (e.g., open-ended questionnaires), as such data may be considered less rich (Noyes et al., 2019). Coding information and judgements for WoE B are presented in Appendix E.

WoE C assesses the relevance of each study’s focus to the review question, using criteria determined by the researcher (Gough, 2007). Within the current review, studies were evaluated based upon “*the extent to which the focus of the study was gaining school staff or parent/carer views of the transition to Y1 in mainstream English schools*”. Factors which informed judgements included participants, outcome measures and how findings were reported. WoE C criteria, coding information and judgements are presented in Appendix F.

WoE A, B and C judgements were combined to provide an overall rating of quality and relevance for each study (WoE D). Table 2.5 provides a summary of WoE judgements.

**Table 2.5***Weight of Evidence Summary*

<b>Study</b>	<b>WoE A</b>	<b>WoE B</b>	<b>WoE C</b>	<b>WoE D*</b>
Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	2	2	1.7	5.7 (medium)
Fisher (2009)	3	1	2	6 (medium)
Nicholson (2019)	3	2	2	7 (medium)
Nicholson & Hendry (2022)	3	3	1.7	7.7 (high)

\* *WoE D- Low- 0–5.0, medium- 5.1–7.0, high- 7.1–9.0.*

**2.4.3 Thematic Synthesis**

The included studies were analysed using thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008), an approach recommended for reviews exploring participant perspectives and experiences (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The synthesis was largely inductive, as codes and themes were data driven. However, transcripts from original studies were not available, only data included by researchers to address their research questions (RQs). Therefore, some level of deductive analysis was present.

**2.4.3.1 Methodology.**

The process outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008) includes three stages: coding text, generating descriptive themes and generating analytical themes.

***Stage 1: Coding Text.***

The findings/results section of each study was read line by line. All sections referring directly to school staff and parent/carers views of the transition to Y1 were assigned codes, based upon perceived meaning. The aim of producing codes is to translate concepts across studies (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The order in which

studies were coded was dictated by WoE D ratings, so the studies given the highest weighting had the largest influence upon the codes generated. However, new codes were created where other studies identified alternative viewpoints. From the four studies, 50 initial codes were generated. A list of initial codes, and contextual information relating to the origin of each code, is presented in Appendix G.

### ***Stage 2: Generating Descriptive Themes.***

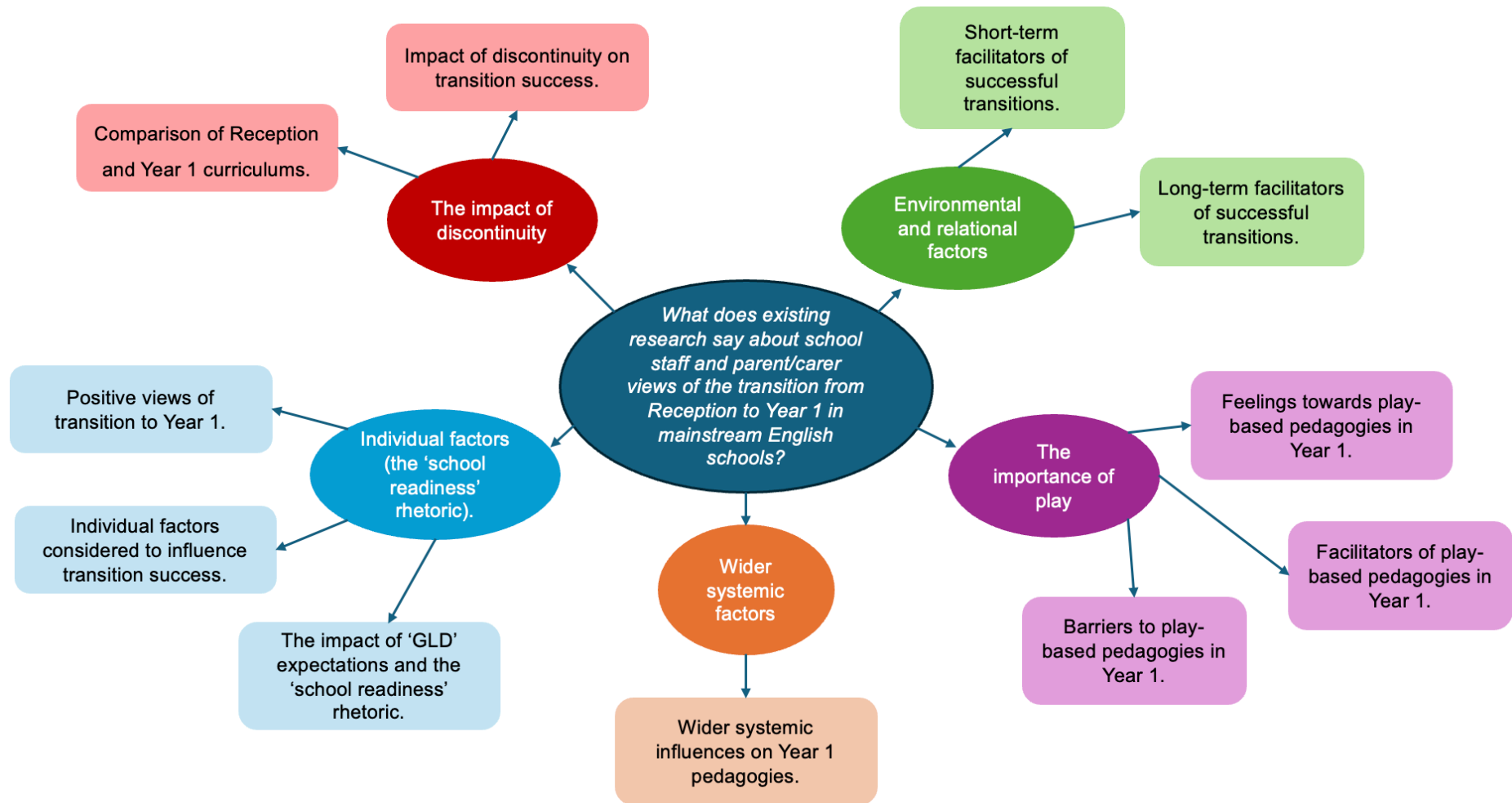
Codes were grouped into descriptive themes, which captured broader meanings. Eleven descriptive themes were created: 'positive views of the transition to Y1', 'individual factors considered to influence transition success', 'the impact of GLD expectations and the school readiness rhetoric', 'comparison of Reception and Y1 curriculums', 'impact of discontinuity on transition success', 'short-term facilitators of successful transitions', 'long-term facilitators of successful transitions', 'feelings towards play-based pedagogies in Y1', 'facilitators of play-based pedagogies in Y1', 'barriers to play-based pedagogies in Y1' and 'wider systemic influences on Y1 pedagogies'.

### ***Stage 3: Generating Analytical Themes.***

Finally, the descriptive themes were organised into five higher-order analytical themes: 'individual factors (the school readiness rhetoric)', 'environmental and relational factors', 'the impact of discontinuity', 'the importance of play' and 'wider systemic factors' (see Appendix H for a summary of descriptive and analytical themes). A thematic map is presented in Figure 2.2, and a detailed description of each theme is provided below.

**Figure 2.2**

*Thematic Map of Descriptive and Analytical Themes Generated by the Thematic Synthesis*



### 2.4.3.2 Findings.

#### ***Theme 1: Individual Factors (the School Readiness Rhetoric).***

This theme highlights the influence of the school readiness agenda upon stakeholder views of the transition to Y1. School staff and parents expressed concerns regarding children's individual capacity to manage the demands of Y1. Parents identified physical maturity, understanding of school rules and ability to manage academic demands as factors which influence transition success (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006). A Reception teacher expressed similar views when describing her current Reception cohort, explaining *"academically they are not ready. Socially they are not ready [for Y1]"* (Nicholson, 2019, p.455).

The suggestion that some children are 'not ready' for Y1, alludes to the idea that others are 'ready' for formal learning. This view was evident amongst the parents of some Reception children, who made comments such as *"she's ready to learn now and she wants to do more reading and writing"* and *"I think Sarah is getting bored with playing now. She's ready to do harder work"* (Fisher, 2009, p.139-140). For children deemed 'ready' for Y1, the transition was generally described as an exciting time for them and their families (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006).

However, the categorisation of children as 'ready' or 'not ready' for Y1 was brought into question in Nicholson and Hendry's (2022) study. Educators within the research setting placed great emphasis on GLD assessments when determining how 'ready' children were for formal learning, so much so that they adapted their curriculum based upon this data.

EYFS lead (Nicholson & Hendry, 2022, p.189): *"from the data last year we realised that there was around 50% of the cohort who weren't actually ready for that more formal routine of the Year One classroom. So, the plan for it was that half of the cohort would go into a more Early Years approach ... And then in the other Year One class it will be more structured, more formal. They were the children that had that solid two [GLD standard] and the exceeding statements and they were ready for that more sort of formalised learning approach"*.

The new Y1 structure was built upon the assumption that those children who did not achieve the GLD standard required a distinctly different curriculum to those who did. However, six months into the academic year, the approach was deemed unsuccessful, mainly due to the lack of transition support provided for children considered 'ready' for Y1. School staff labelled GLD an "*unsophisticated measure*" of readiness (p.190) and acknowledged its reductionist nature. The link between GLD assessments and school readiness was referenced by school staff only, suggesting this construct is specific to those working within schools.

### ***Theme 2: Environmental and Relational Factors.***

Across studies, school staff and parents referenced several environmental and relational factors they considered important for successful transitions. These included measures taken prior to or immediately after the transition as well as longer-term measures to enhance Y1 provision.

Familiarisation with Y1 classrooms and teachers was considered highly important by all stakeholders, with one Y1 teacher stating that children "*need familiarity to feel confident and safe*" (Nicholson, 2019, p.455). Parents in one study praised school staff for ensuring children were familiar with staff throughout the setting, and suggested children's perceptions of Y1 staff were central in their feelings towards the transition. However, they also stated that further efforts to familiarise children with the Y1 environment and routines were needed (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006).

School staff also considered communication and collaboration between EYFS and Y1 staff essential for successful transitions. This included information sharing (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006), as well as joint planning to promote continuity (Fisher, 2009). Where teachers held positive views of the transition, this was largely attributed to collaborative working, with one Reception teacher commenting "*My Year 1 teacher is brilliant... we plan together so the first weeks in Year 1 resemble Reception as much as possible*" (Fisher, 2009, p.139). In other cases, a lack of collaboration between staff was considered a key contributor to transition difficulties (Nicholson & Hendry, 2022).

The importance of continuity between Reception and Y1 in enabling successful transitions was also discussed by parents and school staff. It is important

to note that continuity was not considered a short-term measure, but something to be prioritised throughout children's time in Y1. Some stakeholders identified strategies used to promote continuity, including collaborative planning of the Y1 curriculum by EYFS and Y1 staff, and Y1 children continuing to access the EYFS environment (Nicholson & Hendry, 2022). However, establishing continuity was a challenge faced by school staff across studies, which leads to the next theme.

### ***Theme 3: The Impact of Discontinuity.***

The impact of discontinuity between Reception and Y1 curriculums and pedagogies upon transition experiences was highlighted by school staff and parents across all studies. When describing the EYFS, a Reception teacher commented *"It's learning at their pace. It's learning without them knowing that they are learning... They get to choose and it gives them confidence. It's a lovely curriculum"* (Nicholson, 2019, p.453). Conversely, when discussing Y1 at the same setting, a Y1 teacher explained *"You've just got to sit down and go boom boom boom and get them doing it [formal work]... They are not working under the relaxed atmosphere"* (p.453).

Curriculum content was seen to contribute towards this discontinuity, with the move to the NC described as a *"huge jump"* (Y1 teacher, Nicholson, 2019, p.455). As a result, Reception teachers felt they were left *"frantically trying to prepare them [children] for what's coming"* during the summer term (Reception teacher, Nicholson, 2019, p.455). However, despite the significant changes faced by children, staff identified an absence of policies to support the transition to Y1, whilst parents commented that information sharing and communication with parents was lacking compared to previous transitions (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006).

Some parents expressed positive feelings towards the shift to formal learning, sharing views such as *"I think we'll both be pleased with the more school activities in Year 1"* (Fisher, 2009, p.140). However, this view was not widely held, with most participants expressing discomfort towards the discontinuity. One parent, whose child was about to transition to Y1, shared *"I can see how anxious Josh is getting. He loves outdoors in foundation and there isn't any outdoors in Year 1"* (Fisher, 2009, p.140). Parents also expressed concerns that the academic curriculum of Y1 did not reflect changes in children's needs (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006). This view was echoed by school staff. One EYFS teacher commented *"I don't understand how the two*

*classes can be so different. It makes me really angry that the children are made to do things in Year 1 that obviously aren't appropriate for them".* Similarly, a Y1 teacher explained *"I feel rotten that the children experience something so different. They come up from foundation happy as learners and then I think I switch them off. That's awful"* (Fisher, 2009, p.138).

#### ***Theme 4: The Importance of Play.***

The importance of play in supporting continuity and enabling positive transitions to Y1 was discussed frequently across studies. School staff and parents expressed predominantly positive views of play-based pedagogies in Y1. Links were drawn between play and children's enjoyment of learning, and it was suggested by Reception and Y1 teachers that children are *"bored"* in Y1 (Fisher, 2009, p.137). When asked if play should be confined to the EYFS, a Reception teacher replied *"no, absolutely not... it should go through to at least the end of Year 1 if not Year 2"*. When asked the same question, a Y1 teacher replied *"we'd like to do more through play. Your EYFS needs to be brought into Key Stage One"* (Nicholson, 2019, p.455). The importance of play was also recognised by parents, with one stating *"there should be more time to play in Y1. They're learning at the same time and it is a better way to learn than sitting and listening to the teacher all the time"* (Fisher, 2009, p.140). Some parents did not support play-based learning in Y1, with one stating they are *"not convinced that is what school's for"* (Fisher, 2009, p.140), however this was not a widely held view.

Despite participants expressing predominantly positive feelings towards the implementation of play-based learning in KS1, much of the discontinuity referenced in the previous theme related to a lack of opportunity for play in Y1. One Reception teacher commented *"we've got play-based learning which is fantastic and that's taken away [in Year 1]"* (Nicholson, 2019, p.454), expressing a sense of loss which was echoed by parents, Y1 teachers and senior leaders. Y1 teachers in one setting expressed guilt regarding this topic, using phrases such as *"I feel really guilty"*, *"I feel rotten"* and *"I can't stand this anymore"* (Fisher, 2009, p.137-139) when discussing the formal teaching approaches of Y1. This suggests the presence of barriers preventing teachers from making desired changes to Y1 provision.



A lack of understanding of play-based pedagogies amongst Y1 staff and senior leaders appeared to be a key barrier to implementing play in Y1. One headteacher considered play an intervention (Nicholson & Hendry, 2022), whilst one Y1 teacher considered it an incentive to complete work (Nicholson, 2019), rather than a pedagogy in its own right. Y1 teachers also doubted their ability to manage behaviour during play-based activities, with one commenting *“you saw the glitter tray... they had that in phonics last week... I modelled it but as soon as my back was turned they were throwing it at each other”* (Nicholson & Hendry, 2022, p.189). A lack of resources and limited availability of teaching assistants (TAs) seemed to further reduce teacher’s confidence in this area (Nicholson & Hendry, 2022).

On the other hand, support from senior leaders was seen to aid the successful implementation of play-based pedagogies in Y1. A Y1 teacher who described a positive experience of the transition to Y1 in her setting explained *“My head[teacher] wants me to make Year 1 as play-based and exploratory and interesting as foundation, so I try!”* (Fisher, 2009, p.139). However, even where headteachers claimed to *“100 percent believe that play-based is the way forward”* (Nicholson & Hendry, 2022, p.191) the presence of play in Y1 appeared to remain lacking. This may reflect the impact of wider systemic factors upon teacher autonomy.

### ***Theme 5: Wider Systemic Factors.***

This theme represents the view that children’s transition experiences are impacted by wider systemic factors existing within their exosystems/macrosystems, for example, educational policies such as the NC (DfE, 2013). School staff described how the NC contributes towards the discontinuity between Reception and Y1, with an emphasis upon the impact of literacy and numeracy demands. One Y1 teacher explained *“I used to have a home corner and water and sand trays but they disappeared when the national curriculum came along”* (Fisher, 2009, p.138), whilst another stated *“I like them [children] to think that they have free choice but there is a difference because you just have to cover it [the NC]”* (Nicholson, 2019, p.454). Although this view was expressed mainly by school staff, one parent commented *“all he [my son] seems to do is literacy and numeracy. I remember doing projects and topics when I was his age and he doesn’t do those at all”* (Fisher, 2009, p.140),

demonstrating how the impact of the NC is recognised outside the classroom. In Nicholson and Hendry's (2022) study, Y1 staff felt the pressure to achieve literacy and numeracy objectives undermined their efforts to embed play-based learning, as phonics, maths and English lessons remained rigidly timetabled.

Teachers reported feeling pressure to meet the demands of the NC from internal and external bodies. With regards to their professional autonomy, one Y1 teacher explained *"I want to make changes for the children but I have the head and the literacy coordinator and then the LEA [Local Education Authority] all breathing down my neck to do it [the literacy strategy] by the book"* (Fisher, 2009, p.138). When one school became part of a multi-academy trust (MAT), the implementation of trust wide approaches to teaching also reduced teacher autonomy. A Y1 teacher explained *"we're following the same curriculum pace as everyone else, but my children aren't quite there"* (Nicholson & Hendry, 2022, p.191). A similar statement was made by the school's progress lead, who commented *"the Trust will come in and say 'right, I want to know what you have been doing'. So, they hold us to account, but then obviously we need to hold teachers to account in whatever we are monitoring"* (p.191). This demonstrates how pressure filters down from leadership to class teachers, impacting classroom pedagogy and therefore effecting children's transition experiences.

#### **2.4.4 Conclusion and Implications**

The question posed by this SLR was *"What does existing research say about school staff and parent/carer views of the transition from Reception to Y1 in mainstream English schools?"*. Through a thematic synthesis of existing literature, five overarching themes were identified. Views of the transition were generally negative, with difficulties attributed to both individual factors (e.g., academic and social skills) and environmental factors (e.g., discontinuity between curriculums and pedagogies). This suggests both intrapersonal and bioecological viewpoints influenced participants' conceptualisations of transitions.

The concept of school readiness and the use of normative measures to determine children's readiness for formal learning was most prominent in Nicholson and Hendry's (2022) study, the most recent of the included papers. This suggests despite international researchers moving away from the intrapersonal construct of

school readiness (e.g., Dowker et al., 2007), English policies and practices (e.g., GLD assessments) continue to reinforce the school readiness rhetoric.

There was however some reference to the suitability of Y1 environments to meet the needs of children as they transition from Reception, across all studies. School staff and parents expressed concern and discomfort regarding the discontinuity between the educational phases. The contrast between the curriculums and the shift from play-based to more formal learning appeared central to these concerns. These findings are consistent with the wider literature (e.g., Fabian, 2007, Fisher, 2022). The review revealed support amongst parents, teachers and senior leaders for the incorporation of play-based pedagogies in Y1 to enable smoother transitions, however, the constraints of the NC and pressures from internal and external powers to meet standard objectives were identified as barriers to embedding these approaches.

In line with some studies included within the narrative review (e.g., Sanders et al., 2005), a selection of parents and school staff expressed positive views regarding the transition to Y1. For parents, success appeared to be driven primarily by their children appearing 'ready' for formal learning. School staff, on the other hand, attributed successful transitions to environmental factors, such as collaboration between EYFS and Y1 staff, relationship building between Y1 staff and Reception pupils and the support of senior leaders.

Whilst the SLR provided a broad range of viewpoints regarding the transition to Y1 for pupils in mainstream English schools, all four studies included data gathered prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (data from Nicholson and Hendry's (2022) study was collected between September 2019 and February 2020). As suggested by Mulkey et al. (2023), the needs of pupils are likely to have changed following these events. The lack of up-to-date research in this area supports White and Sharpe's (2007) claim that the transition to Y1 in England is under-considered due to it often occurring within the same setting. This idea was reinforced by parents in Bulkeley and Fabian's (2006) study, who reported significantly less information sharing during the transition to Y1 compared to previous transitions.

The narrative review suggested the transition to Y1 can be particularly difficult for children with SEND (Sanders et al., 2005). However, despite some studies in the SLR alluding to the transition being more difficult for certain groups of children (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006, Nicholson & Hendry, 2022), no studies addressed this

directly. There was therefore no description of additional planning or reasonable adjustments made for these pupils. This highlights a significant gap within the research.

#### **2.4.5 Limitations**

This SLR had several limitations. Firstly, whilst screening studies ensured they were high quality and relevant to the review question, it also reduced the scope of the review, meaning a limited number of studies were included. This was largely due to the review being restricted to English studies; however, this was considered vital to the applicability of the findings to the current research context. The SLR also included peer-reviewed research only. This meant the exclusion of grey literature such as doctoral dissertations, which, if included, could have increased the number of studies within the review. However, the exclusion of non-peer reviewed research was considered important due to the possibility of bias, particularly within studies commissioned by government bodies. A list of relevant non-peer reviewed research which otherwise met the review's inclusion criteria is presented in Appendix B for further information.

Secondly, two of the studies included within the SLR were dated, with one completed prior to the introduction of the EYFS Statutory Framework in 2008 (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006). This reduces the relevance of the findings to the current context. However, the SLR identified themes present across older and newer studies, suggesting little change over the 16-year period.

Additionally, the SLR focused upon views expressed by school staff and parents via qualitative methods only, which discounted some of the data reported in the studies. This included children's views (Fisher, 2009, Nicholson, 2019), data gathered through classroom observations (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006, Nicholson & Hendry, 2022) and quantitative data gathered through closed questionnaires (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006). Including wider data may have created a richer picture and further contextualised stakeholder views. The emission of children's views from the SLR resulted from the researcher focusing upon data most relevant to their own research topic. However, gaining the voices of CYP is central to the EP role (HCPC, 2016/2023), therefore a future review focusing on children's views would be valuable.

Finally, one included study (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006) reported no direct quotes, as interviews were not recorded and transcribed verbatim, rather notes were made by the researcher during and after the interviews. This reduces the reliability of the findings and increases the risk of researcher bias. This is however reflected in WoE judgements. Where possible, the reviewer used direct quotes to drive their synthesis, to reduce the impact of the original researchers' interpretations upon the SLR outcomes.

#### **2.4.6 Rationale and Research Questions**

This review has provided a comprehensive overview of literature exploring stakeholder views of the transition to Y1 in mainstream English schools. The transition is characterised by its lack of continuity, with Y1 pupils facing a new curriculum, changes in teaching pedagogies and heightened expectations. As a result, it is considered one of the major challenges children face during their early education (Fisher, 2009). However, research exploring children's experiences of this transition is sparse, with no English studies completed post COVID-19. There is also no official guidance regarding how schools should support children during this time.

Research suggests the transition to Y1 can be particularly challenging for children with SEND (Sanders et al., 2005). Since signing The Salamanca Statement in 1994, the English government has pledged its commitment to the inclusion of children with SEND in mainstream schools, and successful transitions are key to effective inclusive practice (Chadwick & Kemp, 2002). However, the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) provides little guidance regarding how schools can support successful transitions for children with SEND, particularly where they occur within settings.

The importance of 'ready schools' in enabling successful transitions to formal schooling has been recognised within international research (e.g., Dowker et al., 2007, Burke & Burke, 2005). However, English research and policy continues to be dominated by the school readiness agenda (Kay, 2018). This rhetoric places the responsibility of being 'ready' for Y1 upon children, further disadvantaging those who do not develop in line with 'typical' trajectories (Lynch & Soni, 2021).

The SLR identified some common environmental factors which appear to support successful transitions to Y1, including the continuation of play-based learning and collaborative planning between EYFS and Y1 staff. Factors which can

hinder successful transitions were also highlighted, including pressure to achieve standard objectives and the constraints of the NC. However, further research is required to explore whether these factors also facilitate/hinder successful transitions to Y1 for children with SEND, or whether different or additional support is required for these children.

This review provides a strong rationale for research which explores the experiences of children with SEND during the transition to Y1 and considers how mainstream schools can support successful transitions to Y1 for these children, from a bioecological perspective. Those working in schools can provide insight into the complexities of transitions, within school systems and the wider socio-political context, whilst parents/carers can offer a unique understanding of how transitions are experienced by children and their families. Based upon this rationale, the following RQs were formulated:

1. What are school staff and parent/carer experiences and views of the transition to Y1 for children with SEND in mainstream schools, post COVID-19?
2. What do school staff and parents/carers perceive as the key environmental factors in facilitating/hindering a successful transition to Y1 for children with SEND?

Within RQ2, the term 'environmental factors' is used to describe any factors existing in the systems around children, including relationships, physical environments, teaching pedagogies and the wider context. This study can offer an original contribution to knowledge and practice by developing greater understanding of the environmental factors which support successful transitions to Y1 for pupils with SEND. In turn, this may support school staff to develop evidence-based, inclusive transition practices and inform the systemic work of EPs in this area.

### **3. Method**

This chapter explores the philosophical assumptions and methodological approach of the current research. A detailed account of the research design is provided,

including recruitment, participants, data gathering and data analysis. Steps taken to increase the trustworthiness of the research are also considered.

### **3.1 Philosophical Considerations in Research**

The approaches adopted by researchers are underpinned by their philosophical assumptions regarding the nature of reality and knowledge (Mertens, 2023).

Understanding researchers' philosophical positions is essential when interpreting research findings (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000). Philosophical positions are often described as “paradigms”, a set of “basic beliefs” which determine the answer to three fundamental questions: what is the nature of reality? (“the ontological question”); what can be known about reality? (“the epistemological question”); and how can a researcher attempt to explore what they believe can be known? (“the methodological question”) (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.108). Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe these questions as “interconnected in such a way that the answer given to any one question, taken in any order, constrains how the others can be answered” (p.108).

#### **3.1.1 Ontology**

Ontology refers to an individual's view of the nature of reality (Mertens, 2023). Ontological viewpoints are often described as existing on a spectrum between the polarised stances of realism and relativism (Willig, 2013). A realist ontology assumes a single reality exists, which can be measured and uncovered by researchers (Cohen et al., 2017). Moore (2005) describes reality from a realist perspective as an “orderly, law-abiding, enduring, fixed and objectively knowable and constant place” (p.106). This view posits that the truth exists independently of researchers' beliefs and experiences (Maxwell, 2012). Alternatively, a relativist ontology rejects the idea of a single reality, assuming multiple, socially constructed realities exist (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Relativists theorise that individual realities are based upon social and experiential constructs, which may be unique to a person, or shared across a group or culture, and can change across time and contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Moore (2005) describes a relativist reality as “indeterminate, disorderly and constantly in flux and thereby ultimately “unknowable” in any objective sense” (p.106).

### **3.1.2 Epistemology**

Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge, the processes through which knowledge is obtained, tested and communicated (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016) and the “nature of the relationship between the knower... and what can be known” (Moore, 2005, p.106). When considering the epistemological stance of the current research, two positions were explored, objectivist and subjectivist.

An objectivist epistemology builds upon a realist ontology, assuming researchers can study phenomena which exist independently of themselves to uncover objective truths (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Alternatively, a subjectivist epistemology proposes that external reality cannot be known by observers, as everyone’s perception of reality is influenced by their worldviews and experiences (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Subjectivists consider knowledge dependent upon historical and social influences and individual perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and therefore consider researchers’ perspectives of reality to influence the knowledge generated by their research (Grix, 2010). Whilst objectivism is aligned with a realist ontology, subjectivism can be combined with realist and relativist ontologies, resulting in a variation of theoretical paradigms.

### **3.1.3 Theoretical Paradigms**

A researcher’s ontological and epistemological stance informs their research paradigm, which in turn guides their methodology (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Table 3.1 describes three prevalent paradigms within social science research: positivism, post-positivism and constructivism. A more in-depth description is provided of the paradigm with which the current research aligns, critical realism (CR).



**Table 3.1**

*Description of Prevalent Theoretical Paradigms and Their Aligned Ontologies, Epistemologies and Methodologies (Adapted from Allison & Pomeroy, 2000, p.94, Table 1 and Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.109, Table 6.1).*

<b>Paradigm</b>	<b>Ontology</b>	<b>Epistemology</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Common Critiques</b>
Positivism	Realism- There is a true reality, and we can understand it.	Objectivist- Research can produce knowledge which is true.	Experimental- Mainly quantitative methods, manipulation of variables to test hypotheses.	Regards human behaviour as passive, controlled and pre-determined, ignoring intention, freedom and the impact of values, culture and individuality (Cohen et al., 2017).
Post-Positivism	Critical Realism- A true reality exists, but we cannot perfectly understand it. It can only be described through probabilities.	Modified Objectivist- Research findings may be true but cannot be proven without doubt.	Modified Experimental- May include both quantitative and qualitative methods.	Sometimes considered an incoherent paradigm due to its arguably incompatible ontology and epistemology (Groff, 2004).

Constructivism	<p>Relativism-</p> <p>There are multiple realities, everyone's reality is constructed differently based upon their worldview.</p>	<p>Subjective-</p> <p>Findings are created by the research. Findings are considered significant where multiple people's accounts of reality converge.</p>	<p>Hermeneutic-</p> <p>Uses mainly qualitative methods. Information is fed back to participants to confirm the correct interpretation.</p>	<p>Reduced possibility of discovering useful behavioural generalisations due to lack of external validity (Cohen et al., 2017).</p>
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### **3.1.3.1 Critical Realism.**

Pilgrim (2019) describes CR as comprising three core assumptions: ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgemental rationalism/rationality.

#### ***Ontological Realism.***

CR adopts a primarily realist ontology, assuming a large part of reality exists independently of human minds and control (intransitive aspects). However, unlike positivism, it recognises components of reality that exist purely because of human thought (e.g., how humans construct and discuss the world) and these components are viewed through a relativist lens (transitive aspects, Bhaskar, 2013).

#### ***Epistemological Relativism.***

CR postulates that all scientific enquiry is context and value-laden, meaning it is mediated by human knowledge, assumptions and social norms (Bhaskar, 2013). CR is therefore associated with a subjective epistemology, as it considers knowledge to be dependent on historical/social influences and individual perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2022). CR also acknowledges that constructs of reality will change over time and between contexts (Pilgrim, 2019).

#### ***Judgemental Rationalism.***

Judgemental rationalism describes the assumption that humans can make judgements about likelihoods or truth by weighing up sources of knowledge (Pilgrim, 2019). Such decisions may be based upon which knowledge provides the most complete picture of the phenomenon in question, or how strongly a pattern presents over time (Pilgrim, 2019). Although CR recognises the necessity of such judgements, it also advises that all knowledge is fallible and must be considered with caution (Pilgrim, 2019).

### ***Methodological Implications.***

As CR considers the thoughts and words of people to be ontologically real, research conducted within this paradigm assigns value to the views and experiences of participants. CR considers these views and experiences valid scientific data which can result in significant social change if interpreted correctly (Bhaskar, 2013, Egbo, 2005). As a result, CR is often associated with qualitative and interpretative methodologies (Egbo, 2005).

### ***Critique.***

Cruickshank (2004) argues CR adopts two mutually exclusive ontological viewpoints, through its recognition of intransitive and transitive aspects of reality. This can lead the paradigm to be viewed as incoherent, in a similar way to post-positivism (Groff, 2004). However, others argue CR recognises the complex, multi-layered nature of reality, and provides a bridge between research and practice by seeking knowledge of causal explanations which take context into account (Brunson et al., 2025). An additional critique is that there is no standard methodology associated with CR, which can make it difficult for researchers to design methodologically rigorous and theoretically sound studies. However, this can also be seen as an advantage, as the flexibility of CR allows researchers to select the methodology most suited to their RQs (Danermark et al., 2019).

### ***3.1.4 Positioning the Current Research***

The current research aligns with the CR paradigm, adopting a primarily realist ontology, but acknowledging the presence of transitive aspects which exist because of human thought. As the study is concerned with exploring the experiences and views of participants, its primary focus is upon transitive aspects of reality. However, the potential impact of intransitive processes occurring within the physical and social realities that exist around participants upon their views and experiences is also acknowledged. In line with CR, the research adopts a subjective epistemology, considering knowledge dependent upon participants' historical and social influences and individual perspectives. Specifically, this research aligns with an interpretative

epistemology, recognising that participants' positionings impact the meanings expressed, and the researcher's positioning impacts their interpretations. Therefore, the findings shared are only one possible interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In keeping with this theoretical position, the researcher exercised reflexivity throughout the research process, as evidenced in their reflexive journal entries (see Appendix W).

## 3.2 Methodology

This section discusses possible methodologies considered for the current research, before providing an explanation of the chosen methodology. Crotty (1998) defines methodology as "The strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes" (p.3). Table 3.1 provides a summary of how methodologies align with theoretical paradigms.

### 3.2.1 Quantitative or Qualitative Design

Research methodologies are divided into two broad categories: qualitative and quantitative approaches. Before identifying a specific methodology, the researcher considered whether to adopt a quantitative or qualitative design. Table 3.2 provides a summary of the features of each approach.

**Table 3.2**

*Typical Features of Quantitative and Qualitative Methodologies within Social Science Research (Adapted from Robson, 2024, p.24-25, Box 2.1 & Box 2.2).*

Quantitative Approaches	Qualitative Approaches
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collect numerical data which can be statistically analysed.</li> <li>Adhere to the scientific method.</li> <li>Test existing theories (deductive logic).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collect non-numerical data, with no statistical analysis.</li> <li>Generate theories and ideas from the data (inductive logic).</li> <li>Employ flexible research designs.</li> </ul>

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Specify research design early in the process.</li><li>• Describe study design in detail to allow replication.</li><li>• Value accuracy, precision and reliability of data.</li><li>• Maintain distance between the researcher and participants to promote objectivity.</li><li>• The researcher aims to be neutral and value-free.</li><li>• Can involve decontextualization- e.g., removing research from its context or ignoring the impact of context.</li><li>• Seek generalisable findings.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The researcher is not expected to remain distant from the participants; objectivity is not sought.</li><li>• The influence of the researcher is accepted and considered.</li><li>• Study phenomenon within context.</li><li>• Usually small scale.</li><li>• Do not aim to produce generalisable findings.</li></ul> |
|--|--|

Based upon the features of the two approaches, quantitative methodologies were considered unsuitable for the current research. Firstly, the research aims to explore the experiences and views of participants, which are influenced by their individual viewpoints and therefore cannot be considered objective. Secondly, data gathered will be transcripts of verbal interactions, providing no numerical data for statistical analysis. Thirdly, the research is being conducted within school environments, meaning findings cannot be decontextualised or generalised. Finally, the researcher is embedded within the research, and will interact with participants and data, therefore influencing findings.

On the other hand, qualitative approaches place value on non-numerical data, exploring meaning through gaining participant views. Studies are conducted within context, and the impact of the researcher upon findings is acknowledged. Such approaches allow flexibility in design, and use inductive logic, allowing theories/concepts to arise from the data and therefore supporting the contribution of

new ideas within the evidence base (Robson, 2024). For these reasons, a qualitative approach was selected for the current research.

### ***3.2.2 Selecting a Methodology***

Several qualitative methodologies were considered when planning the current research, including Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Grounded Theory and RTA. A summary of each methodology and its suitability for the research is presented in Table 3.3. Following an evaluation of the named methodologies, RTA was selected as the most appropriate for the current study.

**Table 3.3**

*A Summary of the Methodological Approaches Considered for the Current Research*

<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Key Features</b>	<b>Suitability for the Current Research</b>	<b>Limitations for the Current Research</b>
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Aims to understand and interpret how people make sense of the world, within context (Braun &amp; Clarke, 2020a).</li><li>• Uses small, homogenous, purposive samples (Smith et al., 2009).</li><li>• Uses interviews to gather accounts of personal experiences (Smith et al., 2009).</li><li>• Involves thematic and idiographic analyses, exploring unique details of each participant and patterns across participants (Braun &amp; Clarke, 2020a).</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Aims to explore people's experiences of a particular phenomenon within context, through in-depth analysis of interviews.</li><li>• Involves drawing patterns across participants.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Requires a homogenous sample (Braun &amp; Clarke, 2020a), whereas the current study includes two sub-populations.</li><li>• Places significant focus on understanding individual experiences, whereas the current study seeks to identify patterns across a dataset.</li></ul>



Grounded Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aims to generate theory grounded in data (Noble &amp; Mitchell, 2016).</li> <li>• Data collection and analysis are completed simultaneously.</li> <li>• Research methods include interviews and observations (Braun &amp; Clarke, 2020a).</li> <li>• Often has larger sample sizes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses an inductive approach.</li> <li>• Recognises the role of the researcher in generating findings.</li> <li>• Suitable where there is only a small amount of research available.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourages minimal engagement with literature prior to data collection, whereas a full literature review was completed to explore the current research topic.</li> <li>• The current research does not aim to generate a grounded theory from the data.</li> <li>• Time consuming process (not practical within the time frame of the current research).</li> <li>• The sample of the current research is relatively small.</li> </ul>
Reflexive Thematic Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aims to identify themes across a dataset.</li> <li>• Prioritises reflexivity, highlighting the researcher's role in the production of knowledge (Braun and Clarke 2019).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritises the identification of themes across the dataset.</li> <li>• Recognises the influence of the researcher upon findings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some argue the flexibility of RTA can lead to incoherence and a lack of consistency when developing themes derived from data (Holloway &amp; Todres, 2003).</li> </ul>

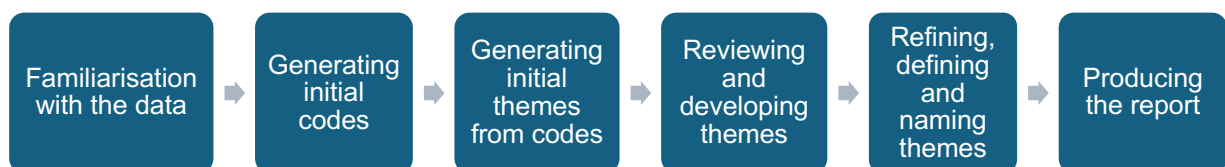
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Themes generated reflect the researcher's interpretation of the data (Byrne, 2021).</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Suitable for analysis of focus group data.</li><li>• Useful when addressing RQs centred on exploring participants' experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2022).</li></ul> |
|---|--|
-

### 3.2.3 Rationale for Selecting Reflexive Thematic Analysis

RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006/2022) is an “easily accessible and theoretically flexible interpretative approach to qualitative data analysis that facilitates the identification and analysis of patterns or themes in a given dataset” (Byrne, 2021, p.1392). RTA is a six-phase process, which is summarised in Figure 3.1.

**Figure 3.1**

*A Figure Showing the Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006/2022)*



RTA is an inductive approach, meaning themes are actively generated by the researcher through data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020a). This differs from other types of Thematic Analysis (TA), such as coding reliability and codebook TA, which use a deductive approach, analysing data using pre-determined codes guided by existing theory (Braun & Clarke, 2020a). As RTA is considered a subjective process, it is the responsibility of the researcher to reflect upon their viewpoints, and how these may have impacted the themes generated. RTA aligns with the CR paradigm by acknowledging the unique experiences and perspectives of participants as well as the researcher’s role in knowledge production. The inductive approach also allows concepts and meanings outside of existing theories to be captured, which is important given the lack of existing literature relating to the research topic.

### ***3.2.4 Decisions within the Reflexive Thematic Analysis Framework***

RTA is a theoretically flexible approach, making it compatible with a range of philosophical positions (Braun & Clarke, 2020b). However, for RTA to be conducted effectively, researchers must make their theoretical position explicit and ensure all decisions align with this position, avoiding the assumption that RTA is atheoretical (Braun & Clarke, 2020b). The researcher therefore endeavours to make explicit the series of decisions made within the current research, to demonstrate how their approach to RTA aligns with their philosophical assumptions.

#### **3.2.4.1 Experiential or Critical Orientation.**

The orientation of research indicates researchers' intentions to either reflect participant's experiences of social reality (experiential orientation) or examine the construction of social reality (critical orientation, Byrne, 2021). Researchers who adopt an experiential orientation see the thoughts and feelings expressed by participants as a reflection of their worldview. Alternatively, those who adopt a critical orientation consider discourse a mechanism through which participants' realities are constructed. A critical researcher therefore offers interpretations of meaning beyond those explicitly shared by participants, whereas an experiential researcher does not (Byrne, 2021, Clarke & Braun, 2014). As this research aligns with a CR paradigm, the researcher adopts an experiential orientation, considering the views and experiences shared by participants to reflect their unique views of reality (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

#### **3.2.4.2 Inductive or Deductive Analysis.**

A researcher's approach to generating themes may be inductive (data driven) or deductive (theory driven, Byrne, 2021). Although one approach to analysis will usually dominate, studies often use a combination of both (Byrne, 2021). The current research adopts a primarily inductive approach to analysis, as the researcher aims to explore participant views and experiences in an open manner, without applying any pre-determined theoretical frameworks. However, it is important to acknowledge that some level of deductive analysis is required to provide criteria to identify information

suitable for addressing the RQs (Byrne, 2021). Braun and Clarke (2022) also emphasise that a purely inductive approach to RTA is impossible, as who the researcher is will always shape their interpretation of the data.

### **3.2.4.3 Semantic or Latent Codes.**

Codes generated by researchers during analysis fall into two categories: semantic codes and latent codes. Semantic codes provide surface level descriptions of the data as communicated by participants, whereas latent codes go beyond description to suggest possible hidden meanings and ideas which could underlie semantic codes (Byrne, 2021). Within the current research, identification of semantic codes is prioritised, as the researcher aims to reflect participants' personal worldviews, in line with the CR paradigm (Byrne, 2021). However, it is important to acknowledge that, as the researcher plays an active role in the generation of codes, they will contain some element of interpretation.

### **3.2.5 Selecting a Data Collection Method- Focus Groups**

The final decision to be made by a researcher is how they will go about collecting data. Within the current study, semi-structured focus groups were selected as an appropriate method. A focus group is defined as “a way of collecting qualitative data, which—essentially— involves engaging a small number of people in an informal group discussion (or discussions), ‘focused’ around a particular topic or set of issues” (Wilkinson, 2004, p.177). Within focus groups, the researcher acts as a moderator, setting ground rules, introducing group members, explaining the purpose of the focus group and steering conversation (e.g., through offering prompts and setting time limits, Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). A selection of questions or stimuli are generally used to guide discussion and elicit conversations relevant to the RQs (Massey, 2011). Participants within a group may be homogenous or heterogenous, have pre-existing relationships or be unknown to one another, and be concerned with or naïve to the subject matter (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). The make-up of focus groups within the current study is discussed in section 3.3.1.4.

When planning the research, the researcher considered the use of alternative methods, such as semi-structured interviews. Research suggests one-to-one

interviews can support participants to be open about more intimate aspects of their experience, which could increase the richness of data (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). However, the decision to use focus groups was made for the following reasons:

1. As well as providing insight into the views, feelings and experiences of individual participants, focus groups highlight differences in perspectives between group members (Rabiee, 2004).
2. The capacity of group members to comment upon, extend and challenge the responses of others generates rich data (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008).
3. Discussion includes “inevitable digressions”, resulting in data which extends beyond the preconceived RQs (Massey, 2011, p.22). This is valuable where existing research is lacking.
4. Focus groups can appear less threatening to participants and create a sense of belonging, helping them feel safe to share information (Krueger & Casey, 2000, Vaughn et al., 1996).
5. Focus groups can include similar questions to interviews, but questions are posed within a social context (Massey, 2011). The current research is concerned with transitive aspects of reality, which are socially and culturally influenced, therefore completing the research in a social context aligns with the researcher’s philosophical position.
6. The researcher hopes the findings will generate ideas and recommendations to improve future practice, which Breen (2006) considers a key benefit of focus groups.
7. Focus groups provide an efficient method for collecting data from multiple participants, increasing a study’s sample size (Kreuger & Casey, 2000).

There are however some drawbacks to focus groups which must be acknowledged. Firstly, a dominant voice within a group could pressure other members to agree with their views (Breen, 2006). It is therefore essential researchers consider and act to minimise the impact of group dynamics at all stages of the research process (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). Additionally, focus groups can be logistically difficult to arrange and carry out (Breen, 2006). Researchers must therefore allow adequate time to conduct focus groups and be sufficiently flexible to suit the requirements of participants. Further limitations relating to the use of focus groups within the current research are discussed in Chapter 5 (5.3.2).

### **3.3 Research Procedure**

The following section outlines the design employed to recruit participants and gather and analyse data within the current research. The research involved five semi-structured focus groups, three with members of school staff involved in planning/managing the transition to Y1 for pupils with SEND in mainstream schools, and two with parents/carers of children with SEND who transitioned from Reception to Y1 within a mainstream school in September 2023 or 2024.

#### ***3.3.1 Recruitment, Participants and Context***

##### **3.3.1.1 Recruiting Schools.**

##### ***Sampling Approach.***

Before recruiting participants, the researcher needed to identify school leaders willing to support the research and provide access to participants. A purposive sampling approach was used to identify appropriate schools. Firstly, the researcher sought state-funded mainstream primary schools with average to high numbers of pupils with identified SEND (compared to national figures, GOV.UK, 2024a). This was to ensure participating school staff had adequate experience to address the RQs and ensure the availability of a parent/carer sample. Secondly, the researcher sought schools who demonstrated interest in developing practice relating to the transition to Y1, to increase the likelihood of good practice being shared.

##### ***Sample Size.***

With regards to determining the desired sample size, several approaches were considered. Some researchers, including Guest et al. (2006), suggest sample sizes in qualitative research should be determined by data saturation. Saturation is defined as “‘information redundancy’ or the point at which no new themes or codes ‘emerge’ from data” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p.201). Guest et al. (2017) completed a study exploring data saturation in focus groups. After analysing 40 focus groups,

they concluded that 80% of themes were identified in two to three focus groups, and 90% were identified within three to six. However, the researchers considered their sample to be relatively homogenous and cautioned the overgeneralisation of their findings to heterogenous samples, like that of the current study. Additionally, despite its prevalent use across TA research, Braun and Clarke (2021) argue the concept of saturation is incompatible with RTA, as the themes generated are “never finally fixed” (p.207). Instead, they suggest researchers set a provisional range in which they hope their sample size will fall, by considering several factors, including “the breadth and focus of the research question”, “the depth of data likely generated from each participant” and “the pragmatic constraints of the project” (p.211). They then recommend researchers decide upon their final sample size during data collection, based upon the richness of data gathered for addressing the RQ(s). The researcher therefore set a provisional aim of six focus groups across three schools (three groups per sub-population) but maintained flexibility, responding to the richness of the data collected as focus groups were completed.

### ***Recruitment Procedure.***

Schools were recruited between June and December 2024. Initially, schools showing an interest or good practice in the research area were identified through conversations with members of the researcher’s placement EPS, during team meetings and via email. However, it is acknowledged that information shared in this manner was highly subjective, as it was based upon individual EPs’ constructs of ‘good practice’. To broaden the potential sample, the researcher shared the research with attendees at a city-wide training event focused on planning successful transitions to Y1. This provided access to a larger sample of schools showing interest in the research topic. Six schools were identified using these methods. The researcher explored demographic data for each school, and those with average to high numbers of pupils with identified SEND compared to national figures were contacted, via a recruitment email shared with the headteacher (see Appendix I). Of the three schools contacted, one expressed interest, and went on to participate.

Following this, demographic requirements were loosened to increase the potential sample size, allowing schools with a slightly below average number of pupils with identified SEND to participate (10% or above). This allowed the



researcher to contact three additional schools, from which one chose to participate. The researcher hoped to identify at least one further school to participate in the research and therefore shared the recruitment email with headteachers at three schools they had worked with as a TEP. This method was selected in the hope that pre-existing relationships between the researcher and school leaders may aid communication. Two further schools opted to participate, bringing the total to four.

***Contextual Information.***

The research was conducted across four state-funded primary schools in a West Midlands LA. All schools cater for pupils aged 3-11 years. Two of the schools are part of separate MATs (B and C). Additional contextual information is included in Table 3.4 (data retrieved in Autumn 2024).

**Table 3.4**

*A Table to Show Participating Schools’ Contextual Information (GOV.UK, 2024a/2024c)*

School	Percentage of pupils receiving SEN support	Percentage of pupils with an EHCP	Percentage of Pupils receiving Pupil Premium Funding (PPF)
A	10.3	0.4	43.4
B	14.4	0.9	58.5
C	15.4	0.6	42
D	12.7	1.7	32

National data indicates that 3% of pupils attending state-funded primary schools in England in 2023/24 had an EHCP, whilst 14.1% were receiving SEN support (GOV.UK, 2024a). All four schools were therefore below the national average for percentage of pupils with an EHCP in 2023/24. Schools B and C were above the national average for the number of pupils receiving SEN support, whilst

schools A and D were slightly below. All four schools reported an increase in the number of pupils receiving SEN support since 2022/23, reflecting national trends (GOV.UK, 2023/2024a). The number of pupils eligible for PPF across all schools was above the national average (24.6%, GOV.UK, 2024c), suggesting a large proportion of their pupils come from lower socio-economic status backgrounds.

### 3.3.1.2 Recruiting Participants.

#### *Sampling Approach.*

A purposive sampling approach was used to identify school staff and parent/carers within the identified schools who met the inclusion criteria (see Table 3.5).

**Table 3.5**

*A Table to Show Participant Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Population	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
<b>School Staff</b>	Involved in the transition from Reception to Y1 for children with SEND for at least one cohort, post COVID-19.	Involved in the transition prior to COVID-19. New to Reception/Y1 in September 2024.	Staff require sufficient knowledge of the transition to Y1 for children with SEND to address the RQs. The research should be relevant to the post COVID-19 context.
	Support staff, class teachers, SENCO, middle leadership (e.g., EYFS Lead, KS1 Lead).	Headteachers. Staff not involved in the transition to Y1.	The presence of a wide range of perspectives will increase the richness of data.

			The presence of a headteacher may cause unequal power dynamics.
<b>Parents/Carers</b>	Parent/carer of a child with identified SEND (EHCP or SEN support) currently in Y1 or Y2.	Parent/carer of a child in Y1/Y2 who does not have identified SEND. Parent/carer of a child with identified SEND who is not currently in Y1 or Y2.	To ensure knowledge is relevant to the post COVID-19 context, and the schools' current policies and practices.
	Parent/carer of a child who transition from Reception to Y1 in the same mainstream setting.	Parent/carer of a child who transition to Y1 from another setting or the home environment.	The discussion will be context specific (based upon practice at the child's current setting).
<b>All Participants</b>	Able to communicate in English.	Not able to communicate in English (requiring a translator).	Focus groups will be conducted in English. Pragmatic limitations do not allow use of a translator.

### ***Sample Size.***

Information within the literature regarding the optimum size of focus groups is mixed. According to Willig and Stainton-Rogers (2008), a focus group should include no more than six participants, to promote active involvement and aid accurate transcription, however, Massey (2011) describes focus groups as containing six to 12 participants. The researcher set a lower limit of three participants per focus group, to

ensure adequate opportunities for conversation. No upper limit was set, to ensure all those who wished to access the focus groups were able to. However, the researcher felt it was unlikely any group would exceed 12 participants.

### ***Recruitment Procedure.***

The procedure used to recruit participants is detailed in Figure 3.2. Participants were recruited between July 2024 and January 2025. The recruitment email, recruitment posters, information sheets and consent form are presented in Appendices I, J and K.

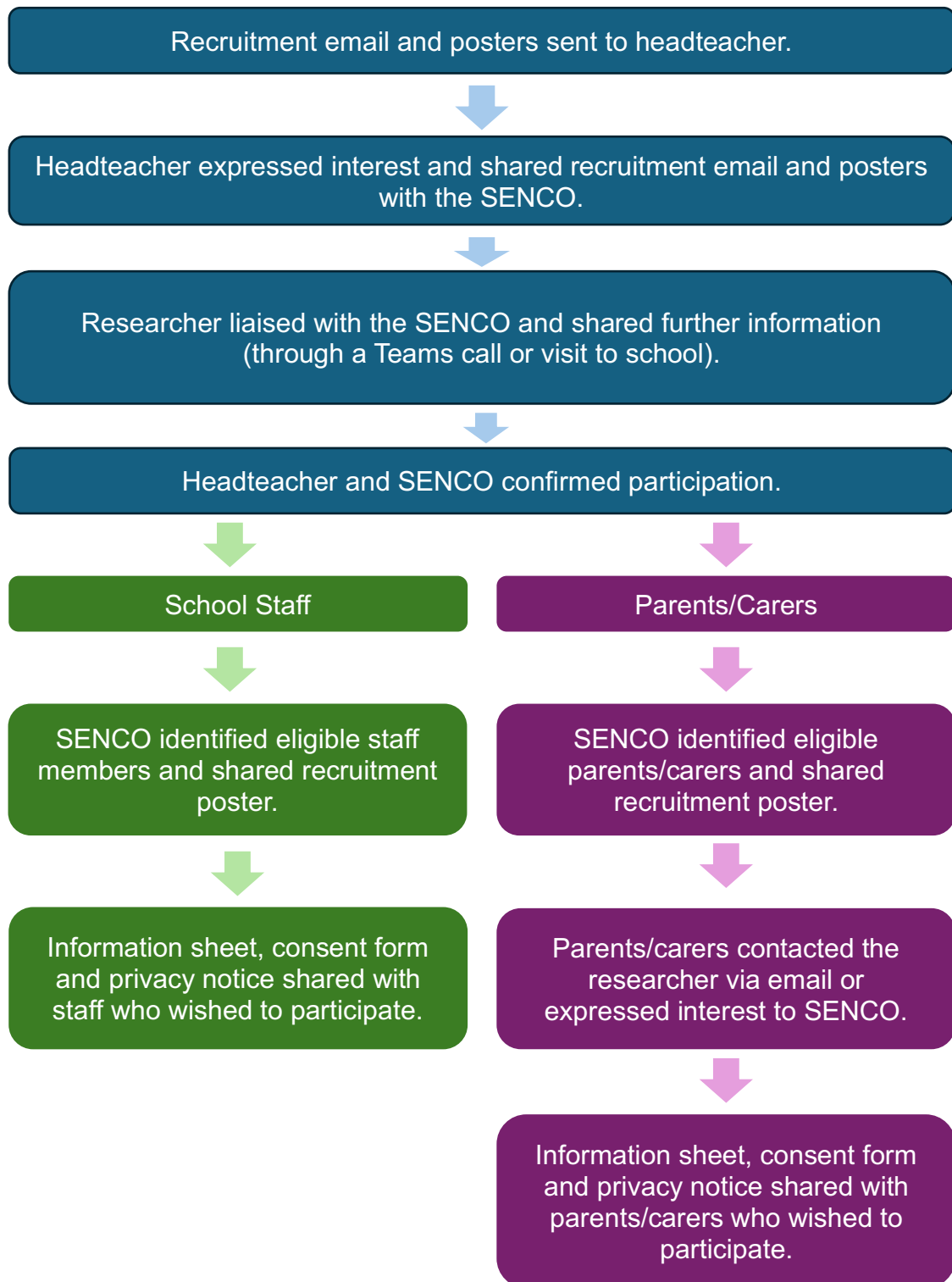
#### **3.3.1.3 Recruitment Difficulties.**

Recruitment of staff groups was relatively simple. When opting into the research, school leaders were aware of the requirement to allocate development time or organise cover for staff members to participate. Therefore, the necessary time was allocated and information promptly shared with potential participants. Staff groups were recruited in three of the participating schools (A, B and C).

The recruitment of parents/carers posed greater challenges. The researcher had no direct contact with parents/carers, placing the responsibility of sharing the recruitment poster upon school staff at participating settings, which sometimes resulted in delayed dissemination of information. Maintaining contact with parents/carers was also challenging in some cases. The accessibility of the focus groups may have further impacted engagement. One participating school included a high number of parents/carers who spoke English as an additional language, and therefore may not have considered their English proficiency great enough to participate. Additionally, information shared in the recruitment poster required potential participants to read and process information, which may have been a barrier to parents/carers with literacy difficulties. Finally, the idea of participating may have been more daunting for parents/carers, due to reduced knowledge of the topic and not being familiar with other group members. As a result, parent/carer groups were only recruited within two schools (A and D). Limitations relating to the study sample are considered further in Chapter 5 (5.3.1)

**Figure 3.2**

*A Flowchart Detailing the Participant Recruitment Process*



### 3.3.1.4 Participants.

Altogether, 22 participants were included in the study. Three staff focus groups were completed, comprising of four, eight and three members, totalling 15 participants. Within each group, staff worked at the same setting and therefore had pre-existing relationships. The focus of the discussion was linked to their job role, suggesting they possessed existing knowledge of the research topic.

Two parent/carer focus groups were recruited, one with four members and one with three, totalling seven participants. Most participants were parents/carers of children with communication and interaction needs. Specific information regarding the needs of their children was not included to maintain anonymity. Some parent/carers had no pre-existing relationships, some had engaged in brief interactions, and two participants within one group were the mother and father of the same child. Parents/carers were concerned with the subject matter as their child had transitioned from Reception to Y1 within the last 17 months. Information about the participants within each group is presented in Tables 3.6 and 3.7.

**Table 3.6**

*A Table to Show Participant Information for School Staff*

<b>Setting of Focus Group</b>	<b>Name (pseudonym) and Gender (m-male/ f-female)</b>	<b>Role(s) in School</b>
School A	Megan (f)	KS1 lead/Y1 teacher, previous EYFS lead for 5-6 years
	Anita (f)	Y1 teacher, Reception teacher last academic year
	Lydia (f)	Reception teacher
	Tracey (f)	Reception teacher
School B	Rick (m)	EYFS lead
	Liz (f)	Reception teacher
	Mary (f)	Reception teacher
	Josie (f)	Reception TA

	Georgia (f)	Reception TA (previous Y1 TA)
	Heidi (f)	Y1 TA
	Lisa (f)	Previous Y1 teacher (2020/2021)
	Karen (f)	Nursery TA
School C	Ruth (f)	EYFS SENCO and Reception teacher (previous Y1 teacher)
	Kate (f)	Previous Y1 teacher (2023/2024)
	Martha (f)	EYFS Lead and Reception teacher

**Table 3.7**

*A Table to Show Participant Information for Parents/Carers*

<b>Setting of Focus Group</b>	<b>Name (pseudonym) and Gender</b>	<b>Child's Name (pseudonym), Gender and Year Group</b>
School A	Alex (m)	Charlie (m)- Y2
	Claire (f)	Charlie (m)- Y2
	Jessica (f)	Alice (f)- Y1
	Simon (m)	Billie (f)- Y1
School D	Helen (f)	Finn (m)- Y1
	Nina (f)	George (m)- Y2
	Sarah (f)	Elliott (m)- Y2

### **3.3.2 Data Collection**

#### **3.3.2.1 Developing the Focus Group Schedule.**

Interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Structured interviews involve “a series of pre-established questions, allowing only a limited number of response categories” (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p.244). On the other end of the continuum, unstructured interviews allow participants to lead

conversation and require the researcher to adjust interview content based upon the views shared (Edwards & Holland, 2011). Existing between these two poles, semi-structured interviews include flexible prompts/questions which can be adapted based upon responses but provide structure to guide conversation (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

The researcher believed a structured script would be incompatible with the conversational style of a focus group, and the inductive approach of the research. Alternatively, an unstructured script may result in significant digressions in conversations across focus groups, making it difficult to generate themes. The researcher therefore developed a semi-structured script to guide focus groups, aiming to respond flexibly to issues raised by participants, whilst ensuring conversation remained relevant to the RQs.

The focus group schedule was shaped by the RQs and the researcher's knowledge of existing literature and the research context. Rubin and Rubin (2012) recommend interviews are structured using a combination of main questions, follow-up questions and probes. Main questions, which provide scaffolding and ensure the RQs are addressed, are usually prepared prior to data collection, whilst follow-up questions and probes generally come about during data collection, in response to participants sharing ideas which are unclear, or not anticipated by the researcher (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The researcher therefore developed a selection of main questions relating to each RQ, as well as possible follow-up questions and prompts to guide conversation if needed (see Appendix L).

Due to recruitment difficulties and the restricted timeframe of the research, a pilot study was not completed. Pilot studies are useful to assess facilitator skills and ensure accessibility of questions, so adaptations can be made to improve the quality of data gathered (Breen, 2006). To mitigate the impact of not completing a pilot study, the following steps were taken to make final amendments to the focus group schedule.

- The schedule was discussed by the researcher during academic tutorials to ensure relevance to the RQs.
- The schedule for staff groups was shared with a Y1 teacher who was not participating in the research, to ensure accessibility and relevance.



- The schedule for parent/carer groups was shared with a parent of a child currently in Y1 with SEND who was not participating in the research, to ensure accessibility and relevance.
- Up to 90 minutes was allocated for each focus group to allow time for the researcher to clarify questions if needed (as recommended by Breen, 2006).

### **3.3.2.2 Focus Group Procedure.**

Breen (2006) offers a practical guide to completing focus group research, which was influential in developing the procedure followed. Focus groups were completed within participating schools. Timings of focus groups varied to meet the needs of participants; some occurred during the school day, and others after school hours. Each focus group lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Rooms were arranged to allow all participants to sit around one table. Prior to focus groups beginning, participants were reminded of the research topic and given opportunity to ask further questions. The procedure followed in each focus group is outlined in Appendix M. Reflexive journal entries written prior to and during data collection are presented in Appendix W (W.1-W.3).

### **3.3.3 Data Analysis**

Focus groups were audio recorded and manually transcribed verbatim by the researcher. All verbal responses were transcribed, including those of the researcher, to promote reflexivity during analysis. Data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase process of RTA (2006/2022), as summarised in Figure 3.1 (Chapter 3, 3.2.3). The researcher referred to Braun and Clarke's (2006) '15 point checklist for good TA' throughout to improve the quality of analysis (see Appendix N). The actions taken during each phase of analysis are detailed below.

#### **3.3.3.1 Phase One: Familiarisation with the Data.**

This phase involves the researcher becoming familiar with the data, through a process of immersion, critical engagement and note taking (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Within the current study, the researcher gathered and manually transcribed the entire

dataset, practices which aid familiarisation (Byrne, 2021, Braun & Clarke, 2022). This also ensured transcripts were accurate and reflective of the data's original nature (e.g., punctuated correctly, Braun & Clarke, 2006).

During transcription, pseudonyms were applied, and identifying information was removed. Following transcription, the researcher read each transcript an additional two times. The first time reading alongside audio recordings and employing active listening skills, and the second taking notes of initial ideas and reflections. Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest familiarisation notes are recorded however works best for the researcher, as they are intended for their use alone. Familiarisation notes for individual focus groups were written by hand, using a visual layout. Overall familiarisation notes detailing the researcher's reflections on the entire dataset were typed electronically (see Appendix O for examples of visual and typed familiarisation notes, and Appendix W.6 for a reflexive journal entry written during the familiarisation phase).

### **3.3.3.2 Phase Two: Generating Initial Codes.**

Following familiarisation, the researcher generates initial codes from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Byrne (2021) describes codes as "succinct, shorthand descriptive or interpretive labels for pieces of information that may be of relevance to the research question(s)" (p.1399). The aim of coding is to identify "interesting" aspects of the dataset, which may provide the foundations for developing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.89). Byrne (2021) suggests codes should be brief but include enough detail to be understood independently of other codes.

Coding can be completed by hand or electronically using qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo, 2017), depending upon the researcher's circumstances and ability (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Within the current study, the researcher used NVivo (2017) to support the coding process. The researcher systematically worked through the dataset, generating a large number of initial codes. Codes were then reviewed and refined (e.g., by combining and renaming codes), before the dataset was worked through again, in an alternative order. This ensured all data items were analysed with the same level of insight. The researcher mainly generated semantic codes based upon explicit meanings expressed by participants, in line with a CR perspective. Each code was preceded by the label

'RQ1', 'RQ2' or 'RQ1,2' to indicate which RQ(s) it related to (see Appendix P for examples of coded transcripts and Appendix W.7 for a reflexive journal entry written during the coding phase).

### **3.3.3.3 Phase Three: Generating Initial Themes from Codes.**

Once data has been coded and relevant extracts have been collated, the researcher can begin to generate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). During this phase, the researcher moves beyond the analysis of individual extracts, and sorts codes into potential themes or subthemes, based upon shared meanings relating to the RQ(s) (Byrne, 2021).

For this phase, the researcher exported the complete list of code labels from NVivo, before printing them and sorting them into candidate themes by hand. Codes were then grouped into candidate themes on NVivo, in preparation for the next phase of analysis (images of this phase are presented in Appendix Q, and a reflexive journal entry written at this phase is presented in Appendix W.8). Codes which did not fit within the candidate themes were kept within a 'miscellaneous' folder, in case they became relevant as the analysis developed (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

### **3.3.3.4 Phase Four: Developing and Reviewing Themes.**

Once initial themes have been generated, they must be reviewed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involves considering whether data extracts within themes demonstrate coherent patterns (by reading through data extracts associated with each candidate theme) and evaluating whether the generated themes accurately reflect the dataset (by re-reading the entire dataset, Braun & Clarke, 2006). When reviewing themes, Braun and Clarke (2012) recommend researchers consider a range of questions, including "is this a theme?", "does it tell me something useful about the dataset and my research question?" and "are there enough (meaningful) data to support this theme?" (p.65).

The researcher followed the two stages recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), reviewing and developing themes to ensure they were rooted in the data. Whilst some themes required little change, some underwent several iterations, and others were disregarded due to a lack of relevant, meaningful data (see Appendix R

for a selection of thematic maps demonstrating this process and Appendix W.9 for a reflexive journal entry written during theme development).

### **3.3.3.5 Phase Five: Refining, Defining and Naming Themes.**

Once a thematic map has been produced which adequately reflects the data, the researcher must refine and define themes, identifying the unique essence of each theme and considering what element of the dataset it encapsulates (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The refinement process also includes considering how the themes fit together (e.g., avoiding too much overlap), how themes relate to the RQ(s) and whether any themes contain subthemes.

To ensure themes were clearly defined, the researcher attempted to describe each theme using a short abstract, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022). Succinct, clear theme names were then assigned. A table showing the final themes and the initial codes from which they were formed is presented in Appendix S.

### **3.3.3.6 Phase Six: Producing the Report.**

The final phase involves writing up the TA, which Braun and Clarke (2022) consider a key component of the analytical process. During this phase, the researcher continued to develop their analysis, considering the order in which the themes told the most compelling story about the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) state a report should provide “a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell - within and across themes” (p.93). Whilst producing the report, the researcher carefully selected data extracts to ensure they demonstrated the essence of each theme and addressed the RQs (see Appendix W.10 for a reflexive journal entry written during this phase).

## **3.3.4 Ethical Considerations**

The research was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines set out by the UoN, and the LA where the research was conducted. Ethical standards outlined by the BPS (2021a/2021b) and the HCPC (2016) were adhered to throughout the research process. The researcher received ethical approval from the UoN's Ethics

Committee prior to recruiting participants (see Appendix T). Table 3.8 outlines key ethical considerations and how they were addressed.

**Table 3.8**

*A Table to Show Ethical Considerations and how they were Addressed*

<b>Ethical Consideration</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Actions Taken to Address</b>
Informed Consent	The participant consents to the identified data being used for the purposes of the research, after receiving all relevant information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All participants received a detailed information sheet and consent form (see Appendices J and K) prior to focus groups.</li> <li>• The researcher offered to speak with all participants individually/in groups before focus groups to answer questions/provide additional information.</li> <li>• The research was explained again at the beginning of each focus group, with the opportunity to ask questions.</li> </ul>
Confidentiality	The researcher protects all personal information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Measures taken to maintain confidentiality were described in participant information sheets.</li> <li>• Confidentiality and safeguarding procedures were discussed when setting 'ground rules' in focus groups.</li> <li>• Data was anonymised during transcription.</li> </ul>
Right to Withdraw	Participants can withdraw at any point before, during or after the research (up until an identified date).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to withdraw was stated in information sheets and consent forms and reiterated at the beginning and end of focus groups.</li> <li>• The cut-off date for withdrawal (two weeks after the focus group) was stated on information sheets.</li> </ul>

Debrief	Participants are provided with additional information about the research following involvement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A debrief sheet was given to participants immediately after focus groups, containing an explanation of the study, the researcher's contact details and links to helpful resources (see Appendix U).</li> </ul>
Reducing Harm	Reducing the impact of any difficult feelings which arise from the discussion of personal experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A focus group provides a supportive space for participants to share and connect with others who may have similar experiences.</li> <li>• An empathetic and non-judgemental approach was adopted by the researcher.</li> <li>• Debrief sheets signposted to support services and resources.</li> </ul>
Data Protection	The safeguarding of information from loss, compromise or corruption.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recordings and transcripts were stored on a secure device in a locked location.</li> </ul>

### **3.3.5 Trustworthiness**

Unlike quantitative studies, qualitative research cannot be evaluated based upon its objectivity, reliability, validity, or generalisability. Instead, Guba (1981) recommends naturalistic research is evaluated in terms of its trustworthiness. Yardley (2008) developed an evaluative tool which considers the trustworthiness of qualitative research according to four criteria: 'sensitivity to context', 'commitment and rigour', 'coherence and transparency' and 'impact and importance'. These criteria can be applied to a range of diverse philosophical and methodological approaches (Yardley, 2015). The researcher used these criteria to ensure methodological rigour and trustworthiness within the current research. Table 3.9

presents a description of each criterion, potential threats, and actions taken to reduce or remove these threats.

**Table 3.9**

*A Description of Yardley's (2008) Trustworthiness Criteria and how they were Addressed*

<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Potential Threats</b>	<b>Actions to Address</b>
<p>Sensitivity to Context</p> <p>The researcher's consideration of participants' socio-cultural background, the existing literature, and ethical issues.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The researcher fails to engage sensitively with participants due to a lack of understanding of their socio-cultural context.</li> <li>• The research does not make a unique contribution.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completion of a SLR to develop knowledge of existing research.</li> <li>• The researcher developed an in-depth understanding of SEND policies.</li> <li>• The researcher worked within the research context (LA).</li> <li>• Participation was voluntary and informed.</li> <li>• The researcher communicated with empathy and allowed time to build rapport.</li> </ul>
<p>Commitment and Rigour</p> <p>The researcher's engagement with participants and the research topic.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The researcher does not develop sufficient knowledge of the research methodology.</li> <li>• The researcher fails to engage fully with participants.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engagement in the literature maintained throughout the research process.</li> <li>• Immersion in focus groups as the facilitator/researcher.</li> <li>• Manual transcription of focus groups to increase knowledge of the data.</li> <li>• Adherence to Braun and Clarke's (2006/2022) RTA procedure.</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of Braun and Clarke's (2006) '15 point checklist for good TA' to improve the quality of analysis.</li> </ul>
<p>Coherence and Transparency</p> <p>Clear links drawn between theory, methodology and interpretation of data. Outcomes presented in a clear and understandable way.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of consistency between the ontology/epistemology and the research design.</li> <li>• Unclear description of data collection/analysis.</li> <li>• Influence of the researcher is not acknowledged.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theoretical underpinnings of the research identified early in the process.</li> <li>• Clear description of data collection/analysis provided, along with extracts from transcripts to promote transparency (see section 3.3 and Appendices L-S and V).</li> <li>• Researcher reflexivity considered throughout (see sections 1.3 and 5.3.4 and Appendix W).</li> </ul>
<p>Impact and Importance</p> <p>The research generates useful knowledge which can have practical or theoretical implications.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research fails to clearly address the RQs or contribute to the evidence-base.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Semi-structured focus group script generated to ensure conversations remained relevant to the RQs.</li> <li>• Implications of the research considered within the discussion (section 5.4).</li> <li>• Outcomes of the research made available to participants.</li> </ul>

### 3.3.5.1 Reflexivity.

Another way in which the researcher increased the trustworthiness of the research is through reflexivity. Reflexivity involves “reflecting on the way in which research is carried out and understanding how the process of doing research shapes its outcomes” (Hardy et al., 2001, p.533). Braun and Clarke (2019) consider



reflexivity the defining feature between RTA and other TA approaches. They suggest good RTA is not dependent on accurate or reliable coding, but on the researcher's reflexive engagement with the data and analysis process. This is important as codes and themes do not exist passively within a dataset, but are actively generated by the researcher, and therefore represent the researcher's interpretation of the data, which is informed by their theoretical assumptions and worldview (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

To ensure reflexivity, Nowell et al. (2017) encourage researchers to keep a critical account of the research process, including methodological decisions and reflections on their experiences and values. Nadin and Cassell (2006) consider a research journal a simple yet valuable tool for promoting reflexivity, which should be employed by social science researchers. The researcher therefore kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process, from which example excerpts are presented in Appendix W.

## **4. Findings**

This chapter explores the themes generated in relation to the RQs. A thematic map is presented for each RQ, along with a narrative discussion of each theme/subtheme. The researcher provides data excerpts to illustrate their interpretation of the findings. Each theme draws upon comments made by both school staff and parents/carers. Where a theme/subtheme was expressed more strongly by one sub-population or within certain groups, this is made explicit. Appendix V identifies which participant groups contributed towards each theme and provides illustrative examples taken from each sub-population. Excerpts represent direct quotes; where slight changes were made to aid readability, this is made clear. Squared brackets indicate added words, and ellipsis indicate omissions. Any changes were made to support coherence and clarity and do not alter the meaning of quotes.

## 4.1 Research Question 1

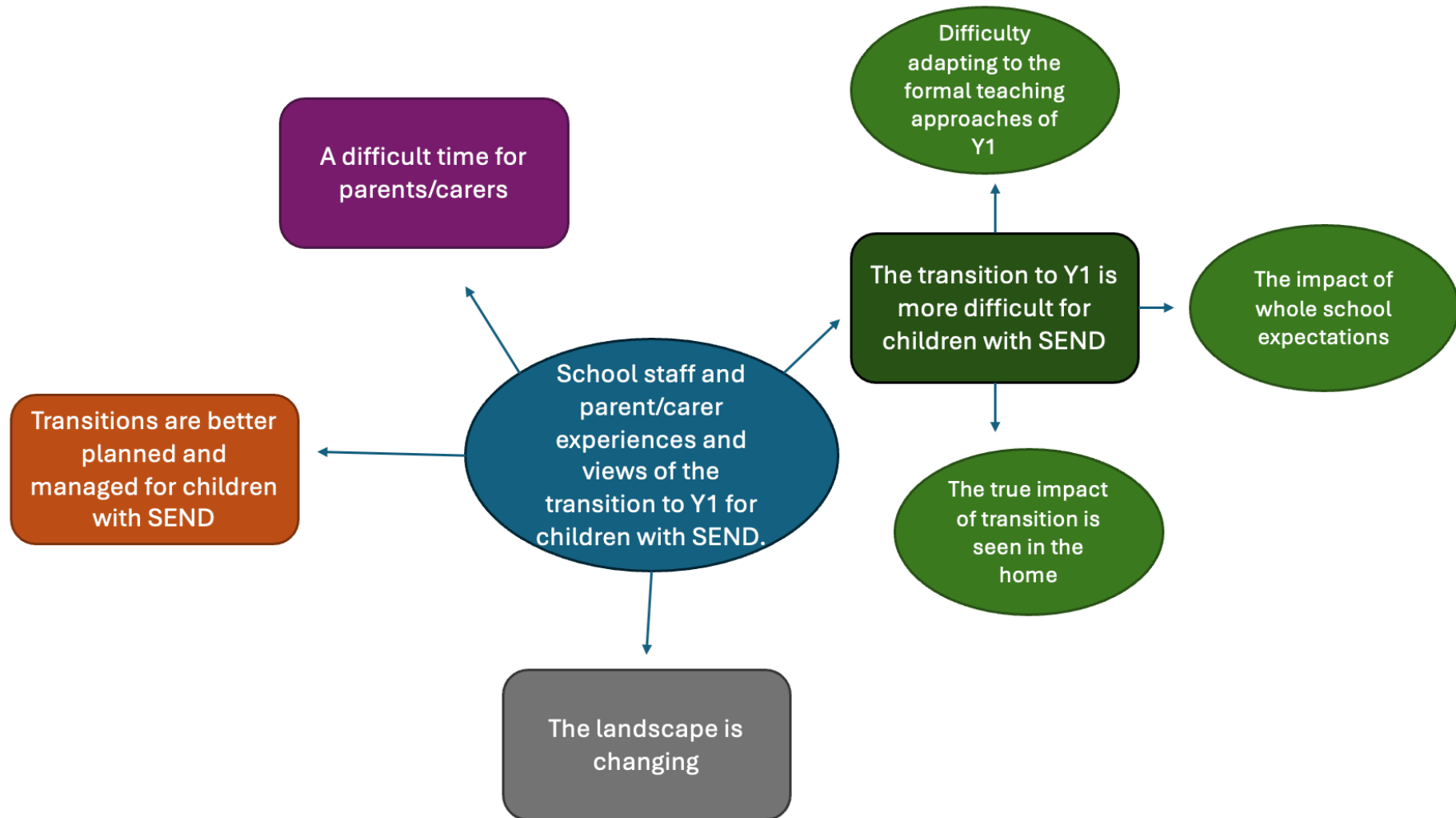
*What are school staff and parent/carer experiences and views of the transition to Y1 for children with SEND in mainstream schools, post COVID-19?*

In relation to RQ1, four main themes were generated, one of which includes three subthemes (see Figure 4.1 for a visual representation).

1. The transition to Y1 is more difficult for children with SEND.
  - a. Difficulty adapting to the formal teaching approaches of Y1.
  - b. The impact of whole school expectations.
  - c. The true impact of the transition is seen in the home.
2. A difficult time for parents/carers.
3. Transitions are better planned and managed for children with SEND.
4. The landscape is changing.

**Figure 4.1**

*Thematic Map of Themes for RQ1*



### **4.1.1 Theme 1: The Transition to Year 1 is More Difficult for Children with SEND**

This theme represents the view that the transition to Y1 is more difficult for children with SEND, compared to children without SEND. Such views were expressed by participants in all groups, demonstrating the consistency of the theme across the dataset. This theme is divided into three subthemes, which together provide a rich interpretation of why children with SEND may experience increased difficulty during the transition to Y1, as well as how these difficulties manifest and are understood by school staff and parents/carers.

1. Difficulty adapting to the formal teaching approaches of Y1.
2. The impact of whole school expectations.
3. The true impact of the transition is seen in the home.

#### **4.1.1.1 Subtheme 1: Difficulty Adapting to the Formal Teaching Approaches of Year 1.**

This subtheme represents the view that children with SEND find the transition to Y1 more difficult than those without SEND, as they have greater difficulty adapting to formal teaching approaches. Parents/carers and school staff described how the preferred learning styles of many children with SEND align more with the play-based pedagogies of Reception than the traditional teaching approaches of Y1.

Jessica (parent/carer): *“when it comes to the more sitting down... she can’t sit still either, she cannot stay in her seat. So the more sitting down it gets... I know the teachers are going to struggle, they know they are because we’ve already spoke about it”.*

Sarah (parent/carer): *“I think for Elliott, my biggest concern for him was the lack of choice and freedom [in Y1] ...academically he was more than ready, he loves learning, he’s very interested, but he likes to do things on his terms”.*

Heidi (Y1 TA): *“I think from my perspective as well, the SEND children that have come up are finding it more difficult to get the structured routine in, with*

*lessons and stuff because they still keep asking “when are we going to do so-and-so” what they used to in Reception”.*

Participant responses suggest not only is the introduction of more formal learning a significant and potentially difficult change for children, but it also creates a less inclusive environment for children with SEND, in comparison to the child-led approaches of Reception.

Martha (Reception teacher/EYFS lead): *“because they’re used to doing that in Early Years aren’t they [making choices] ...particularly SEN children. We’ve got resources which enable them, even if they’re non-verbal, to show us images to show us things, Makaton, symbols and things, to choose, and they go to Year 1 and a lot of that choice aspect is taken away”.*

Ruth (Reception teacher/EYFS SENCO): *“because when they’re in Early Years they don’t necessarily need a sensory break out of the classroom because they can go and access a part of the room more freely... it’s easily accessible to have that sensory break...But Year 1 haven’t got any resources like that to facilitate that level of choice”.*

Participants also expressed views that children with SEND ‘stand out’ more and begin to get ‘left behind’ when formal learning is introduced, reinforcing the idea that Y1 is a less inclusive environment for children with SEND.

Lydia (Reception teacher): *“And I think it actually makes some SEN children stand out more with seeing that change in environment”.*

Megan (KS1 lead/Y1 teacher): *“we’ve been able to support the children to integrate in the classroom, majority of children...It might be that further throughout the year when it does get more formal and the expectations and the work get higher that they sort of tend to stand out a little bit more [children with SEND]”.*

Lydia (Reception teacher): *“I think Year 1 is where you start to see the gap getting a little bit bigger and then a bit bigger and a bit bigger and then it's harder to catch up isn't it”.*

Jessica (parent/carer): *“the formal side of the work petrifies me, absolutely, because I know she's going to be so, so behind and she's already so behind”.*

When reflecting upon her son's response to the formal teaching approaches of KS1, Claire shared how she had begun to wonder *“is a mainstream school the best thing for him?”*. She had grown concerned that the pressure to deliver academic content in KS1 might impact the ability of teachers to address the needs of individual children, as demonstrated in the following quote.

*“I think the only thing I struggle with is being a mainstream school, it's still ultimately a mainstream school... classrooms are still set up for the majority of mainstream children... and sometimes I don't know whether their needs are actually considered [children with SEND] because, you know, they're trying to teach standard things to children”.*

By questioning the capacity of a mainstream school to meet her son's needs, Claire reinforces the idea that current practice in Y1 fails to promote inclusion and disadvantages the progress of some children with SEND.

#### **4.1.1.2 Subtheme 2- The Impact of Whole School Expectations.**

The second subtheme considers the impact of wider school expectations upon transition experiences. This subtheme was expressed most strongly by parents/carers, although it was acknowledged by some school staff (see Appendix V). Participants described how, when children move into KS1, they become subject to increased wider school expectations. Participants' views suggest these expectations can make an already challenging time more difficult for children with SEND.

Across settings, there appeared a general expectation that Y1 children must participate in the same extracurricular activities as other KS1 and KS2 children,

following the loss of their 'EYFS status'. There was no indication across groups that these expectations vary depending upon children's individual needs. One new expectation frequently identified by parents/carers as a difficult change for children during the transition to Y1 was the requirement to attend school assemblies.

Alexander (parent/carer): *"I think something that I picked up on was two things that your daughters found difficult, assembly, RML [phonics]. Charlie struggled with both of those as well".*

Sarah (parent/carer): *"For Elliott it was going to Assembly... he had times where he just didn't go into assembly last year because it was just too much for him".*

Sarah explained how assemblies placed additional pressure upon her son, Elliott, who worries about conforming to school expectations.

*"As much as he doesn't always come across that way... he is quite a stickler for the rules and doing the right thing. So I think he sort of struggled with the fact well "I'm supposed to be sitting up tall, I'm supposed to be quiet, but actually I find that hard, it's hard for my body to do that"".*

This quote demonstrates how Y1 children can be aware of differences between themselves and their peers. Unrealistic and sudden expectations may have a negative impact upon children's feelings of inclusion within the school community, as they might feel unable to meet the same standards as their peers.

The additional challenge of meeting wider school expectations during the transition to Y1 was also discussed by school staff.

Martha (Reception teacher/EYFS lead): *"they're just getting used to all these things that we've already spoken about all the timetabling issues, all the expectations, and then you throw extracurricular things at them that they don't actually need to do. Why are they being pushed to do that in autumn term?"*

Within this quote, Martha recognises wider school expectations as unnecessary pressures placed upon children at an already challenging time. However, staff described a continuing requirement for Y1 children to engage in extracurricular activities, such as “*an assembly in autumn term one for the parents*” (Kate, Y1 teacher). The dichotomy between staff views and practice suggests class teachers have little say over the whole school expectations placed upon Y1 children. This is reinforced in the following quote.

Kate (Y1 teacher): “*I feel like sometimes it is seen like the rest of school and it is not. And also, it’s about other members of staff higher up accepting what we’re doing in Year 1. I feel like there’s a big stigma that they should be doing what we’re doing and they should be doing this. But they’re Year 1*”.

Kate’s words suggest the expectations of staff in the wider school perpetuate the pressures placed upon children to participate in whole school activities, which can add an additional layer of difficulty to the transition.

#### **4.1.1.3 Subtheme 3- The True Impact of Transition is Seen in the Home.**

This subtheme captures the idea that during the transition period, some children suppress their true emotions in school but demonstrate signs of emotional dysregulation and distress at home. Therefore, although children can appear to school staff to be managing the transition well, this may not reflect the true reality of their experiences. This subtheme was identified explicitly in the anecdotes shared by parents/carers, who frequently referred to their children ‘masking’ difficulties or ‘holding in’ their feelings during their time in school, causing their emotions to manifest in different ways at home.

Jessica (parent/carer): “*she was coming home, her sleeping was going all over the place, she wouldn’t eat properly. Just anything that’s sets her routine back, she then acts out in different ways*”.



Claire (parent/carer): *“because of the change, because he masks a lot at school, I was finding his outburst were a lot at home. So obviously he holds it in all day and then, he was like a sort of bomb going off”.*

Nina (parent/carer): *“My son was more like... shy, so he wouldn’t speak up. Then he would come home and say “oh, I’m sitting by so and so and I don’t want to sit there”.*

This theme is also evidenced by the contrasting ways in which school staff and parents/carers within School A described children’s transition experiences. Whilst staff described the transition as a *“really positive experience”* (Megan, KS1 lead/Y1 teacher) and considered children with SEND to be *“settled”* and *“comfortable”* in Y1 (Lydia, Reception teacher), parents/carers recalled the transition in a less positive light, as demonstrated by the quotes below.

Claire (parent/carer): *“I can’t remember one positive about him going up to Year 1. Not in a nasty way... it’s like he gets into a class and then it takes him all year to settle”.*

Simon (parent/carer): *“it has been hard for her... when she comes home, it’s like she might be bottling everything up here. Being reasonably well behaved... but then goes off like a bottle of pop at home... and unleashes”.*

This discrepancy suggests children’s ability to ‘mask’ their true difficulties can influence staff perceptions of transition success, which is likely to directly impact the level of support they provide. Where children do not receive appropriate transition support, this may exacerbate the emotional responses seen by parents/carers in the home, which is also likely to impact upon parents/carers’ own wellbeing. This is explored in the subsequent theme.

#### **4.1.2 Theme 2: A Difficult Time for Parents/Carers**

This theme represents the view that the transition period can be difficult not only for children with SEND, but also their parents/carers. The theme was identified

more explicitly within parent/carer groups, but school staff also acknowledged the transition period as a trying time for parents/carers, and commented on how parent/carer feelings may affect the experiences of children (see Appendix V).

Parents/carers described feelings of anxiety in the lead up to the transition, caused by anticipation of the changes to come. Their heightened anxiety suggests they were uncertain what the transition would look like for their children, and what support would be provided.

Jessica (parent/carer): *"I always kind of try and picture how things are going to play out. So all over the six weeks all I did was panicking how she's going to be".*

Nina (parent/carer): *"I was stressed. More stressed than him. I was panicking, oh is it going to be another part-time year for him?"*

Many parents/carers continued to express concerns and negative emotions towards their children's transition to Y1 at the time of the focus groups, suggesting feelings of worry do not subside following the initial transition. One source of concern appeared to be parents/carers comparing the progress of their children with that of their peers. The quotes below suggest the formal teaching approaches of Y1 (as discussed in Theme 1, Subtheme 1) can make it difficult for parents not to make such comparisons.

Jessica (parent/carer): *"We go to read with me, we see other kids reading books with their parents. And I'm just sat there she's just playing... you don't want to compare, as parents you never want to compare, but you can't help it sometimes".*

Simon (parent/carer): *"I think the biggest fear is that each year that goes by, [there is] too much catch up".*

Parents/carers also described feeling highly protective of their children, which seemed to exacerbate feelings of anxiety during the transition period.

Claire (parent/carer): *“it’s like somebody’s just like, pulling them away from you because you’ve got to let them go and do these things that you’re like “they need me, they need me, they shouldn’t be allowed to do this””*.

Claire’s description of herself as a protective mother is reflective of the way staff described the behaviour and emotions of some parents/carers during the transition period, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Megan (KS1 lead/Y1 teacher): *“We have quite a few parents with anxiety... struggling to leave the children and actually we found that the children were fine coming back [to Y1] but lots of the parents were worried about the children coming back”*.

Staff commented on the possible impact of parental anxiety upon children’s development, using phrases such as *“mollycoddling”* (Lisa, previous Y1 teacher) to suggest parents/carers’ overprotectiveness can delay the development of children’s independence skills. Staff also suggested children appear to *“feed off the emotion”* of their parents (Lydia, Reception teacher), which can directly impact their transition experiences.

This theme highlights the emotional toll the transition can take upon parents/carers and emphasises the need for the wider impacts of transition to be considered when planning support. This is summed up in the following quote by Jessica (parent/carer).

*“I know this is about children, and the transition from Reception to Year 1, but I think it’s important for the parents as well...I know at least five times a week I’m having a breakdown because I can’t control what happens here, and... as you said, you have not a lot of support”*.

#### **4.1.3 Theme 3: Transitions are Better Planned and Managed for Children with SEND**

This theme captures the view that, in some cases, children with identified SEND experience a more positive transition to Y1 than those without identified

SEND, due to increased transition support. The researcher interpreted this theme as evidence of school staffs' recognition of and response to the difficulties discussed within Theme 1.

Staff described how the transition period is often extended for children with SEND, to allow additional opportunities for them to become familiar with new environments and staff members.

Anita (Y1 teacher): *"[they had] lots more earlier opportunities and that drip feeding of seeing those members of staff... having more opportunities possibly than... your typical Reception child, they had more opportunities to go up and see what that environment was like and what the members of staff were like".*

These measures were recognised and appreciated by parents/carers, who spoke positively about the additional support put into place for their children.

Jessica (parent/carer): *"her teachers walking her round the classroom beforehand was amazing... introducing it to them before the six weeks, quite early on... and telling them how it's going to be and different things... it then became routine to go to that classroom".*

Helen (parent/carer): *"I feel like they're doing everything they can to get him in [to the Y1 classroom], he's got his own little desk, he loves numbers so he's got numbers all across his desk... And I feel like they've made it quite inviting for him, because it's his special interest, numbers, he loves it".*

However, although children with identified SEND appear to benefit from additional support, this is little help to those children whose needs are unidentified. Claire described how her son's additional needs were not recognised by school staff until the end of Y1. As a result, he received little additional support when transitioning to Y1.

*“Apart from the booklet, I don’t really feel like there was much [support], because of obviously them not knowing his differences, or them not seeing them, although we expressed them”.*

The experiences of Claire’s son suggest in some settings, children only receive individualised transition support when their needs are recognised by school staff prior to the transition. This highlights a potential issue with broader transition practices, as it seems universal transition support may be insufficient for some children with SEND.

Some staff members reflected on the idea that the support provided for children with identified SEND during the transition to Y1 could in fact benefit all children, sharing the following observations.

Liz (Reception teacher): *“the SEND children probably have maybe a better transition than the other children, because they have got that consistency of things that were familiar to them in Reception but have continued into Year 1”.*

Kate (Y1 teacher): *“I think it’s more of the way it should be for the rest of the children because there is more flexibility, so they get time for sensory breaks, they know it’s short 5-minutes of work then they move on to what they want to choose to do, so it is like a choosing time for those children... So there is that flexibility more for the SEN children than there is [for other children]”.*

These quotes suggest although some schools are effectively implementing additional transition support for children with SEND, more work is needed to develop inclusive universal transition practices, to promote positive transition experiences for all children, including those with unidentified SEND.

#### **4.1.4 Theme 4: The Landscape is Changing**

This theme represents the view that the transition to Y1 for pupils with and without SEND is becoming more difficult due to a range of factors, most notably the direct and indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants conveyed a sense that ‘this is just the beginning’ and feelings of anticipation for the future. The theme

was most strongly expressed within school staff groups, however the long-term impact of the pandemic upon children's experiences was also referenced by parents/carers (see Appendix V).

Many children currently in KS1 missed early health checks because of COVID-19 lockdowns and continue to experience long waiting lists to see professionals. Participants explained how, in some cases, this resulted in delayed identification of SEND. The impact of this upon transition experiences is explored within the quotes below.

Claire (parent/carer): *"I felt like the pandemic was really the beginning of our nightmare wasn't it? Because he had his...two year check during the pandemic, which was online. And if it hadn't been online, there might have been more noticeable factors if we'd actually visited someone in person...So I feel like the pandemic really took a toll, especially on the kids that were having developmental checks at that time, because a lot of it was missed, completely missed. That could have been prevented, and obviously the ball could have been moving a lot quicker and you know, support".*

Rick (EYFS lead): *"we mentioned earlier it's that sort of COVID generation coming through, I think a lot of these children will have missed sort of key milestone appointments when they were younger. And I think there'll be a lot of missed opportunities to diagnose any particular needs or specific needs that they might have".*

In the previous theme, the idea of transition support being dependent upon early identification of SEND was discussed. Therefore, it is likely late identification of needs during and following COVID-19 will have directly impacted children's transition experiences (as seen in the case of Claire's son).

Staff comments suggest some settings have responded to 'the changing landscape' by adapting their transition practices, with positive effects seen. Discussing the changes made to their school's Y1 transition policy following COVID-19, Ruth (Reception teacher/EYFS SENCO) commented

*“I think because we changed it then, we knew that there was massive impacts but... I think some people would probably see more of the changes [since COVID-19]. I think because we spotted it quite quickly we made changes”.*

However, there was a strong sense that more needed to be done, and recognition amongst school staff that their practice must adapt to meet the changing needs of children.

Lydia (Reception teacher): *“I think schools in general just need to start... thinking ahead and adapting more. And schooling as we know it isn’t going to be the same is it? It’s going to be completely different. Whether that’s a COVID thing or a SEN thing or a parenting thing or finance I don’t know”.*

Within this quote, Lydia conveys a sense of anticipation and provokes an image of an uncertain future. She emphasises the importance of school staff adapting and responding to future changes, in order to meet the needs of children during the transition to Y1 and beyond.

#### **4.1.5 Research Question 1 Summary**

Four main themes were generated for RQ1. The view that the transition to Y1 is often more challenging for children with SEND presented strongly across the dataset. Participants attributed this to difficulties adjusting to formal teaching approaches and the effects of increased whole school expectations. Staff generally shared more positive recollections of children’s transition experiences than parents/carers, possibly due to children masking their emotions in school. Parents/carers described the impact of the transition upon their own emotional wellbeing, identifying it as an uncertain and stressful time. Across settings, transitions appeared to be better planned and managed for children with identified SEND, as stakeholders anticipated the difficulties they may face. However, support for children with unidentified SEND was less evident, highlighting potential flaws in universal transition practices. Finally, participants recognised the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon transition experiences, particularly the impact of reduced

access to health services and delayed identification of SEND upon transition support.

## **4.2 Research Question 2**

*What do school staff and parents/carers perceive as the key environmental factors in facilitating/hindering a successful transition to Y1 for children with SEND?*

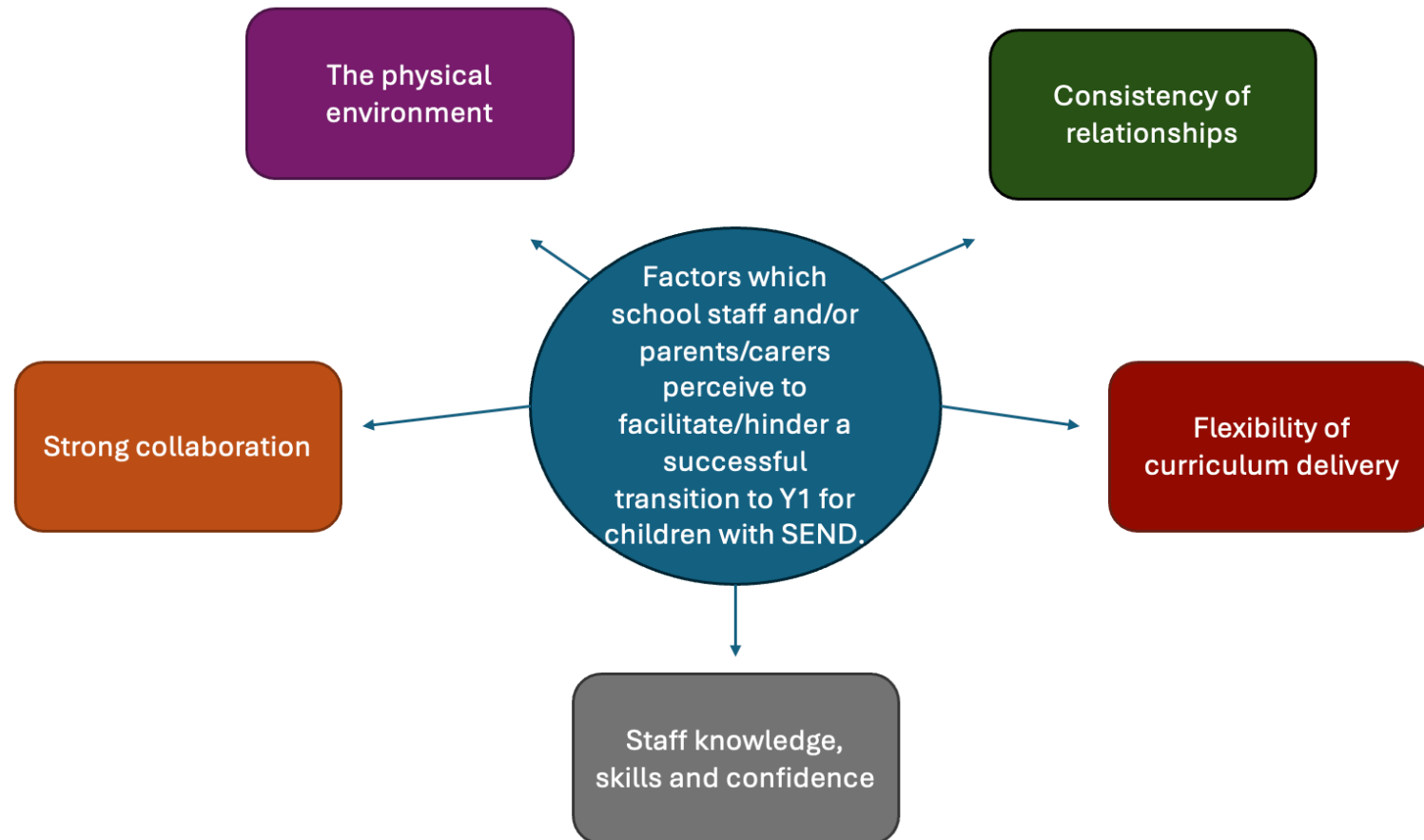
In relation to RQ2, five themes were generated (see Figure 4.2 for a visual representation).

1. The physical environment.
2. Consistency of relationships.
3. Strong collaboration.
4. Flexibility of curriculum delivery.
5. Staff knowledge, skills and confidence.



**Figure 4.2**

*Thematic Map of Themes for RQ2*



*Note:* Within each theme description, there will be a consideration of how related factors can facilitate and/or hinder the transition to Y1 for pupils with SEND.

### **4.2.1 Theme 5: The Physical Environment**

The importance of the physical environment was discussed by participants across all groups. Transitions were generally considered more successful when the Y1 environment was designed to mirror a Reception classroom, as this promotes consistency between Reception and Y1, and provides an environment suited to the preferred learning styles of some children with SEND.

In one setting, staff had transformed their Y1 classrooms to incorporate features typically seen within Reception, such as a construction area and creative area. Anita (Y1 teacher) commented on the impact of this upon children's initial responses to Y1.

*"I think the smallest thing as well, they've walked into the classroom and they've seen toys and I think that's been, just visually, seeing toys, new toys, that was a big tick straight away... And seeing the classroom not in those you know, five sets of three tables and everything is so clean and just sterile".*

The positive impact of these changes upon children's transition experiences was also acknowledged by parents/carers.

Jessica (parent/carer): *"I think they've kept the classroom structure very similar... for Alice... it's like being at home with just the furniture moved around... So I think that made it easier, whereas if you were to probably stick her in a classroom now, with like a desk and two chairs... very formal, sitting down, learning, she wouldn't want to go in there, she'd probably cry "no"."*

On the other hand, where settings maintained a more traditional Y1 classroom, parents/carers reported negative effects of the environment upon children's transition experiences.

Nina (parent/carer): *"the fact that they strip it of toys and it just looks like a normal classroom, I think that's a shock for them. I think they should have something... just to remind them that they are still children and they can still play".*

Staff members across all groups spoke of their desire to further adapt the Y1 environment to resemble Reception when describing an ideal, inclusive Y1 classroom, suggesting they consider the physical environment key in enabling successful transitions.

Ruth (Reception teacher/EYFS SENCO): *“I’d go with mirroring Reception with resources and opportunities for continuous provision. So that would mean less desks”.*

Rick (EYFS lead): *“I think there needs to be similarities to the Early Years environment”.*

Parents/carers also referenced the need for Y1 classrooms to incorporate more diverse spaces, to support the inclusion of pupils with SEND. When asked how the Y1 environment could be made more inclusive, Nina suggested

*“have like a little sensory corner, have a sensory hour, so they don’t have to always leave to go to a sensory room. Because then they’re not really mixing with other kids are they?”.*

Although the potential benefits of adapting the Y1 environment were acknowledged across all groups, not all settings had taken steps to do so, and some felt this was not possible due to the limitations of the available space.

Ruth (Reception teacher/EYFS SENCO): *“The classroom’s not big enough. That is a big thing for SEND children is the lack of space when you get to Year 1... one of the Year 1 classrooms is very small, and you literally can just fit the desks in there”.*

Ruth’s comment suggests replicating an EYFS environment is not possible within all Y1 classrooms, meaning a more creative approach may be required to provide an environment better equipped to meet children’s diverse needs following the transition.

#### **4.2.2 Theme 6: Consistency of Relationships**

This was possibly the most prominent theme identified across the dataset in relation to RQ2. Relationships between children and school staff were considered central to children's transition experiences. Where the maintenance of existing relationships was prioritised, and opportunities to nurture new relationships were created, this seemed to provide a protective factor for children during the transition. However, where relationships were less developed, children's difficulties appeared to be exacerbated.

At the heart of this theme is the importance of consistency. Both parents/carers and school staff discussed the benefits of Reception staff transitioning to Y1 alongside children. Across multiple settings, it was identified as a key consideration within transition planning, as evidenced in the quotes below.

Lydia (Reception teacher): *"I think at least one person has transitioned with the children and I think that's helpful, they've got someone they can relate to".*

Lisa (previous Y1 teacher): *"we're quite fortunate here often if there's a SEN child with a one-to-one, you might get a chance for that one-to-one to move up with that child or at least be around or still be part of that child's day".*

Parents/carers also expressed how the presence of consistent staff members across Reception and Y1 made the transition less difficult for their children and themselves.

Alexander (parent/carer): *"There was one positive, when he moved from Reception to Year 1, Mrs Green [TA] moved up with him. Like you said about how they become attached to one person".*

Jessica (parent/carer): *"I feel like a lot of SEN kids make certain bonds with certain staff. Like we're their safe people at home and they end up having a safe person at school... And luckily for me, my daughter had quite a few teachers who have gone up with her".*

Claire (parent/carer): *“that was the only one reassuring thing for me, that he’d made an attachment with someone and I knew if he was ever upset during the day, he’d got that one person to give him a cuddle”.*

Where it was not possible for staff to transition with children, participants emphasised the importance of children building relationships with Y1 staff prior to the transition.

Anita (Y1 teacher): *“from the teacher’s standpoint as well it’s being able to meet those children before they come up. Because I have had previous year groups where I’ve met them on the first day of September”.*

Heidi (Y1 TA): *“what had worked for me was finding out, spending some time with the SEND children and finding out what they specifically like”.*

In some schools, this appeared to be a priority for staff. Lydia (Reception teacher) described some of the strategies implemented within School A to begin establishing relationships between children and Y1 teachers prior to transition.

*“We had pictures of the staff once we knew who was going to be in the class. We had pictures and we were showing them “your new teacher, your new teacher”... We were pointing them out as they went past in the hall... and saying oh “say hello to Mrs X”... I think the ladies [Y1 teachers] made a conscious effort like you’d pop your face in and say “oh you’re going to be my class next year” and just having those little snippets and interactions with the children as they lined up to go into the dinner hall”.*

However, in other settings staff and parents/carers saw this as an area for development. When discussing how transition practices could be improved, participants in Schools B and D made the following suggestions.

Josie (Reception TA): *“I think forming stronger relationships from earlier on. So rather than waiting for the transition morning, try and get something in*

*place like a few weeks before, maybe just in that last term of school, just try to get staff to come and meet the children”.*

Nina (parent/carer): *“my ideal transition is the child spending more time with the teachers, like as a whole classroom. But then also for the SEN kids to spend an extra few days or weeks, just getting to know them”.*

Where relationships between children and Y1 staff were not developed, this was described as a hindering factor. At the time of the focus group (January 2025), Helen’s son was yet to formally transition into the Y1 classroom, instead spending his time in the school’s intervention space. When considering how his relationships may have contributed towards his transition difficulties, Helen shared the following thoughts.

*“I don’t feel like he’s got that same relationship with the Year 1 teacher [compared to his Reception teacher]... he’s hardly spent any time with her at all... he could have done with the time before to try and get used to her... but he hasn’t really had the chance to get that relationship because he’s not going in there. But would he have gone in if he’d had that relationship with her sooner?”*

According to school staff, staffing changes are a key barrier to establishing relationships prior to transition. Participants made comments such as *“we didn’t find out staffing until quite late on in the term”* (Megan, KS1 lead/Y1 teacher) and *“the other Year 1 teacher was in Year 4, their break times are at different times, so she couldn’t always come down”* (Ruth, Reception teacher/EYFS SENCO). These comments suggest the movement of staff between year groups can have a detrimental impact upon relationship building for children with SEND. This is emphasised in the quote below.

Ruth (Reception teacher/EYFS SENCO): *“that class has struggled that little bit more [with the transition], and potentially that could have been a little bit a part of their struggle, is that they weren’t able to form a relationship... And I think that can have a massive impact, particularly with SEND children”.*

### 4.2.3 Theme 7: Strong Collaboration

This theme was expressed strongly across groups. The theme illustrates the importance of collaboration between stakeholders in facilitating positive transitions to Y1 for pupils with SEND. Efficient information sharing between staff, and collaboration between parents/carers, teaching staff and school leaders was considered key to successful transitions. Where these things were lacking, children's needs were sometimes misunderstood or not appropriately met, resulting in a more unsettling transition.

School staff recognised the importance of communication with parents/carers during the transition period, particularly the need to share information regarding the transition to offer parents/carers support and reassurance.

Megan (KS1 lead/Y1 teacher): *"I think, as we've already touched on, it's that reassurance for parents. So we've got a presentation tomorrow for the Year 1 parents to talk them through the changes and sort of let them know what Year 1 looks like".*

Rick (EYFS lead): *"we're quite good at talking to parents and getting... each parent to know where they [the children] are going and what's going to happen".*

However, staff did not discuss the importance of gaining the views of parents/carers during the transition period. Their focus appeared to be on communication, rather than collaboration. Parents/carers on the other hand, emphasised the value of collaboration between school staff and parents/carers in identifying the appropriate transition support for their children. Some parents/carers felt their views were heard and valued by staff, whilst others felt dismissed.

Sarah explained how she produced a 'one-page profile' about her son, Elliott, to share with his Y1 teacher, adding *"I know Mrs Smith [Year 1 teacher] said that was really helpful and she asked me to do the same for his Year 2 teacher"*. In this circumstance, Sarah felt her views were considered by school staff, which supported Elliott's transition. However, Sarah also commented that, although she had the

opportunity to meet with Elliott's teacher and share additional information a few weeks after he joined Y1, *"with hindsight [it] would have been useful [to meet] probably before he started with her"* to enable the smoothest possible transition.

Unlike Sarah, Claire did not feel her views were heard or valued by school staff during her son's transition to Y1. When discussing the need for increased collaboration between school staff and parents/carers, Claire made the following observation.

*"They're only seeing a school side, there is another side to these children. And it sort of impacts the other... I think they definitely need to sit with parents and get a full view of a child... in order to be able to put things in place for a particular child".*

Other parents/carers also emphasised the need for increased collaboration between school staff and parents/carers, and greater appreciation for the voice of parents/carers during the transition period. When asked how the transition could be better managed for children with SEND, they made the following suggestions.

Jessica (parent/carer): *"I think more parent-teacher meetings and parent SEN meetings, like with the SENCO, I think that's important".*

Helen (parent/carer): *"[A] meeting with parents and teachers, before the term starts, so we're expressing what their struggles are, what they're good at, like that one page profile, but being able to discuss it with the teacher".*

Collaboration between members of staff within settings was also considered key for successful transitions, particularly within school staff groups. Staff commented on the importance of sharing information regarding children's interests, family backgrounds, potential triggers for dysregulation and strategies for support. The efficiency of information sharing procedures appeared to vary across settings. Some schools considered this a strength and a key contributor towards what they perceived to be positive transition experiences for children. Take the following quote from Tracey (Reception teacher).



*“We’ve all worked so closely together [Reception and Y1 staff]. We’ve spoke so much about the children and what they’re like, you know what triggers them. So they was all prepared when they moved up and knew exactly what was going to happen. Staff knew with a trigger what would happen”.*

Staff also highlighted the importance of sharing information prior to transition, so planning can be completed collaboratively. Across several settings, this form of collaboration was prioritised and considered to have a positive impact upon transition experiences.

Megan (KS1 lead/Y1 teacher): *“having those meetings with the ladies [Reception staff] in the summer term about the children and their needs and what we can plan for in autumn term specifically for those children.”*

Kate (Y1 teacher): *“we’re really lucky actually, that last half term we do get time with the teacher to hand over...it’s not just a half an hour gap either, you know. We’ve had a document to fill in to actually put a personalised comment about every single child”.*

Conversely, within School B, staff described information sharing procedures as an area for development, suggesting a lack of effective communication between staff could be hindering successful transitions for children with SEND. Heidi, a Y1 TA, shared the following view.

*“For me personally as the TA, the hinder for me was not having the information on the children before hand, so then I could’ve had a sense of each child and know their needs beforehand”.*

This was also recognised by the schools EYFS lead, Rick, who admitted a lack of time and capacity can mean important conversations between school staff do not occur. He recognised the potential impact of this upon children’s transition experiences in the following quotes.

*“I think there needs to be more conversations between sort of Reception class teachers and Year 1 class teachers. I think we need to get TAs involved at all points. I think SENCO needs to sort of take the lead, particularly with the SEND children, take the lead in facilitating those conversations, because it’s the only real way that we’ll get that transition and make it more effective”*

*“Because a lot of the time, what we’ll find is that you might have people that are working with that child that don’t know much about them at all, in cases where that child can’t communicate for themselves, that’s even harder... But by having that meeting that’s a real sit-down opportunity to go through what the specific needs are and how to counter those”.*

The third level of collaboration discussed was between Reception/Y1 staff and school leadership. In schools where transition practice had been developed, a common factor appeared to be support from school leaders. Take the quotes below from staff in Schools A and C.

Anita (Y1 teacher): *“we’ve been allowed to make these changes haven’t we? Megan [KS1 lead/Y1 teacher] has been there fighting... saying like no, we know these children, just let us try, and luckily, it’s working”.*

Kate (Y1 teacher): *“we’re really lucky there because management understand that... it’s us being ready actually to accept these children, not accept them, but to adapt our classroom ready for these children”.*

These quotes convey a sense of autonomy amongst Reception and Y1 staff, who felt empowered and supported by school leaders to make the changes necessary to meet children’s needs. As a result of the changes, staff across both settings reported improved transitions for children with SEND compared to previous years. However, in School B, a lack of collaboration with leadership was identified by Rick (EYFS lead).

*“The expectations from an SLT perspective and the expectations put on us from the level above us and the level above that, that never changes, but the*

*entire sort of makeup of our cohort and the sort of starting points and everything has changed”.*

Through this quote, Rick suggests teaching staff lack the autonomy to make changes. There is no mention of the possibility to collaborate with school leaders in future, conveying a sense that the situation is ‘stuck’. This lack of collaboration seems to have hindered successful transitions by reducing opportunities for teaching staff to adapt Y1 provision in response to children’s needs.

#### **4.2.4 Theme 8: Flexibility of Curriculum Delivery**

Another prominent theme across the dataset was the importance of flexibility in relation to Y1 curriculum delivery. Participants discussed the benefits of incorporating play-based pedagogies within Y1, introducing formal learning slowly, and responding to the interests and needs of the children within each cohort. Where staff had the desire and freedom to adopt a flexible approach, this appeared to positively impact transition experiences. However, in some cases, rigid policies and expectations seemed to prevent Y1 staff from taking a flexible and creative approach.

Central to this theme was discussion around the benefits of merging typical EYFS and Y1 teaching pedagogies and offering children increased access to play-based learning in Y1. This was generally seen to benefit children with SEND during the transition, as play-based learning often aligns with their preferred learning styles (see Themes 1 and 5 for further discussion). School A had recently adapted their Y1 provision in this way and reported positive results.

Megan (KS1 lead/Y1 teacher): *“Year 1 in autumn term now, it does feel like Reception, doesn't it? And actually, I keep forgetting that we're only four weeks in and they've responded so well to that because they've had that consistency... they've settled really well. So I think moving forward we've already started to add a little bit more formality in because they've been able to cope with it, including the SEN children”.*

This quote illustrates how staff planned to slowly introduce formal teaching approaches, at a pace appropriate for children. This demonstrates how child-led learning can act as a bridge to support children following their initial transition to Y1, before slowly being reduced as they become more settled. Parents/carers also described how the gradual shift from play-based to formal learning supported their children's transitions.

Jessica (parent/carer): *"it's quite a lot of informal, play type learning, but I think they are slowly, over the next couple of terms, introducing that [formal learning], so it isn't just going to be a "bang, here's a book, write and read".*

Simon (parent/carer): *"I think it is better because just imagine this, you've got the colour white and the colour black, they've made a grey in the middle. So that it just doesn't go from one to the other".*

Staff also discussed the importance of responding to the specific needs of children within each cohort, recognising that transition support may need to look different every year.

Tracey (Reception teacher): *"We've even had chats about next year's transition because our children are completely different this year aren't they?"*

Kate (Y1 teacher): *"I had a really strong class last year. So I actually brought it forward [formal learning] because they were accessing the learning... Then Louise's class were a completely different cohort, so she held back, and that's ok".*

However, whilst some schools appeared to have embraced a flexible approach, this was less apparent within other settings, where Y1 curriculum delivery remained more formal. In School B, the EYFS lead, Rick, expressed a preference for formalising Reception over adopting a flexible approach to Y1.

*"We've tried both... putting the more sort of continuous provision approach into Year 1... with mixed results to be completely honest. And so our*

*emphasis has really been on putting the structure in, or as much structure as you can in a Reception classroom... And it seems as though that's [had] more impact on what we wanted with that effective transition into Year 1".*

Formalising Reception seemed to support smoother transitions for some children, as they had time to become familiar with Y1 teaching approaches. However, the impact upon children with SEND was not discussed. In Rick's experience, the introduction of play-based learning to Y1 had "*mixed results*", and he seemed uncertain about the value of play in supporting positive transitions. The differing views and experiences of staff across settings suggests the impact of play-based learning upon transition experiences is mediated by the presence of other factors, for example, staffs' knowledge and confidence to implement these approaches (see Theme 9). Another member of staff within the setting recognised that a formal approach to Reception is unlikely to work for all children, alluding to a need for greater flexibility in future.

Liz (Reception teacher): *"last year's cohort were a lot more easier to ease them into that transition [to Y1] where this cohort that we've got we are seeing a huge difference".*

Although across most settings, staff valued opportunities for flexibility in Y1, there were clear barriers which prevented them from being as flexible as they desired. These barriers were often related to the expectations of higher powers, extending from school leadership to government bodies. Firstly, Y1 teachers have a responsibility to deliver the content of the NC. Staff explained how pressure to cover a large quantity of content can limit the flexibility of curriculum delivery.

Kate (Y1 teacher): *"Would I like to do more [to adapt the curriculum], yes, but obviously we can't condense the National Curriculum unfortunately".*

Additionally, school leaders and other staff members can put pressure on Y1 staff to meet the same academic expectations as others throughout the school.

Kate (Y1 teacher): *We just need to get subject leaders and everything on board...all these new ideas that we've got coming through for maths and English particularly, we as Year 1 staff are still meant to adhere to that like the rest of school".*

These expectations can influence timetabling and reduce the freedom of Y1 staff to implement child-led learning.

Martha (Reception teacher/EYFS lead): *"we [Reception staff] pick our own timetable and we swap things around... They [Y1 staff] are given their timetable and it's rigid. They've got expectations on the amount of lessons they have to squeeze in a day".*

Anita (Y1 teacher): *"the children will come up with something but because you have that restriction of the planning and the timetabling, you can't go sometimes with their interests".*

Both school staff and parents/carers expressed a desire for change at school and government levels, to allow increased flexibility in Y1.

Helen (parent/carer): *"maybe when they first go into Year 1, it should be like a term I think, even for the other kids, where they are just kind of getting familiar with each other, getting familiar with Year 1. And then it's kind of like more structured if that makes sense after a term or maybe even half a term".*

Kate (Y1 teacher): *"I'd like more flexibility on my timetable, so if they walk in and I'm not doing maths when it says maths... nobody's going to say anything, because actually we've gone with what the children want to do, or we're plugging gaps".*

Anita (Y1 teacher): *"I mean in an ideal world Year 1 would be part of EYFS wouldn't it?"*

Within some settings, there was a sense that Y1 staff have done all they can to adopt a flexible approach to Y1, and changes in policies and guidance at school and government levels are needed to allow greater change and improve transition experiences further.

#### **4.2.5 Theme 9: Staff Knowledge, Skills and Confidence**

This theme describes the view that transition success can be facilitated or hindered by the knowledge, skills and confidence of Y1 staff. This theme was only strongly evident within staff groups; however, one parent/carer, Simon, did express a desire for more “*specialised teachers*” within mainstream schools to support the inclusion of pupils with SEND (see Appendix V).

Staff within all groups considered Y1 staff members’ knowledge and experience of early development and EYFS pedagogies key to supporting children as they transition to Y1, particularly those with SEND.

Martha (Reception teacher/EYFS lead): *“you need that child development knowledge still in Year 1, and Year 2. Particularly those SEND children, if they are developmentally 12, 18 months behind then you need to be looking at the Early Years curriculum and child development things”.*

Within School A, all members of Y1 staff had previous experience working in Reception, which staff felt had improved teaching quality. Anita compared her practice as a Y1 teacher prior to and following a period teaching in Reception.

*“In my previous years in Year 1, we haven't even had toys out it's been they've come to us from Reception and we have books for every single topic...it definitely helped being in EYFS for a few years and then coming back into Year 1 that I have that knowledge”.*

As alluded to in this quote, there appeared a view amongst participants that staff without EYFS experience lack understanding of the foundations of learning. As a result, it was implied their attempts to adopt child-led learning can be superficial and short-lived, as they do not understand the function of play as a pedagogy.

Tracey (Reception teacher): *"I think in previous years you've lost the commentary approach in Year 1 and like you say, it's just putting toys out for the sake of putting toys out".*

Rick (EYFS lead): *"I think you'll find that staff that have never taught in Early Years, they have that, it's very much a misconception isn't it really, that it's just playing".*

Staff also emphasised the importance of Y1 staff having the confidence to transfer their EYFS knowledge to Y1 for children to truly see the benefits. Use of words such as *"risk"* and *"frightened"* within the quotes below suggest some teachers continue to implement traditional Y1 pedagogies as they lack the confidence to enact change.

Ruth (Reception teacher/EYFS SENCO): *"in order to take it back a notch, they've [Y1 teachers] got to take a risk that potentially could land them into trouble. So they just sort of plough through and that's how Year 1 has been, you just plough through".*

Anita (Y1 teacher): *"It's being open to those changes as well. I know sometimes it is frightening change isn't it?"*

Some participants expressed the view that staff are not always given enough time to develop the required knowledge and confidence. Within School C, participants criticised the frequent movement of staff in and out of Y1, considering it to result in a lack of 'expertise' amongst Y1 staff.

Ruth (Reception teacher/EYFS SENCO): *"usually what they do is... everybody moves after a couple of years. The idea is that you have a breadth of knowledge. Well actually if you are an expert in Year 1, you shouldn't be moved, in my opinion".*



Ruth and her colleagues put forward the argument that if EYFS is seen as a “*specialist area*”, then the same attitude should be adopted for staff in Y1, to ensure they have the knowledge needed to support those children still working at the level of the EYFS curriculum, which can often include children with SEND.

Another factor which was considered important by school staff was Y1 teachers’ knowledge of strategies to support children with SEND. Staff gave the impression of feeling under trained in this area, impacting the quality of support they can offer children with SEND during the transition period.

Anita (Y1 teacher): *“I was thinking back to my teacher training, our SEN training was half a day...Out of our whole course half a day on SEN children. And then I’m expected to be able to work with all these different SEN types”.*

However, across all groups, staff expressed motivation to develop their knowledge and skills in the areas of early development and SEND. When describing how the transition could be improved for children with SEND, several participants referenced increased access to training opportunities.

Megan (KS1 lead/Y1 teacher): *“training and CPD for staff that don’t have an understanding of EYFS... and SEN needs as well... I think that’s always beneficial to have that and to sort of have some strategies that we can use in the classroom”.*

Liz (Reception teacher): *“if Year 1 staff have never worked in Early Years, it’s a completely different curriculum, massive, so maybe get the Year 1 staff trained in... the Development Matters and learning a little bit about continuous provision and how they can support that transition from Reception to Year 1”.*

The desire of staff members to seek professional development in these areas demonstrates the value they place on knowledge and confidence in enabling successful transitions.

#### **4.2.6 Research Question 2 Summary**

Five themes were generated for RQ2. Each theme relates to an environmental factor which school staff and/or parents/carers believe can facilitate and/or hinder successful transitions to Y1 for children with SEND. Participants suggested children with SEND benefit from consistency in relation to physical environments, relationships and teaching pedagogies during the transition to Y1. When consistency is lacking in these areas, children appear to find the transition more difficult. By maintaining consistency where possible, school staff can reduce the enormity of the change children face when they transition to Y1, before slowly adapting practice as children become settled. Participants also emphasised the importance of collaboration between teaching staff, parents/carers and school leaders to facilitate successful transitions. Finally, the knowledge and confidence of Y1 staff in relation to early development and SEND was considered key in enabling them to meet the diverse needs of children transitioning to Y1.

## **5. Discussion**

This chapter aims to explore the findings of the current research, in order to address the RQs. Each of the nine themes generated are discussed in relation to the associated RQ and relevant research and theory, as outlined within the literature review (Chapter 2). The methodological limitations of the research are considered, before potential implications of the findings for practice and future research are explored.

### **5.1 Research Question 1**

*What are school staff and parent/carer experiences and views of the transition to Y1 for children with SEND in mainstream schools, post COVID-19?*

In relation to RQ1, four themes were generated based upon the most salient patterns identified across the dataset: ‘the transition to Y1 is more difficult for children with SEND’; ‘a difficult time for parents/carers’; ‘transitions are better planned and managed for children with SEND’; and ‘the landscape is changing’.

### ***5.1.1 Theme 1- The Transition to Year 1 is More Difficult for Children with SEND***

This theme was present across all focus groups. The idea that particular groups of children find the transition to Y1 more challenging than others is reflected within existing literature, with some specific references made to children with SEND (Sanders et al., 2005). However, past research has provided little insight into why this may be. Within the current study, participants identified several reasons why challenges may be more significant for children with SEND, the most notable being greater difficulty adapting to the formal teaching approaches of Y1.

Participants described how some children with SEND demonstrate a preference for play-based learning and find it difficult to engage in adult-led activities requiring focused attention. This may be linked to their developmental abilities, as many children with SEND leave Reception without achieving the GLD standard (80.3%, GOV.UK, 2024b), suggesting they are not yet ready to move on from the child-led EYFS curriculum. This is consistent with past research, which suggests the transition to Y1 can be more challenging for children who do not achieve the expected standards at the end of Reception (Quick et al., 2002). The idea that variation in transition experiences can be attributed to differences in children’s ‘readiness’ for Y1 is consistent with an intrapersonal view of transitions. According to this interpretation, the key to improving transition experiences is developing children’s skills and knowledge, to better prepare them for formal learning. This view continues to dominate English literature and policy through the school readiness agenda (Kay, 2018).

However, participants described how some children with SEND struggle to adapt to formal learning despite being able to access the curriculum, suggesting differences in experiences cannot be attributed solely to academic ‘readiness’. For many children, the loss of choice and freedom in Y1 appeared to be a contributing factor. Whilst the flexibility of Reception allows children to learn in their own way, the

rigidity of Y1 can push them to learn in the same way as their peers. The impact of this change in pedagogy caused participants to question the inclusiveness of Y1 teaching approaches. Participants shared observations that children with SEND often ‘stand out’ more once play-based learning is removed/reduced, and attainment gaps between children with and without SEND grow. This contrasts with the government’s claim that the school readiness agenda acts to “*close the learning gap*” through the provision of high-quality ECE (Kay, 2022, p.172), instead suggesting that, by focusing primarily upon academic attainment, the agenda acts to further exclude children with SEND. Parents/carers described their children being removed from Y1 classrooms to access individualised provision, which reinforces Glazzard’s (2013) concern that children who do not meet standard expectations face segregation to complete interventions. One parent/carer also questioned whether mainstream school is appropriate for her son, as she felt uncertain his needs could be met within the structured KS1 environment. These anecdotes bring into question whether practice in Y1 classrooms is consistent with Gilhool’s (1989) definition of inclusion, which states children with SEND should be able to learn alongside their peers, with appropriate support and resources. These examples suggest transitions may be more difficult for children with SEND because Y1 provision is not set up to meet diverse needs, which is consistent with a bioecological view of transitions (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

The impact of wider school systems upon children’s transition experiences was also acknowledged by participants, especially parents/carers. Participants described how increased expectations to engage in extracurricular activities such as assemblies can place additional pressure upon children at an already challenging time. When considered from a bioecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), this demonstrates how different facets of the school system interact to impact upon children’s transition experiences.

As well as describing why the transition may be more challenging for children with SEND, participants provided insight into how children express these difficulties, and how they are recognised and understood by key adults across contexts. A clear discrepancy emerged between school staff and parent/carer views of children’s transition experiences. School staff shared generally positive recollections, particularly in Schools A and C, where improving the transition to Y1 had been a school development priority. However, this was not echoed by parents/carers, who

reported seeing a negative impact of the transition upon their children's wellbeing at home. Parents/carers used words such as 'masking' to describe how children can suppress their emotions in school, causing their feelings to manifest in unhealthy ways at home (e.g., disrupted eating and sleeping patterns, emotional dysregulation). Although the concept of masking is described in detail by online sources (e.g., National Autistic Society, 2024), it is yet to be recognised within SEND policy (e.g., SEND CoP, DfE & DoH, 2015). The possibility of children masking their feelings towards the transition was not considered by school staff, suggesting a lack of understanding regarding how children's experiences in one context can impact another (as outlined by the Bioecological Model, Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Unrealistic perceptions of transition success amongst school staff may reduce the level of transition support provided for individual children, which could exacerbate any difficulties they experience. This highlights a need for greater communication between school staff and parents/carers to develop a holistic understanding of each child's transition needs.

### **5.1.2 Theme 2- A Difficult Time for Parents/Carers**

The second theme generated from the dataset relates to the experiences of parents/carers of children with SEND during the transition to Y1. This theme was mainly evident in the responses of parents/carers and reflects existing research which suggests transitions are significant not only for CYP, but also for families (Dockett & Perry, 2004, Webb et al., 2017). Parents/carers frequently referenced the impact of their children's transitions upon their emotional wellbeing, using words such as "*panicking*" (Jessica) and "*stressed*" (Nina) to describe their mental states prior to and during the transition period. Several contributing factors were discussed, including lack of communication with school staff, limited access to information and support services, and the tendency to compare their children's progress to that of their peers. According to the Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), parental views and emotions directly impact children's own transition experiences, therefore understanding and supporting the wellbeing of parents/carers during this time is essential.

Parents/carers expressed a sense of anticipation in the lead up to their children transitioning to Y1. This appeared to stem from uncertainty regarding what

this change would look like, and what additional support their children would receive. The SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) directs schools to plan and prepare for phase transitions in collaboration with CYP and their parents, however, parent/carer responses indicate that such planning does not always occur. Past research also suggests information sharing and communication with parents/carers during the transition to Y1 can be lacking in comparison to previous transitions (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006), possibly due to the transition usually occurring within a single setting (White and Sharpe, 2007).

Comparison was also a source of anxiety for some parents/carers. Participants described how the formal approaches and increased expectations of Y1 caused them to reluctantly compare the progress of their children with that of their peers. This reflects how the school readiness agenda can disadvantage those children who do not develop in line with 'typical' trajectories (Lynch & Soni, 2021), by highlighting their difficulties, rather than celebrating their strengths.

School staff also recognised the transition period as a difficult time for parents/carers. Across groups, staff attributed increases in parental anxiety to COVID-19 lockdowns. This is consistent with post COVID-19 research, which suggests the pandemic caused increased stress, depression and anxiety for some parents/carers (Calvano et al., 2021). Parents/carers may also have felt anxiety in relation to their changing roles and responsibilities, as suggested by Webb et al. (2017). The transition to Y1 involves increased expectations for children and parents/carers with regards to homework and extracurricular activities. Claire described how difficult it was to "*let go*" of her son Charlie when he transitioned to Y1, suggesting she experienced difficulties adapting to her changing responsibilities. These findings reinforce Webb et al.'s (2017) recommendation that schools should offer increased support for parents/carers during transitions. This suggestion is also consistent with UNICEF's (2012) model of school readiness, which emphasises the role of 'ready families' (parental attitudes/involvement in transition processes) in facilitating successful transitions to formal schooling.

### ***5.1.3 Theme 3- Transitions are Better Planned and Managed for Children with SEND***

This theme frames the transition to Y1 for pupils with identified SEND more positively. Participants indicated that, in anticipation of the challenges to come, school staff often allocate additional time and resources to support children with SEND prior to, during and following the transition to Y1. For example, planning an extended transition period to allow children more time to build relationships with teachers and become familiar with new environments, and adapting classrooms to incorporate children's interests. Despite a lack of guidance regarding transition support in the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015), the support provided across some settings appeared fairly consistent, suggesting the approaches described were based upon shared knowledge of child development and/or SEN support. Both school staff and parents/carers recognised the benefits of this support for children with identified SEND.

However, across settings, the provision of additional support appeared contingent upon children's needs being identified and understood by school staff, disadvantaging those children with unidentified SEND. This issue was highlighted by Claire, who attributed her son's lack of transition support to delayed identification of need. Research has indicated that children currently in KS1 faced reduced access to health and social care professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic (Best Beginnings et al., 2021). Additionally, services such as SALT were unavailable for many and access to ECE settings was limited (Ofsted, 2021). These factors are likely to have reduced opportunities for early identification of SEND, meaning a higher proportion of SEND will not be identified until later in children's school careers. It is therefore important to look beyond the individualised support provided for children with identified SEND and consider how universal transition practices can be developed to meet the needs of all children.

Within several staff groups, participants reflected upon the idea that the transition support provided for children with SEND could benefit all children. This suggestion is supported by the overlap in environmental facilitators identified within the SLR and the current study (e.g., familiarisation with Y1 environments and staff prior to transition). Nicholson and Hendry's (2022) study also highlighted the potential dangers of assuming those children deemed 'ready' for Y1 require less

transition support, further highlighting the importance of effective universal transition practices.

Despite staff recognising the potential benefits of greater transition support for all children, and the evidence base supporting this, most additional support appeared restricted to children with identified SEND. This may be impacted by the fact transition is not listed as a mandatory area of consideration for schools in the current Ofsted inspection framework (2019), making it less of a priority for school development. Although this theme highlights good practice in relation to transition support for children with identified SEND, it raises important questions regarding equity, and how schools can ensure the needs of all children are met during this potentially challenging time.

#### **5.1.4 Theme 4- *The Landscape is Changing***

Across focus groups, participants conveyed a sense that the transition to Y1 is becoming more difficult for children with and without SEND. This theme was most evident in staff groups, possibly because staff can draw comparisons between cohorts. Participants attributed changes in transition experiences primarily to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 upon children's transition experiences can be understood by viewing transitions through a bioecological lens (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Participants described how the pandemic impacted children's microsystems, through reducing access to educational settings and impacting family dynamics. Participants also discussed wider effects occurring in children's macrosystems and exosystems, for example, the government's decision to enforce national lockdowns, and the impact of this upon access to health services.

The experiences described by parents/carers regarding missed appointments and delayed processes are consistent with post COVID-19 research (e.g. Best Beginnings et al., 2021, Ofsted, 2021). Although all COVID-19 restrictions were lifted by July 2021, the long-term impact of the pandemic upon children with SEND was evident in participant responses, with one parent/carer describing lockdowns as "*the beginning of our nightmare*" (Claire). Many children continue to face long waiting lists for specialist support and assessments (Centre for Young Lives, 2024, NHS England, 2025), therefore future cohorts are likely to face similar delays in



identification of need and early intervention. This may delay the provision of SEN support and the issuing of EHCPs for children with higher levels of need, reducing staff understanding of children's transition needs, and effecting the financial capacity of schools to provide specialised support.

Staff in School A and C described how they had adapted their practice to meet the changing needs of children. School C made specific reference to their response to COVID-19, explaining how they 'slimmed down' the NC to account for missed EYFS learning. Staff reported a positive impact upon transition experiences for all children, including those with SEND, and suggested the impact of the pandemic may be greater in settings where practice was not promptly adapted. In support of this, staff at School B, who recalled no significant changes in transition practices since the pandemic, reported clearer signs of "*the COVID generation*" moving through school (Rick, EYFS lead). The different experiences reported by staff in Schools B and C suggest the impact of COVID-19 upon transitions is mediated by the responsiveness and flexibility of school systems, in line with a bioecological view (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Although some schools had taken steps to adapt their practice, there was an acknowledgement across staff and parent/carer groups that more change is needed, as the needs of children are likely to continue changing overtime. This suggests the transition period could become increasingly difficult for children with SEND if schools are not open to change.

### **5.1.5 Overall Discussion of Themes for Research Question 1**

The first question the research sought to answer was "*What are school staff and parent/carer experiences and views of the transition to Y1 for children with SEND in mainstream schools, post COVID-19?*". Overall, findings suggest school staff and parents/carers view the transition as more challenging for children with SEND, compared to those without SEND, as suggested by previous research (Sanders et al., 2005). The transition period was also recognised as a lonely and uncertain time for parents/carers, a subject largely missing from the current evidence base. However, there was a clear theme that transitions are often better planned and managed for children with identified SEND, which can positively impact their experiences.

There was some acknowledgement that children's developmental abilities may contribute towards the difficulties they experience when faced with a formal Y1 curriculum, which is the basis of the school readiness agenda (Kay, 2018). However, participants considered children's transition experiences to be largely shaped by the systems around them, and the capacity of these systems to meet their individual needs, which is consistent with a bioecological view (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Participants identified a range of factors existing within children's microsystems (environments they interact with directly) which may influence transition experiences. For example, discontinuity between Reception and Y1 environments and pedagogies, and heightened parental anxiety regarding the transition. There was also an acknowledgement of how children's experiences can be influenced by their mesosystem (interrelations between the microsystems). Parents/carers suggested the difficulties children face during the transition often exceed school staffs' perceptions, due to children suppressing their emotions in school. Where school staff have an unrealistic perception of transition success, this is likely to directly impact the support they provide. Communication between home and school systems is therefore essential to gain an accurate understanding of children's transition experiences. Participants also considered how transition experiences are shaped by wider factors existing in children's exosystems (events which have indirect influence upon development), for example, COVID-19. Participants described significant changes in transition experiences following the pandemic due to a range of factors, including reduced access to health services. Finally, participants considered how the pandemic and other societal factors may continue to impact transition experiences over time, demonstrating the influence of the chronosystem (time).

Participants provided a deep insight into their experiences and views of the transition to Y1 for children with SEND in mainstream schools. Their views were diverse, reflecting variation in transition experiences between settings and individual children, however, clear patterns were identified across the dataset. The next RQ continues to draw upon a bioecological viewpoint, focusing on the practical steps schools can take to improve transition experiences for children with SEND by considering environmental facilitators and barriers.

## 5.2 Research Question 2

*What do school staff and parents/carers perceive as the key environmental factors in facilitating/hindering a successful transition to Y1 for children with SEND?*

For RQ2 five themes were generated, each relating to a different aspect of a child's environment which can act to facilitate and/or hinder a successful transition to Y1. These themes were: 'the physical environment'; 'consistency of relationships'; 'strong collaboration'; 'flexibility of curriculum delivery'; and 'staff knowledge, skills and confidence'.

### **5.2.1 Theme 5- The Physical Environment**

School staff and parents/carers considered the physical environment key in either facilitating or hindering successful transitions to Y1 for children with SEND. Adapting Y1 classrooms to mirror an EYFS environment appeared to positively impact transition experiences, for two key reasons. Firstly, by promoting continuity between Reception and Y1. During transitions, children are removed from a familiar environment and placed into a new environment, with different routines and expectations (Harper, 2016). For some children, this can cause anxiety, discomfort, confusion and exhaustion (Fabian, 2007). Participants explained how many children with SEND find changes to their routine especially difficult, which may increase the intensity of these feelings. Although some aspect of change is inevitable, researchers suggest that to promote positive transitions, schools should identify ways to balance change with continuity (Dockett & Einarsdóttir, 2017). Staff within School A did so by redesigning Y1 classrooms to reflect a Reception environment. Both staff and parents/carers reported a positive impact upon children's emotional responses to the transition and engagement in learning. This is consistent with the wider evidence base, which has found continuity to be key in facilitating successful transitions (e.g., Nicholson & Hendry, 2022).

Secondly, adapting the environment to mirror an EYFS classroom allows the incorporation of more diverse spaces, to better meet children's individual needs. Participants described how Reception classrooms often include sensory resources/areas, allowing children to regulate without being removed from the

classroom. One parent/carer recommended incorporating such spaces within Y1 classrooms to support inclusion. Additionally, including resources for child-led learning within Y1 classrooms allows children with a preference for play-based learning to continue to develop in a way which suits their individual strengths. These adaptations may support children with SEND to learn alongside their peers, in line with Gilhools (1989) definition of inclusion. Where Y1 classrooms remained 'traditional', including mainly desks and chairs, this was seen to hinder successful transitions. Participants suggested such environments can be unappealing and potentially distressing for children. Past research also suggests environmental changes, such as reduced access to outdoor spaces, can negatively impact children's experiences of the transition to Y1 (Fisher, 2009).

Although the benefit of continuity between Reception and Y1 environments was recognised across all staff groups, not all had taken steps to adapt the Y1 environment, suggesting the presence of barriers. Practical limitations were referenced by staff in School C, who described their Y1 classrooms as small, and not compatible with child-led learning. It is also possible that pressure to deliver the NC prevents school staff from moving away from a traditional classroom format. Within the SLR, teachers across multiple studies described how the academic focus of the NC caused them to adapt Y1 classrooms to facilitate formal learning (Fisher, 2009, Nicholson, 2019). Due to these barriers, it may not currently be possible for all schools to adapt their Y1 classrooms to mirror EYFS environments, therefore a more creative approach to achieving environmental continuity may be required. An example was provided in Nicholson and Hendry's (2022) study, where participants suggested sharing the EYFS environment with Y1 may provide a more practical way to promote continuity.

### ***5.2.2 Theme 6- Consistency of Relationships***

Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Bioecological Model emphasises the importance of processes (interactions between children and people within their ecological systems) in shaping development. Participants within the study described how children with SEND can form incredibly strong bonds with members of staff and considered consistent relationships key for successful transitions. A method of promoting consistency referenced across most groups was staff members (teachers

or TAs) transitioning from Reception to Y1 alongside children. Schools A and B identified this as a key focus within transition planning. Parents/carers praised this practice, describing how the presence of familiar adults increased children's feelings of safety in Y1. This is consistent with the wider evidence base, which suggests children require familiarity to feel confident and safe in new environments (Nicholson, 2019). Parents/carers also described feeling reassured knowing their children had a familiar adult to support them in difficult moments. This is important given the issues discussed in Theme 2 ('a difficult time for parents/carers'). However, the benefits of staff transitioning to Y1 alongside children were not discussed within SLR studies. This may be because some schools do not consider it a viable option, for example, if they wish for EYFS trained staff to remain in Reception.

When Y1 staff are unfamiliar, participants emphasised the importance of children with SEND having additional opportunities to build relationships prior to transitioning. Past research suggests children's feelings towards transition are influenced by their perceptions of Y1 staff (Bulkely & Fabian, 2006). It is therefore important to ensure children form positive perceptions of Y1 teachers before leaving Reception. In School A, staff gradually introduced children to their new teachers, showing them pictures and organising times for Y1 staff to visit Reception. These small, frequent opportunities to build relationships appeared more effective than single transition days, which is the standard practice across many schools (e.g., Schools B and D).

Where relationship building was not prioritised, this appeared to hinder successful transitions. For example, Helen (parent/carer) explained how, one term into the academic year, her son continued to have difficulty entering the Y1 classroom. She questioned whether a lack of opportunity to form a relationship with his Y1 teacher prior to transition may have contributed towards this. Staff in Schools B and C identified relationship building prior to transition as a key area for development, but acknowledged barriers to this, including the movement of staff between year groups. This appeared particularly detrimental when staff moved from KS2 to Y1, as timetabling clashes and physical distance made it difficult for staff to visit Reception. Bulkeley and Fabian's (2006) research offers an alternative way to support relationship building which could overcome this barrier. Parents within the study praised school staff for ensuring children were familiar with adults throughout the school. Creating opportunities for staff to work with children across different year

groups could reduce the pressure for teachers to build relationships with children through transition days alone.

### **5.2.3 Theme 7- Strong Collaboration**

Participants across all groups considered strong collaboration between stakeholders a key factor in successful transitions. When naming this theme, the term ‘collaboration’ was chosen over ‘communication’, as it captures the importance of all stakeholders engaging actively in knowledge production (Jackson, 2010). Participants spoke about the importance of collaboration on three levels: between school staff and parents/carers; between Reception and Y1 staff; and between teaching staff and school leaders.

Views regarding the importance of collaboration between school staff and parents/carers, and the nature of what this might look like, appeared to differ between the sub-populations. School staff recognised the importance of sharing information with parents/carers prior to and during the transition period to reduce feelings of uncertainty. This is important given the issues raised within Theme 2 (‘a difficult time for parents/carers’). Staff across multiple settings saw communication with parents/carers as a strength, and described ways in which information sharing was facilitated, for example through group presentations or individual meetings. However, past research suggests communication with parents/carers during the transition to Y1 is minimal compared to previous transitions (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006). Additionally, parents/carers in the current study reported feelings of uncertainty and loneliness during their children’s transitions, suggesting information sharing alone is not enough to support families during this time. Information sharing fits more with the definition of communication, as it positions parents/carers as passive receivers of information (Jackson, 2010). It also fails to fulfil the transition requirements set out in the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015), which emphasises the importance of collaborative transition planning.

The need for greater collaboration between parents/carers and school staff was emphasised by parents/carers, who highlighted the value of parent-teacher meetings prior to or immediately after transition to develop a holistic view of each child’s transition needs. In cases where collaboration occurred, it was seen to positively impact transition experiences. However, parents/carers across both groups

voiced their desire for increased collaboration. For example, Claire described how she felt her views were not heard or valued by school staff when her son first transitioned to Y1, causing his needs to be misunderstood. The Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) highlights the importance of stakeholders from the different systems around children collaborating to support their development. Where schools do not prioritise collaboration with parents/carers, this may reduce staff members' understanding of children's needs, therefore decreasing the effectiveness of transition support. It may also contribute to parental anxieties, which could further impact children's transition experiences.

Participants also discussed the importance of information sharing between Reception and Y1 staff to enable successful transitions. School staff emphasised the importance of sharing information such as children's interests, family backgrounds and effective support strategies to ensure Y1 staff are prepared to meet children's needs. Common methods of communication included meetings and written documents. In schools where information sharing procedures were well established, staff perceived a positive impact upon transition experiences, which reflects the findings of past research (e.g., Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006). In School A, staff also highlighted the value of collaborative planning between Reception and Y1 teachers to develop a Y1 curriculum suited to the strengths and needs of the cohort. Similarly, within past research, teachers described the benefits of joint planning between Reception and Y1 teachers for the first weeks of Y1 to promote continuity (Fisher, 2009).

On the other hand, past research has demonstrated that a lack of collaboration between Reception and Y1 staff can have a detrimental impact upon transition experiences (Nicholson & Hendry, 2022). In School B, a Y1 TA, Heidi, stated she did not receive sufficient information regarding children's strengths and needs prior to transition, which she perceived as a hindering factor. The school's EYFS lead, Rick, reflected upon the potentially detrimental impact of this for children with communication and interaction difficulties, who are reliant upon support from attuned and responsive adults who know them well. Although the need for greater collaboration between stakeholders was recognised by Rick, he identified time and staff capacity as key barriers to the development of more effective communication streams. The differences in practice across settings may reflect variation in how school leaders prioritise transition processes and staff collaboration. This leads to the

final level of collaboration discussed by participants, that between teaching staff and school leaders.

The extent to which teaching staff were able to develop inclusive transition practices appeared contingent upon the level of support given by school leaders. Staff in Schools A and C praised senior leaders for trusting their judgement, allowing them the flexibility to make changes which benefitted the transition experiences of children with SEND. This aligns with past research, which suggests senior leaders' openness to change directly impacts the flexibility exhibited by teachers (Fisher, 2009, Nicholson & Hendry, 2022). However, where senior leaders maintained rigid expectations, this seemed to restrict the power of teaching staff to adapt their practice. Staff in School B described how the expectations of senior leaders remained unchanged over time, despite staff reporting significant changes in the needs of pupils. It seemed teaching staff were not afforded the same autonomy as staff across other settings, and expectations were imposed upon them by senior leaders without engagement in collaborative discussions. This lack of collaboration is likely to limit the ability of teachers to develop more inclusive transition practices. The EYFS lead within School B referred to expectations being passed down through various levels of leadership, which may relate to the school being part of a MAT. Blanket expectations enforced across MAT schools by executive leadership may contribute towards the lack of autonomy afforded to teaching staff. Similar themes were discussed in Nicholson and Hendry's (2022) study, with teaching staff and a senior leader describing how the implementation of MAT wide initiatives and expectations limited the ability of class teachers to adapt their daily practice. However, School C is also part of a MAT and did not report the same levels of rigidity. This suggests the attitudes and openness of school leaders towards collaboration and change are likely to be influenced by a wider range of factors.

#### ***5.2.4 Theme 8- Flexibility of Curriculum Delivery***

Participants described how a flexible and creative approach to Y1 curriculum delivery can facilitate positive transitions to Y1 for children with SEND. Participants defined a flexible approach as one which merged the pedagogies typically implemented in Reception and Y1, creating a blended style of teaching. Past research has demonstrated how the sudden jump from play-based to formalised



learning can be challenging for all children (Nicholson, 2019), and participants in the current study suggested it can be especially difficult for children with SEND, due to developmental delays and preferences for self-directed learning. School A had recently adapted their delivery of the Y1 curriculum, to replicate the mixture of child-led and adult-directed learning implemented in Reception. Parents/carers and school staff reported positive effects upon children's emotional responses to the transition and engagement in learning. This approach aligns with Burke and Burke's (2005) definition of a 'ready curriculum', which recommends the implementation of inquiry-based learning to support transitions to formal schooling.

The steps taken by School A are also in line with the National Assessment Agency's (2005) recommendation that schools incorporate features of EYFS practice within Y1 to increase continuity. However, despite these recommendations having been made 20 years ago, both the current study and the wider evidence base suggest many schools are yet to embrace this form of teaching. There was a sense amongst some participants that although difficult for many children, changes which occur during the transition to Y1 are inevitable, and therefore children must adapt. School B's EYFS lead, Rick, described how staff had previously attempted to embed child-led learning in Y1, with "*mixed results*". Consequently, they opted to formalise Reception, which reportedly supported a smooth transition to Y1 for some children by allowing them more time to adapt to formal teaching approaches. However, the impact upon children with SEND was not discussed. Given that most participants considered play-based learning to align more with the preferred learning styles of many children with SEND, it can be inferred that formalising Reception may have a detrimental impact for some children. This approach aligns more with an intrapersonal view of transition, placing the responsibility to be 'ready' for Y1 upon children. Unlike staff in Schools A and C, Rick seemed uncertain regarding the value of play-based learning during the transition to Y1. This suggests the impact of play upon transition experiences is mediated by other factors, such as staff knowledge of EYFS pedagogies (see Theme 9) and collaboration between stakeholders (see Theme 7).

The traditional approach to Y1 maintained in School B reflects trends seen within the wider evidence base, suggesting the dichotomy between the teaching approaches of Reception and Y1 remains as significant as ever (Fisher, 2022). Past research suggests although Y1 teachers would like to adopt a flexible approach to

curriculum delivery, opportunities are restricted by time pressures, lack of support from leadership, and the prescriptive nature of the NC (Fisher, 2009/2022, Nicholson, 2019). The current study supports these findings; in School B, rigid expectations from school and MAT leaders appeared to prevent teachers from adopting a more flexible approach, whilst staff in School C identified the content of the NC as a key barrier to increased flexibility. Given the presence of these barriers, school staff must find ways to deliver a developmentally appropriate and inclusive curriculum whilst also meeting standard objectives. School A provided a good example of this, describing how play-based learning can act as a bridge to support children during the transition to Y1, before being slowly reduced to allow more time for formal teaching. Y1 staff found after mirroring Reception pedagogies for one half term, children with SEND appeared settled in their new environment, and were able to engage in the adult-directed activities staff were slowly introducing.

Although School A identified creative ways to increase curriculum flexibility, there is only so much school staff can do without wider educational reform. Some school staff and parents/carers expressed a desire for Y1 to be reclassified as part of the EYFS, to allow greater alignment of pedagogies and reduce the academic demands placed upon children. As recognised in Theme 4 ('the changing landscape'), the needs of children are likely to vary from cohort to cohort. It is therefore important school staff have the flexibility to respond to the needs of individual children and adapt their practice accordingly, to promote positive transitions and long-term outcomes.

### ***5.2.5 Theme 9- Staff Knowledge, Skills and Confidence***

This theme was evident predominantly in staff groups and therefore reflects school staffs' own perceptions of their knowledge, skills and confidence, rather than the perceptions of parents/carers. Two areas of staff knowledge and understanding were considered instrumental in determining transition success: knowledge of early childhood development and the EYFS curriculum; and knowledge of SEND and SEN support strategies.

Knowledge of early development was considered crucial in enabling Y1 staff to support the progress of children working below age-related expectations, including many children with SEND (as evidenced by national data, GOV.UK, 2024b). Across

schools, Y1 teachers' knowledge and experience of EYFS education varied. In School A, all members of current Y1 staff had previously worked in Reception, whilst in School C, one teacher was new to Y1, having previously taught in KS2. Across groups, staff suggested teachers with no EYFS experience can lack an appreciation and understanding of EYFS pedagogies, causing them to use approaches such as play-based learning superficially. This reflects the findings of past research; for example, in Nicholson & Hendry's (2022) study, a lack of understanding of EYFS pedagogies amongst Y1 staff and school leaders was seen as a key barrier to the successful implementation of play-based approaches in Y1. The current research suggests the presence of child-led learning increases the inclusiveness of the Y1 environment; therefore, it is essential Y1 staff are equipped to use these approaches effectively.

Knowledge of early development alone may not be enough to enact change; staff also require the confidence to apply their knowledge. Across groups, participants described how adopting elements of EYFS practice could be a risk for Y1 teachers, who are under pressure to achieve standard objectives (see Theme 8). Previous research also suggests some Y1 teachers doubt their abilities to facilitate learning via play, causing them to shy away from implementing play-based approaches (Nicholson & Hendry, 2022). Staff confidence is likely to be influenced by a range of factors, including experience and support from senior leaders. Staff from School C suggested Y1 staff are often not provided sufficient opportunity to develop their knowledge and confidence, as they frequently move between year groups, spending only one to two years in Y1. They explained how this practice is rarely seen in the EYFS, as this is considered a specialist area, and argued the staffing of Y1 should be afforded the same consideration. Developing an experienced and confident Y1 staff team could support the meaningful implementation of EYFS pedagogies to promote inclusive practice and increase continuity. One way to achieve this may be for staff from Reception to transition to Y1 alongside children, as seen in School A. This would provide consistent relationships, whilst also ensuring staff have adequate knowledge and experience of early development and EYFS pedagogies.

Staff members' understanding of SEND and confidence in their abilities to provide appropriate support was also discussed by participants. A lack of training was identified by staff in School A, who recalled only half a day of their initial teacher

training programme dedicated to developing understanding of SEND. In 2010 and 2019, Williams-Brown and Hodkinson (2021) explored mainstream primary school teachers' views of inclusive practice in England. At both timepoints, staff reported a lack of training in this area, suggesting this issue has endured over time. As discussed in Theme 4 ('the landscape is changing'), the needs of children are evolving over time, but it is unclear whether training programmes are responding to these changes. Without the necessary knowledge and skills, teachers may not be able to provide the support required by children with SEND during the transition to Y1.

Across focus groups, school staff expressed a desire for further opportunities to develop their knowledge of early development and SEND. This suggests the lack of knowledge and confidence perceived by some participants stems from a lack of opportunity to access training and development, not a lack of personal motivation to change. It is therefore essential schools and LAs consider how to better prepare school staff to meet the needs of all children during the transition to Y1 and beyond.

### **5.2.6 Overall Discussion of Themes for Research Question 2**

The second question the research sought to answer was "*What do school staff and parents/carers perceive as the key environmental factors in facilitating/hindering a successful transition to Y1 for children with SEND?*". This question stems from a bioecological view of transitions (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), as it attempts to move away from an intrapersonal viewpoint, instead considering how the systems around children impact their transition experiences, to inform future practice.

The themes generated in relation to RQ2 are largely reflective of those identified within the wider evidence base. This suggests by incorporating the facilitating factors identified by participants within their broader transition policies, schools can promote positive transitions for all children. This is especially important given the potentially increasing number of children with unidentified SEND moving into KS1.

Many of the themes generated relate to the importance of consistency and continuity between aspects of Reception and Y1, including relationships, pedagogies and physical environments. Continuity is considered a staple of successful

transitions across the wider evidence base (Docket & Einarsdóttir, 2017, Ballam et al., 2017). However, transitions are also characterised by change, which is an essential element of child development (Docket & Einarsdóttir, 2017). Therefore, schools should not aim to eliminate change, but rather to balance it with continuity, to support children to feel safe as they transition to their new environment. Participants indicated that change can be particularly difficult to manage for children with SEND, therefore providing elements of continuity is even more essential for these children. By promoting consistency of relationships, physical environments and pedagogical approaches, staff can support children to manage changes beyond their independent capacity, in line with Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD (Peters, 2004).

Another pattern identified across themes relates to the limitations imposed by wider educational policies. Many of the hindering factors school staff referenced can be linked to issues with wider policies. For example, some staff felt unable to adopt a flexible approach to Y1 due to pressures placed upon them by school leaders to meet standard objectives. The high expectations of school leaders likely result from the pressure placed upon them by LA leaders and Ofsted, who are responsible for ensuring schools meet the expectations set out by the DfE. Additionally, staffs' lack of knowledge and confidence regarding how to support children with SEND may stem from a lack of investment in SEN support within initial teacher training and continuing professional development (CPD) materials. School staff hold positions of great power in children's lives, and it is essential they do all they can to provide the optimum environmental conditions to enable successful transitions. However, it is important to acknowledge that teachers work within a rigid and dated system, which must also evolve to allow schools to meet the changing needs of all children, including those with SEND.

### **5.3 Reflexive Consideration of Methodological Limitations**

This section aims to evaluate the methodological limitations of the study. The researcher's role in shaping research outcomes is also considered.

### **5.3.1 Participants**

There is no clear guidance regarding the optimum number of focus groups for RTA research. Guest et al. (2017) recommend facilitating three to six focus groups to achieve 90% data saturation within a homogenous sample. The researcher aimed to recruit three focus groups per sub-population (totalling six). Due to recruitment difficulties, it was only possible to recruit two parent/carers groups. Although this is lower than Guest et al.'s (2017) recommendation, the researcher felt the data obtained was sufficiently rich. This is consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2021) criteria for determining sample size, which refers to data richness, rather than saturation. The imbalance between the number of participants from each sub-population did however present some concerns. As RTA focuses on the most salient patterns across the dataset, the imbalance could skew the research findings to favour the views of school staff. However, the researcher ensured the voices of parents/carers were given equal attention during data analysis and write up. It was also made explicit where views were expressed more strongly by one sub-population, to avoid generalisation across the groups (see Appendix V).

Another potential limitation of the sample was the inclusion of parents/carers of children in Y1 and Y2. This decision was made to increase the likelihood of parent/carers recruitment. However, the views of parents/carers of Y2 children may have been influenced by later experiences (e.g., the transition to Y2) or forgetting. On the other hand, it allowed the comparison of experiences over time, increasing data richness.

With regards to the transferability of the findings, the overall sample size of the research was small (n=22). The research was also conducted across four primary schools within the same West Midlands LA. It is therefore unclear whether similar themes would be identified in different contexts. However, the aim of RTA research is not to generalise, and Braun and Clarke (2022) advise researchers avoid considering a lack of generalisability a limitation of their findings. As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022), the researcher provided as much contextual detail as possible (without risking the identification of participants/settings), to enable readers to evaluate the relevance of the findings to alternative contexts and/or populations.

### **5.3.2 Data Collection**

Focus groups were selected as an appropriate method of data collection for multiple reasons, as discussed in Chapter 3 (3.2.5). However, there are several limitations associated with this method which must be explored. Firstly, group dynamics were likely to impact the views shared by participants. Breen (2006) warns about the presence of dominant voices within groups, who may pressure others to agree with their views. Headteachers were excluded from staff groups to reduce the possibility of power imbalances, however, members of senior leadership were still present (EYFS and KS1 leads). This may have reduced the willingness of some participants to share negative views. When reviewing the transcript for staff group B, the researcher noticed TAs contributed significantly less to discussion compared to class teachers and the EYFS lead. The TAs may have felt uncomfortable expressing views in front of more senior members of staff.

Staff group B was also the largest group, with eight members. The researcher chose not to limit group sizes to provide all eligible participants the opportunity to participate. In retrospect, this group may have been too large. Willig (2008) recommends including no more than six participants in a focus group to encourage active participation. Reducing the size of the group to six may have helped participants feel more comfortable and allowed sufficient time for all to share their views. However, setting this limit would have meant the exclusion of two participants from the study. If the attendance of teaching staff and senior leaders was prioritised, this would remove any opportunity for members of support staff to express their views. Staff groups A and C included no support staff, therefore having a contribution from TAs in staff group B, however small, was extremely valuable.

It is important to consider how the issues arising from the use of focus groups could be addressed using alternative methods. Participants may have felt more comfortable expressing their views via semi-structured interviews, which would remove the impact of group dynamics. Semi-structured interviews may also have broadened the potential sample, by enabling the participation of individuals who speak English as an additional language through use of interpreters. Alternatively, the use of an action research methodology, such as appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), may have empowered participants to facilitate change, increasing the impact of the research for participating settings. However, the

researcher feels focus groups created space for collaborative discussion with the potential to drive change within settings, whilst also providing a supportive environment for participants to share their views.

### **5.3.3 Data Analysis**

RTA was selected as the most appropriate methodology to address the RQs (see Chapter 3, 3.2.3), however, there are limitations to the approach to consider. RTA focuses on patterns of meaning identified across the dataset. Focus is therefore removed from individual experiences and viewpoints, which could also provide rich insights and lead to meaningful discussions. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis allows the exploration of individual experiences, as well as the identification of patterns across participants. However, this approach would be unsuitable for the current research due to its heterogenous sample (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

The researchers relative lack of experience with RTA may also have impacted the quality of data analysis. However, the researcher took steps to develop their knowledge of the approach prior to and during analysis, referring to the guidelines set out by Braun and Clarke (2006/2022), including their '15 Point Checklist for Good TA' (2006). Additional limitations relating to analysis are discussed in section 5.3.4.

### **5.3.4 Retrospective Researcher Reflexivity**

Researcher reflexivity is a central element of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The researcher's values, beliefs and experiences impact every stage of the research process, from planning to data collection and analysis. Reflexive engagement is therefore essential for high quality RTA which produces trustworthy findings (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The comments below were written following the completion of the research and should be considered alongside the journal entries written throughout the research process (see Appendix W).

The researcher influenced data collection through the creation of the focus group schedule, and via their role as focus group facilitator. The researcher strived to take a neutral stance within focus groups, not sharing their opinions with participants. However, it is possible that non-verbal cues made their views apparent to participants at times. This could have encouraged a social desirability bias, whereby



participants provided further responses they believed to be in line with the researchers own views. The researcher's role as a TEP may have further increased the impact of social desirability bias, as participants may have had preconceptions regarding their potential views, based upon their previous experiences working alongside TEPs/EPs.

The researcher's role as a TEP may have also contributed towards possible power imbalances during focus groups. The researcher took steps to avoid this, arranging seating in a circle to promote collaboration, and positioning participants as the 'experts' in the topic at hand. However, research suggests stakeholders often view EPs as experts, despite the efforts of many EPs to avoid this perception (Ashton & Roberts, 2006). Additionally, some staff within Schools A and B had pre-existing professional relationships with the researcher, through their work as a TEP and primary school teacher. Familiarity with the researcher may have increased participants' openness and honesty by making them feel more comfortable. However, it could also have increased the impact of power imbalances, by reinforcing participant's perceptions of the researcher as an 'expert'. The researcher emphasised their presence in the focus groups as a researcher, rather than a practicing TEP, however it is not clear how significantly this will have altered participant perceptions.

The researcher's views, beliefs and experiences will have significantly impacted the data analysis process, as codes and themes do not emerge from the dataset, rather they are actively generated by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher adopted an inductive approach to analysis, attempting to avoid imposing pre-existing theories upon the themes generated. However, Braun and Clarke (2022) claim it is not possible for a researcher to complete a purely inductive RTA, as their interpretation of the data will always be influenced by their own experiences and views. As outlined in Chapter 1 (1.3) the researcher spent four years teaching in Reception and Y1 in an English mainstream primary school, gaining relevant experiences and developing their own opinions towards the research topic. These views have continued to develop during their time as a TEP, working in a range of primary schools. They also immersed themselves in relevant research whilst completing the literature review (Chapter 2), increasing their awareness of themes already identified within the evidence base. The researcher's knowledge and experience of the research area likely influenced analysis by

reducing their ability to adopt a primarily inductive approach. However, it is hoped that by maintaining transparency throughout the research process, the researcher preserved the trustworthiness of the research.

## **5.4 Implications**

This section aims to explore the potential implications of the research findings for practice and future research, in line with Yardley's (2008) fourth trustworthiness criteria, 'impact and importance'.

### ***5.4.1 Implications for Schools***

The current research has multiple implications at a school level. Firstly, it provides insight into the experiences of children with SEND during the transition to Y1 from multiple perspectives, which is largely missing from the current evidence base. By understanding the experiences of these children, schools can act to better support them. Secondly, participating settings provided examples of good practice which schools can draw upon to facilitate more successful transitions to Y1 for children with SEND. Examples include extending transition periods to allow additional opportunities for familiarisation with new staff and environments and identifying opportunities for Reception staff to transition to Y1 alongside children, to promote consistent relationships and broaden staff skills. Many of the facilitators discussed reflected those identified within the wider evidence base (e.g., Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006, Fisher, 2009, Nicholson, 2019, Nicholson & Hendry, 2022). This suggests that by incorporating these factors within their broader transition policies, schools can develop inclusive transition practices which benefit all children.

Furthermore, in line with a bioecological framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the findings demonstrate how different systems around children interact to impact their transition experiences, emphasising the importance of collaboration between stakeholders prior to and during transitions. Facilitating parent-teacher meetings before the transition could help Y1 staff develop a holistic view of children's individual needs, allowing them to pro-actively identify appropriate support. The findings also provide an insight into the emotional impact of the transition upon some parents/carers. UNICEF's (2012) definition of ready schools emphasises the role of

'ready families' in enabling successful transitions. By facilitating more parent-teacher meetings, school staff could help parents/carers feel prepared for the changes to come, enabling them to provide effective support to their children.

Additionally, the research highlighted several barriers which may be preventing schools from making necessary or desired changes to transition practice. By drawing attention to these barriers, the findings could empower schools to begin removing/overcoming them, enabling greater change. Implementing EYFS pedagogies within Y1 appears to benefit the emotional regulation and engagement of children with SEND following transition, and the practice has been recommended for many years by government bodies (e.g., National Assessment Agency, 2005). However, a lack of knowledge and confidence amongst Y1 staff has hindered the implementation of these approaches, in both the current study and past research (e.g., Nicholson & Hendry, 2022). To enable staff to adopt a more flexible approach to curriculum delivery, it may be beneficial to prioritise the development of a Y1 staff team with knowledge and experience of early development and EYFS pedagogies. This could be achieved by Reception staff transitioning to Y1 alongside children, or through providing additional CPD opportunities. It may be valuable for all KS1 and KS2 staff to access such training, to support their understanding of the approaches implemented in EYFS and Y1, and ensure they are prepared to teach in Y1 in the future. Current and past research also suggests primary school staff feel undertrained and lack confidence in their abilities to support children with SEND (Williams-Brown & Hodkinson, 2021). Increased CPD in this area may help staff provide more effective individualised transition support.

Finally, the research highlights the need for flexibility in schools' transition policies and practices. Participants described significant changes in the needs of children and their families following the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting the issues raised within the wider evidence base (e.g., Best Beginnings et al., 2021, Calvano et al., 2021). Participants predicted the effects of this event will continue to impact the transition experiences of future cohorts. It is therefore essential schools are adaptable and open to change, to enable them to meet the needs of all children when they transition to Y1.

### **5.4.2 Implications for Educational Psychologists**

The research findings have many potential implications for EP practice, varying from individual casework to systemic work. EPs continue to support the inclusion of individual children through casework (Lambert & Frederickson, 2015). The current research highlights a range of factors which can impact transition success for children with SEND. This could support EPs to recognise hindering factors which might be contributing towards a negative transition experience or help them to identify possible facilitating factors when planning transition support. EPs also possess knowledge of psychological theory, such as the Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This research demonstrates that the transition to Y1 is a complex process, influenced by factors existing in the various systems around children. EPs have an important role in sharing their psychological knowledge with schools, to help them develop a holistic understanding of children's individual needs and the support they require.

EPs are increasingly becoming involved in systemic work in schools (DfE, 2023b), for example supporting schools to develop their curriculums, cultures and systems to promote inclusion (Lambert & Frederickson, 2015). Successful transitions are central to inclusive practice (Chadwick & Kemp, 2002). EPs could draw upon the themes generated by the current research to support schools to develop inclusive transition policies and processes, making use of their unique skillset. EPs are experienced in facilitating consultations and problem-solving processes (e.g., Process Consultation, West & Idol, 1987). Consultations could be used to identify actions, overcome barriers and support collaborative decision making, whilst also providing emotional containment for those present. EPs can also draw upon their psychological knowledge during consultations, to develop staff understanding of key theories and ensure decisions remain evidence-based (West & Idol, 1987). Alternatively, where more significant changes to policies or procedures are required, or where systems are less flexible (as seen in the case of School B), EPs could utilise organisational change tools (e.g., Force Field Analysis, Lewin, 1951) to bring together teaching staff and senior leaders, promoting collaboration and supporting change.

The findings may also support EPs to make evidence-based contributions towards transition policies at the LA or government level. As outlined within the

literature review, there is a lack of guidance regarding how schools should support the transition to Y1 for children with and without SEND. EPs have a role in policy development (Frederickson & Miller, 2008), and psychological research is often drawn upon by other professionals when developing policies (Hill, 2013). EPs can also advocate for the consideration of stakeholder views within policy development, as gaining the views of stakeholders is a key element of the EP role (HCPC, 2016/2023, BPS, 2017/2021).

### **5.4.3 Local Authority and Government Implications**

It is hoped the research findings will provide LAs and the wider government with insight into the experiences of children with SEND and their families during the transition to Y1, so they can gain a deeper understanding of the support needed. There is currently no requirement for schools to report the measures taken to support CYP and families during transitions (Ofsted, 2019). The SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) also provides little guidance regarding the specific measures which should be taken to support children with SEND during these times. Variation in transition processes across the participating settings suggests clearer policies and procedures would be valuable to schools, and ensure all children had access to the same level of transition support regardless of which school they attend. Schools may also benefit from clearer guidelines regarding the implementation of play-based pedagogies within Y1, as the presence of such approaches varied across settings within the current study, despite research suggesting it supports successful transitions (e.g., Fisher, 2009, Nicholson, 2019).

Across focus groups, participants identified the NC as a barrier to improving transition practices. Teaching staff felt pressure to deliver the content of the NC, impacting their ability and confidence to adopt a more flexible and inclusive approach to curriculum delivery. These feelings are echoed across the wider evidence base (e.g., Nicholson & Hendry, 2022). Parents/carers and school staff alike expressed a desire for Y1 to become part of the EYFS, to promote continuity and increase access to child-led learning in Y1. In a 2004 report, Ofsted described the transition to more formal learning for English pupils as “*abrupt*” (p.2). However, over 20 years on, it seems little has changed. The NC was last reviewed in 2013; since then, significant events such as the COVID-19 pandemic have greatly impacted children’s

development and access to services. For schools to appropriately adapt Y1 provision and meet the changing needs of children, it may be necessary for the government to evaluate the structure of the NC, ensuring it is inclusive and relevant to the current needs of CYP.

Additionally, the research highlighted a potential lack of focus upon understanding and supporting SEND in initial teacher training courses and CPD, a theme also identified within the wider evidence base (Williams-Brown & Hodkinson, 2021). Since signing the Salamanca Statement in 1994, the government have pledged their commitment to developing an inclusive education system. Data indicates most children with SEND are now educated within mainstream settings, in line with this agenda (GOV.UK, 2024). However, the provision of high quality inclusive education relies upon staff within mainstream settings receiving the appropriate training. LAs and the wider government could better equip schools to support successful transitions to Y1 for pupils with SEND by increasing access to relevant CPD for all mainstream school staff.

#### ***5.4.4 Implications for Future Research***

Finally, the research findings have potential implications for future research. The current study did not directly seek the views of children. The SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) highlights the importance of including CYP in transition planning, as well as parents/carers. Additionally, the professional guidelines for EPs set out by the HCPC (2016/2023) and the BPS (2017/2021a) emphasise the importance of involving CYP in all decisions impacting their education. EPs are well positioned to gain the views of CYP with SEND through use of creative tools and approaches (Norwich et al., 2006). It would therefore be valuable for future research to explore the views of children, to ensure their voices are present in the evidence base. It may also be beneficial for future research to gain the views of EPs and explore the work they are currently doing in this area, as well as how they feel they could have a greater impact upon transition practices.

The qualitative nature of the current study means it is highly contextualised to one LA. It may be helpful to explore the relevance of the findings within a broader context, through a widescale survey. The themes generated by the current research

offer an initial understanding of potential facilitating and hindering factors which could help shape survey questions.

#### **5.4.5 Research Dissemination**

Once finalised, a copy of the research will be shared with all participants via the main contact at each setting (e.g., the SENCO). The researcher will also present a summary of their findings to colleagues at their placement EPS, to support the dissemination of the research outcomes amongst the EP community.

## **6. Conclusion**

### **6.1 Summary**

This research aimed to explore how mainstream schools can support successful transitions to Y1 for children with SEND, by gaining the views of school staff and parents/carers. The researcher adopted a qualitative methodology, facilitating five focus groups (two with parents/carers, three with school staff) before analysing transcripts using RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006/2022).

In relation to RQ1 (*What are school staff and parent/carer experiences and views of the transition to Y1 for children with SEND in mainstream schools, post COVID-19?*), four main themes were generated: 'the transition to Y1 is more difficult for children with SEND'; 'a difficult time for parents/carers'; 'transitions are better planned and managed for children with SEND'; and 'the landscape is changing'. Overall, the researcher's interpretations suggest participants consider the transition to Y1 more difficult for children with SEND, but recognise these children often receive additional support during this time, which can help facilitate more successful transitions. The research also highlighted the potential impact of the transition upon the emotional wellbeing of parents/carers, identifying a need for more support. Finally, perceived increases in transition difficulties for children with and without SEND were attributed to the direct and indirect impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly reduced access to health services during and following lockdowns.

In relation to RQ2 (*What do school staff and parents/carers perceive as the key environmental factors in facilitating/hindering a successful transition to Y1 for children with SEND?*), five themes were generated: ‘the physical environment’; ‘consistency of relationships’; ‘strong collaboration’; ‘flexibility of curriculum delivery’; and ‘staff knowledge, skills and confidence’. Across the themes, the importance of consistency and continuity between Reception and Y1 was apparent, as well as the need for schools to adopt a flexible approach. Transition practices varied across the schools, and appeared to be impacted by wider school factors, such as the attitudes and support of school leaders. The ability of schools to adapt transition practice was also influenced by the wider political context (e.g., education policy). Overall, the findings aligned largely with past research, suggesting the reasonable adjustments which benefit children with SEND during the transition to Y1 could be implemented more broadly to benefit all children and establish more inclusive transition practices.

## **6.2 Distinct Contribution of the Research**

In England, the transition to Y1 marks the end of the EYFS, and the beginning of children’s formal primary education. The transition has been labelled “*abrupt*” (Ofsted, 2004, p.2) and is recognised as a particularly difficult transition for many children (Fisher, 2009), especially children with SEND (Sanders et al., 2005). However, there is no specific guidance regarding how schools can or should support children during the transition, and research exploring children’s experiences during this time is sparse, with no English studies completed since COVID-19. This research therefore offers a unique contribution to the evidence base by providing an insight into the experiences of children with SEND and their families during the transition to Y1, post COVID-19.

Additionally, English literature and policy continue to be dominated by the school readiness rhetoric (Kay, 2018), which places the responsibility of being ‘ready’ for Y1 upon children themselves, disadvantaging those who do not develop in line with ‘typical’ trajectories (Lynch & Soni, 2021). This is despite international research and policy emphasising the importance of creating ‘ready schools’, which are set up to meet the diverse needs of all children (Dowker et al., 2007, The National Educational Goals Panel, 1998). This research therefore provides an original



contribution by exploring the transition to Y1 from a bioecological perspective, identifying environmental facilitators and barriers to help schools develop inclusive transition practices and 'ready' Y1 classrooms.

Finally, the research contributes to the evidence base by gaining the views of key stakeholders. Parents/carers offer a unique understanding of how transitions are experienced by children and their families, whilst school staff provide an insight into the complexities of transitions, within school systems and the wider socio-political context. Gaining the views of these participants can help ensure their voices are represented and considered within future policy and research.

## 7. References

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## 8. Appendices

### 8.1 Appendix A - Rationale for Search Terms (Systematic Literature Review)

**Table A.1**

*A Table to Show the Rationale for the Chosen Search Terms*

Study Component	Search Terms	Rationale
Topic	("transition*" OR "move" OR "transfer")	All terms identified within the literature to describe educational transitions were included in the search terms.
Educational Phase	("reception" OR "early years" OR "early childhood education" OR "early years foundation stage" OR "EYFS" AND "year 1" OR "year one" OR "key stage one" or "key stage 1" or "KS1" OR "infant school" OR "primary education" OR "primary school" OR "national curriculum")	All identified terms used to describe Reception and Year 1 in an English context were included within the search terms.
Participants	("parent*" OR "carer*" OR "family" OR "families" OR "school staff" OR "teacher*" OR "headteacher*" OR "teaching assistant*" OR "senior leader*" OR "SLT" OR "SENCO*" OR "special educational needs coordinator*" OR "SENDCO*" OR "special educational needs and disabilities coordinator*")	A variation of terms used to describe a child's primary caregiver were included to identify studies including the views of parents/carers.  Titles of relevant school staff were included to identify studies including the views of school staff.



## 8.2 Appendix B- List of Excluded Studies (Systematic Literature Review)

**Table B.1**

*List of the Studies Excluded at the Full Text Level*

Excluded Study	Reason for Exclusion
1. Cassidy, M. (2005). 'They do it anyway': A study of Primary 1 teachers' perceptions of children's transition into primary education. <i>Early Years</i> , 25(2), 143-153. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/09575140500127923">https://doi.org/10.1080/09575140500127923</a>	Study context (completed in Scotland).
2. Fisher, J. (2011). Building on the Early Years Foundation Stage: Developing good practice for transition into Key Stage 1. <i>Early Years</i> , 31(1), 31-42. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2010.512557">https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2010.512557</a>	Focus was on Y1 provision only, the transition to Y1 was not discussed.
3. Fisher, J. (2022). To play or not to play: teachers' and headteachers' perspectives on play-based approaches in transition from the Early Years Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1 in England. <i>Education 3-13</i> , 50(6), 803-815. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2021.1912136">https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2021.1912136</a>	Focus was on Y1 provision only, the transition to Y1 was not discussed.
4. Lazzari, A., Balduzzi, L., Van Laere, K., Boudry, C., Rezek, M., & Prodger, A. (2020). Sustaining warm and inclusive transitions across the early years: Insights from the START project. <i>European Early Childhood Education Research Journal</i> , 28(1), 43-57. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2020.1707361">https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2020.1707361</a>	Focus was on transition to Reception at four-years-old. Study completed across four countries (one of which was England).

**Table B.2**

*List of Non-Peer Reviewed Research Which Otherwise met SLR Inclusion Criteria*

<b>Title</b>	<b>Type of Publication</b>
1. Sims, E. (2019). <i>Supporting Children Through Transitions in Early Childhood Education in England: Perspectives of Educational Psychologists and School Staff</i> . [Doctoral Thesis: Cardiff University]. <a href="https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/124065/1/ThesisSimsDEdPsy.pdf">https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/124065/1/ThesisSimsDEdPsy.pdf</a>	Doctoral Thesis
1. Sanders, D., White, G., Burge, B., Sharp, C., Eames, A., McEune, R., & Grayson, H. (2005). <i>A Study of the Transition from the Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1</i> . Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills. <a href="https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED502599.pdf">https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED502599.pdf</a>	Government Commissioned Research Paper

## 8.3 Appendix C- Characteristics of Included studies (Systematic Literature Review)

**Table C.1**

*SLR Data Extraction Table*

<b>Author(s) Date of Publication</b>	<b>Research Context</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Research Question(s)</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>Measures</b>	<b>Primary Outcomes</b>
Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	One mainstream primary school in rural Cheshire	Parents of children in Reception and Y1 (n=16). Y1 teacher (n=1) Y1 teaching assistant (n=1)	Determining the significance of the transition at the end of the Foundation Stage on children's well- being and subsequent impact on their learning.	Qualitative case study.  Narrative reporting of findings.	Likert scale questionnaires: Teachers- management of transitions. Parents- initial transition into Reception and subsequent transition into Y1.	<i>Teachers' responses-</i> No formal policy for transition existed. Children were prepared for the transition through familiarisation (e.g., classroom visits). Similarity of learning environments used to ensure continuity (e.g., active learning in Reception and Y1) has a positive impact upon wellbeing. Partnership with parents is key.

		Reception teachers (n=2)	Identifying activities and strategies that are likely to support continuity and emotional well-being.		Parent interviews (n=7)- Teacher interviews (n=2)- Key words were recorded and notes made afterwards (no audio recordings). Classroom observations in Reception and Y1 over a 5-week period.	Reception curriculum is formalised to support transition (e.g., less free choice). <i>Parents' responses-</i> Children look forward to Y1. Five parents were unsure if their children were prepared for the transition. Parents see the ethos of Y1 as cognitive rather than social. Parents emphasised the importance of children being 'behaviourally' prepared by learning the rules/expectations.
Fisher (2009)	Large, rural English LA in the Midlands.	Teachers from Reception and Y1 across 59	'How do you feel about transition from Foundation Stage to Y1?'- exploring the	Large scale qualitative case study.	Teachers and parents were sent a letter asking, "tell us how you feel about your	<i>Teachers' responses-</i> 93% were negative- worried about children being bored, children not having enough time to play, feeling uncomfortable about current practices in Y1, constraints of the literacy

schools (n=94). Parents of Reception and Y1 children across 59 schools (n=420) Children in Reception across 134 schools (n=2381)	views of teachers, parents and children.	Thematic analysis of findings.	children transferring to Year 1”. Children were asked “show us how you feel about moving into Year 1” and space was provided for a drawing, and the teacher’s commentary.	strategy, differences between Reception and Y1 being too large. 7% of teachers mentioned positive transition experiences. <i>Parents’ responses-</i> Some shared the same concerns as teachers regarding the differences between Reception and Y1 being too great (62%). Some felt their children were ready for more formal teaching (38%). <i>Children’s responses-</i> 76% were looking forward to Y1 (e.g., playing on the larger playground). 24% expressed negative views- using words like “sad”, “scared” and “nervous”. Boys were more concerned than girls. Summer born children were more likely to express negative feelings.
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						<p>Friendships were most important to children's feelings about the transition. Key anxieties were – being bullied, 'not knowing' (e.g., the rules), being told off and having hard work.</p>
Nicholson (2019)	One mainstream primary school in England.	<p>Reception teacher (n=1)</p> <p>Y1 teacher (n=1)</p> <p>Y1 pupils (n=23)</p>	<p>Do teachers and pupils perceive pedagogical discontinuity between the EYFS and Y1?</p> <p>What do they see as the causes of pedagogical discontinuity?</p> <p>Based on these views, to what extent can a play-</p>	<p>Mixed methods case study.</p> <p>Thematic analysis of findings.</p>	<p>Semi-structured interviews with one Reception and one Y1 teacher (interviews recorded on an audio device and transcribed).</p> <p>Closed questionnaire with Y1 pupils, including 10 questions with pre-determined responses ('yes',</p>	<p><i>Teachers' responses-</i></p> <p>Opportunities for play based learning are significantly lower in Y1 than EYFS.</p> <p>There is high work demand in Y1, and it is more structured.</p> <p>Curriculum content is the most significant aspect of the transition to Y1.</p> <p>The NC prevented the Y1 teacher from using play.</p> <p>In Y1, play is used more as an incentive, rather than a pedagogical approach.</p>

			based pedagogy bridge pedagogical discontinuity?		'no', 'don't know' and Likert scale questions). Completed in 1:1 interviews with the researcher.	<i>Children's responses-</i> 87% of children found the transition to Y1 to be a big change. 91.3% said they enjoyed moving to Y1. 87% of children said they 'really enjoyed' learning in EYFS, but only 43% 'really enjoyed' learning in Y1. 87% of children would like more opportunities to play in Y1.
Nicholson & Hendry (2022)	Two form entry primary academy in an English city. The school received an 'inadequate' Ofsted	Headteacher (n=1) EYFS lead (n=1) Progress lead (n=1) Y1 teachers (n=2).	How does one school facilitate and implement play-based pedagogy for certain children in Y1? What factors support or inhibit the	Qualitative case study.  Findings analysed using an inductive thematic analysis.	Semi-structured interviews with school staff.  Four whole day classroom observations in Y1 classrooms.	At the start of Y1, Children were divided into a 'continuation class', who had access to play based learning, and a 'traditional class' who accessed more formal learning, based on if they achieved a GLD or not at the end of Reception.  Grouping of children was based upon the assumption that GLD assessments were an indicator of children's

inspection in 2017.	implementatio n of play- based pedagogy in Y1?	<p>‘readiness’ for Y1, leading to differences in transition support. School staff felt a play-based approach for all pupils would have been beneficial to support social and emotional development during the transition to Y1.</p> <p>The headteacher and progress lead saw play as an intervention to ‘close the gap’, whereas teachers saw it as helping develop key skills and ensuring a smooth transition.</p> <p>In both classes, there were limited opportunities for play due to the pressures of the NC.</p> <p>The approach was deemed unsuccessful after six months by senior leaders.</p>
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## 8.4 Appendix D- Weight of Evidence A (Systematic Literature Review)

**Table D.1**

*A Table to Show CASP Scoring and Rationale for WoE A*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Bulkeley &amp; Fabian (2006)</b>	<b>Fisher (2009)</b>	<b>Nicholson (2019)</b>	<b>Nicholson &amp; Hendry (2022)</b>
Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	Yes – explicit in abstract and methodology.	Yes- explicit in abstract and methodology.	Yes- explicit in abstract and methodology.	Yes- explicit in abstract and methodology.
Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	Yes- seeks participant views/ experiences.	Yes- seeks participant views.	Yes- seeks participant perceptions.	Yes- seeks participant perceptions.
Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	Yes – questionnaires/ interviews to gain rich data from a small sample.	Yes- open-ended questionnaire to gain a wide range of views from a large sample.	Yes- interviews with staff to gain rich data from a small sample and closed questionnaires to provide supplementary data.	Yes- observations and interviews to provide rich data from a small sample over six months.
Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	Yes- purposive opportunity sampling within case study school based upon study aims.	Yes- random selection of schools from one LA.	Yes- case study. One school identified for research.	Yes- opportunity sampling to identify case study school.

Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	Yes- questionnaires, interviews and observations.	Yes- questionnaires (open-ended).	Yes- interviews and questionnaires.	Yes- observations and interviews.
Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	Can't tell- no reporting of relationship between researcher and participants.	Can't tell- no reporting of relationship between researcher and participants.	Yes- relationship between researcher and participants described.	Can't tell- existing relationship alluded to but not described.
Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	Can't tell- ethical procedures not reported.	Can't tell- ethical procedures not reported.	Yes- clear description of ethical procedures.	Yes- clear description of ethical procedures.
Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	No- no indication of data analysis method used (narrative reporting).	Yes- clear description of analysis procedures.	Yes- clear description of analysis procedures.	Yes- clear description of analysis procedures.
Is there a clear statement of findings?	Yes- detailed findings section linked to RQs.	Yes- detailed findings section linked to RQs.	Yes- detailed findings section linked to RQs.	Yes- detailed findings section linked to RQs.
How valuable is the research?	Yes- exploratory research. Implications and limitations discussed.	Yes- large scale research. Implications and limitations discussed.	Yes- exploratory research. Implications and limitations discussed.	Yes- exploratory research. Implications discussed.
Overall Score	7	8	10	9

**Table D.2***A Table to Show Weight of Evidence A Coding*

<b>WoE A Rating</b>	<b>Criteria</b>
3 (high)	8 or more CASP criteria met.
2 (medium)	5-7 CASP criteria met.
1 (low)	Fewer than 4 CASP criteria met.

**Table D.3***A Table to Show Weight of Evidence A Judgements*

<b>Study</b>	<b>CASP criteria met</b>	<b>WoE A rating</b>
Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	7	2 (medium)
Fisher (2009)	8	3 (high)
Nicholson (2019)	10	3 (high)
Nicholson & Hendry (2022)	9	3 (high)

## 8.5 Appendix E- Weight of Evidence B (Systematic Literature Review)

**Table E.1**

*A Table to Show Weight of Evidence B Coding*

<b>WoE B Rating</b>	<b>Criteria (Methodology)</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
3 (high)	Interviews or focus groups.	Interviews/focus groups provide rich data and have the potential to make a bigger contribution to a qualitative synthesis (Noyes et al., 2019).
2 (medium)	Interviews or focus groups alongside other data collection methods from which qualitative data cannot be elicited (e.g., closed questionnaires).	Qualitative studies are likely to include a greater amount of qualitative data than mixed methods studies, which must also report quantitative findings.
1 (low)	Qualitative data collected through other methods only (e.g., open-ended questionnaires)	Data from questionnaires is considered appropriate for qualitative reviews where there is a shortage of studies using interviews, but data is often less rich (Flemming & Noyes, 2021).

**Table E.2***A Table to Show Weight of Evidence B Judgements*

<b>Study</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>WoE B Rating</b>
Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	Interviews (parents and teachers), classroom observations (Reception and Y1) and Likert scale questionnaires (parents and teachers).	2 (medium)
Fisher (2009)	Open-ended questionnaires (parents, teachers and children).	1 (low)
Nicholson (2019)	Interviews (teachers), closed questionnaire (children).	2 (medium)
Nicholson & Hendry (2022)	Interviews (school staff), classroom observations (Y1).	3 (high)

## 8.6 Appendix F- Weight of Evidence C (Systematic Literature Review)

WoE C Criteria- *“the extent to which the focus of the study was gaining school staff or parent/carer views of the transition to Y1 in mainstream English schools”.*

**Table F.1**

*A Table to Show Criteria and Rationale for Weight of Evidence C*

Criteria	Ratings	Rationale
A- Participants	3) School staff AND parents/carers.	Greater focus on school staff and/or parent/carer views will provide richer data. Information from both parents/carers and school staff will allow a comparison of views.
	2) School staff AND parents/carers, alongside other participants (e.g., children).	
	1) School staff OR parents/carers	
B- Outcomes	3) School staff and/or parent/carer views are the primary outcome.	Studies focusing solely on school staff and/or parent/carer views are likely to report a larger amount of data than studies with additional outcomes.
	2) Views of other stakeholders are included (e.g., children).	
	1) Stakeholder views are included alongside other outcome measures (e.g., classroom observations).	
C- Reporting of Findings	3) Direct quotes from interviews included within findings.	Where direct quotes are included, themes can be identified independently from the original researcher's interpretation, reducing
	2) Direct quotes from open-ended questionnaires reported within findings.	

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1) Qualitative data reported by the researcher with no direct quotes.

the impact of possible bias.

**Table F.2**

*A Table to Show Weight of Evidence C Criteria A-C judgements, and Overall Weight of Evidence C Judgements (SLR)*

<b>Study</b>	<b>Criterion A</b>	<b>Criterion B</b>	<b>Criterion C</b>	<b>WoE C</b>
Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	3 (high)	1 (low)	1 (low)	1.7 (medium)
Fisher (2009)	2 (medium)	2 (medium)	2 (medium)	2 (medium)
Nicholson (2019)	1 (low)	2 (medium)	3 (high)	2 (medium)
Nicholson & Hendry (2022)	1 (low)	1 (low)	3 (high)	1.7 (medium)

*Note:* low – 0.9-1.6, medium- 1.7-2.3, high- 2.4-3.0.

*Note:* Weight of Evidence C judgements are calculated by taking an average of the judgements on criteria A to C.

## 8.7 Appendix G- Thematic Synthesis- Initial Codes

**Table G.1**

*A Table to Show Initial Codes and Contextual Information*

<b>Initial Codes</b>	<b>Studies the code is present in:</b>	<b>Participants view was expressed by.</b>
Children who do not achieve a GLD require a different approach to teaching and learning in Y1.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022)	Headteacher
GLD is used as a measure of 'readiness' for Y1.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022)	EYFS lead
Pupils who achieve a GLD are considered 'ready' and receive less transition support.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022)	EYFS lead
Transition experience is influenced by physical maturity.	Bulkeley & Fabian (2006) Fisher (2009)	Parents Teachers (Reception and Y1)
Transition experience is influenced by children's sense of belonging in the wider school community.	Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	Parents
Transition experience is influenced by children's understanding of rules.	Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	Parents
Transition experience is influenced by children's ability to meet academic demands.	Nicholson (2019) Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	Parents Teachers (Reception and Y1)



Transition experience is influenced by social development.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022) Nicholson (2019)	Teachers (Reception and Y1) EYFS lead Headteacher
Consideration of individual needs is important during transition.	Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	Teachers (Reception/Y1)
Some children are 'ready' for formal learning and 'bored' of playing.	Fisher (2009)	Parents
Continuity of approaches between Reception and Y1 supports transition.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022) Nicholson (2019) Fisher (2009) Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	Teachers (Reception/Y1) EYFS lead Headteacher
Familiarisation with environments and people is important in the transition to Y1.	Nicholson (2019) Fisher (2009) Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	Parents Teachers (Reception/Y1)
Sharing of information between EYFS and Y1 school staff supports transition.	Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	Teachers (Reception/Y1)
Communication and collaboration between EYFS and Y1 teachers supports transition.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022) Fisher (2009)	EYFS lead Headteacher

	Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	Teachers (Reception/Y1)
Parental involvement supports transition.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022)	Teachers (Reception and Y1)
A mixture of EYFS and Y1 expertise is required for a successful transition.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022)	EYFS lead
Opportunities for children to interact with staff from throughout the school supports transition.	Fisher (2009) Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	Parents Teachers (Reception/Y1)
Children's perception of Y1 teachers influences their feelings towards transition.	Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	Parents
The transition to Y1 is an exciting time for some children.	Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	Parents
Some children look forward to changes.	Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	Parents
The move towards formal learning in Y1 is a positive change.	Fisher (2009)	Parents
Play is linked to children's enjoyment of learning.	Nicholson (2019) Fisher (2009)	Teachers (Reception and Y1)
Children are bored in Y1.	Fisher (2009)	Teachers (Reception and Y1)
There is discontinuity between Reception and Y1.	Nicholson (2019) Fisher (2009)	Teachers (Reception and Y1) Parents
Y1 is structured and involves more formal learning.	Nicholson (2019) Fisher (2009)	Teachers (Reception and Y1) Parents

Reception teachers feel pressure to prepare children for Y1.	Nicholson (2019)	Teachers (Reception)
Lack of formal transition policies.	Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	Teachers (Reception/Y1)
Curriculum content is considered a significant aspect of the transition to Y1.	Nicholson (2019)	Teachers (Reception and Y1)
GLD provides an unsophisticated measure of 'readiness'.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022)	Teachers (Y1) EYFS lead Headteacher
Lack of information sharing with parents compared with the transition to Reception.	Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	Parents
Y1 has a cognitive rather than social focus.	Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	Parents
Changes in curriculum between Reception and Y1 do not reflect development or changes in children's needs.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022) Nicholson (2019) Fisher (2009) Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	EYFS lead Parents Teachers (Reception and Y1)
Familiarisation and preparation for Y1 is not sufficient.	Bulkeley & Fabian (2006)	Parents
The Y1 curriculum requires careful planning.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022)	Headteacher
Support for play-based pedagogy in Y1.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022) Nicholson (2019) Fisher (2009)	Headteacher Teachers (Reception and Y1) Parents
Play-based pedagogy in Y1 is seen as an intervention.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022)	Headteacher

Play in Y1 is used as an incentive, not a pedagogy.	Nicholson (2019)	Teachers (Reception and Y1)
Lack of play-based learning in Y1 (play is 'taken away').	Nicholson (2019)	Teachers (Reception and Y1).
Lack of outdoor learning in Y1.	Fisher (2009)	Parents
Lack of understanding of play-based approaches amongst Y1 staff.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022)	Teachers (Y1) EYFS lead
Y1 teachers are unable to manage behaviours during play-based learning.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022)	Teachers (Y1) EYFS lead
Lack of resources to support play-based approaches in Y1.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022) Fisher (2009)	Teachers (Y1) EYFS lead
Lack of TAs to support play-based provision in Y1.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022)	EYFS lead Teachers (Y1)
Sharing the EYFS environment may support continuity of approaches between Reception and Y1.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022)	Teachers (Y1) EYFS lead Headteacher
Y1 teachers feel restricted by the NC.	Nicholson (2019) Fisher (2009)	Teachers (Y1)
Y1 teachers feel 'guilt' regarding the lack of play in Y1.	Fisher (2009)	Teachers (Y1)
Internal and external expectations impact pedagogies in Y1 (e.g., Ofsted, MATs).	Nicholson & Hendry (2022) Nicholson (2019) Fisher (2009)	Headteacher Teachers (Reception and Y1)

The literacy and numeracy strategies impact pedagogy in Y1.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022)	Headteacher
	Fisher (2009)	Teachers (Reception and Y1)
		Parents
Wider school initiatives impact pedagogy in Y1.	Nicholson & Hendry (2022)	Teachers (Y1)
Support from senior leaders helps implement play-based pedagogies in Y1.	Fisher (2009)	Teachers (Reception and Y1)

## 8.8 Appendix H- Thematic Synthesis- Generating Themes

**Table H.1**

*A Table to Show Initial Codes, Descriptive Themes and Analytical Themes*

Initial Codes	Descriptive Themes	Analytical Themes
The transition to Y1 is an exciting time for some children.	Positive views of the transition to Y1.	Individual factors (the school readiness rhetoric).
Some children look forward to changes.		
The move towards formal learning in Y1 is a positive change.		
Transition experience is influenced by physical maturity.	Individual factors considered to influence transition success.	
Transition experience is influenced by children’s understanding of rules.		
Transition experience is influenced by children’s ability to meet academic demands.		
Transition experience is influenced by social development.		
Consideration of individual needs is important during transition.		
GLD is used as a measure of ‘readiness’ for Y1.	The impact of ‘GLD’ expectations and the school readiness rhetoric.	
Children who do not achieve a GLD require a different approach to teaching and learning in Y1.		

Pupils who achieve a GLD are considered ‘ready’ and receive less transition support.		
Some children are ‘ready’ for formal learning and ‘bored’ of playing.		
GLD provides an unsophisticated measure of ‘readiness’.		
Familiarisation with environments and people is important in the transition to Y1.	Short-term facilitators of successful transitions.	Environmental and relational factors.
Sharing of information between EYFS and Y1 school staff supports transition.		
Communication and collaboration between EYFS and Y1 teachers supports transition.		
Opportunities for children to interact with staff from throughout the school supports transition.		
Parental involvement supports transition.		
Children’s perception of Y1 teachers influences their feelings towards transition.		
Continuity of approaches between Reception and Y1 supports transition.	Long-term facilitators of successful transitions.	
Sharing the EYFS environment may support continuity of approaches between Reception and Y1.		
A mixture of EYFS and Y1 expertise is required for a successful transition.		

The Y1 curriculum requires careful planning.		
Y1 has a cognitive rather than social focus.	Comparison of Reception and Y1 curriculums.	The impact of discontinuity.
Y1 is structured and involves more formal learning.		
Reception teachers feel pressure to prepare children for Y1.		
Curriculum content is considered a significant aspect of the transition to Y1.		
Children are bored in Y1.		
Lack of outdoor learning in Y1.	Impact of discontinuity on transition success.	
There is discontinuity between Reception and Y1.		
Changes in curriculum between Reception and Y1 do not reflect development or changes in children's needs		
Lack of formal transition policies.		
Lack of information sharing with parents compared with the transition to Reception.		
Familiarisation and preparation for Y1 is not sufficient.	Feelings towards play-based pedagogies in Y1.	
Play is linked to children's enjoyment of learning.		
Support for play-based pedagogy in Y1.		
Lack of play-based learning in Y1 (play is 'taken away').	Facilitators of play-based pedagogies in Y1.	
Y1 teachers feel 'guilt' regarding the lack of play in Y1.		
Support from senior leaders helps implement play-based pedagogies in Y1.		



Play-based pedagogy in Y1 is seen as an intervention.	Barriers to play-based pedagogies in Y1.	The importance of play.
Play in Y1 is used as an incentive, not a pedagogy.		
Lack of Teaching Assistants to support play-based provision in Y1.		
Lack of understanding of play-based approaches amongst Y1 staff.		
Y1 teachers are unable to manage behaviours during play-based learning.		
Lack of resources to support play-based approaches in Y1.	Wider systemic influences on Y1 pedagogies.	Wider systemic factors.
Y1 teachers feel restricted by the NC.		
Internal and external expectations impact pedagogies in Y1 (e.g., Ofsted, academy trusts).		
The literacy and numeracy strategies impact pedagogy in Y1.		
Wider school initiatives impact pedagogy in Y1.		
Transition experience is influenced by children's sense of belonging in the wider school community.		

## 8.9 Appendix I- Recruitment Email and Recruitment Posters

Dear [insert headteacher name]

My name is Abigail Westwood, and I am a trainee Educational Psychologist studying at the University of Nottingham. I am currently on placement with [redacted] Educational Psychology Service. As part of my training, I will be completing a research thesis. This research is being conducted in my role as a university student, and the decision to participate will not have any impact upon current or future involvement with the Educational Psychology Service.

The topic I have chosen to explore is:

“What environmental factors facilitate/hinder a successful transition to Year 1 for children with special educational needs? Exploring the experiences and perspectives of school staff and parents/carers.”

In order to explore this highly important topic, I am hoping to facilitate focus groups with relevant members of school staff (e.g., SENCO, Reception and Year 1 teachers, support staff, Early Years and Key Stage 1 leads), and with parents/carers of children with SEND currently in Key Stage 1.

Please find attached two research posters (one for school staff and one for parents/carers) which provide further information about the study, and eligibility criteria for potential participants.

If you feel that staff and parents/carers from your setting may wish to participate, and would be interested in discussing the research further, please respond to this email.


Kind Regards

Abigail Westwood


Trainee Educational Psychologist

University of Nottingham

## School Staff Recruitment Poster



School of Psychology  
Recruitment Poster



The University of  
Nottingham  
UNITED KINGDOM • CHINA • MALAYSIA

Ethics Approval Number: S1605

# Reframing School Readiness

**A study exploring school staff and parent/carer views of the transition from Reception to Year 1 for children with special educational needs (SEN).**

**Research Aims**


- To explore the experiences of school staff in supporting the transition to Year 1 for children with SEN.
- To consider the environmental facilitators/barriers to a successful transition to Year 1 for children with SEN.
- To challenge the idea of 'school readiness' by exploring how our Year 1 classrooms can be 'ready' for children with SEN.

**Research Methods**

Semi structured focus groups, completed in school.  
Facilitated by the researcher.  
Duration: 60–90 minutes.

**Participant Requirements**

- Involved in supporting the transition of children with SEN from Reception to Year 1.
- Experience of supporting one or more cohorts through this transition.
- E.g. SENCO, Reception and Year 1 teachers, support staff, Early Years and KS1 leads.




To find out more, or express interest in taking part in the study, please contact:

Abigail Westwood  
Trainee Educational Psychologist  
University of Nottingham  
[Abigail.westwood@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:Abigail.westwood@nottingham.ac.uk)

## Parent/Carer Recruitment Poster

School of Psychology  
Recruitment Poster




The University of  
Nottingham  
UNITED KINGDOM • CHINA • MALAYSIA


Ethics Approval Number: S1605

# Participants Needed


**A study exploring parent/carers and school staff views of the transition to Year 1 for children with special educational needs (SEN).**




Are you the parent/carers of a child with special educational needs (with an Education, Health and Care Plan, or on SEN support), who is currently in Year 1 or Year 2 at a mainstream primary school?



Would you like to share your views of how the transition from Reception to Year 1 can be best supported for children with SEN?




Would you be happy to meet with a group of other parents/carers, in school, during the school day, to discuss your views?



To find out more, or express interest in taking part in the study, please contact:

Abigail Westwood  
Trainee Educational Psychologist  
University of Nottingham  
[Abigail.westwood@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:Abigail.westwood@nottingham.ac.uk)



## 8.10 Appendix J- Participant Information Sheets

### ***School Staff Information Sheet***

<p><b>School of Psychology</b></p> <p><b>Information Sheet</b></p>
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*Title of Project: What environmental factors facilitate/hinder a successful transition to Year 1 for children with special educational needs? Exploring the experiences and perspectives of school staff and parents/carers.*

*Ethics Approval Number: S1605*

*Researcher: Abigail Westwood*

*Supervisor: Maria Abijah-Liburd*

*Contact Details: Abigail.Westwood@nottingham.ac.uk,  
lpama@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk*

This is an invitation to take part in a research study exploring school staff and parent/carer perspectives of the environmental factors which can facilitate/hinder a successful transition to mainstream Year 1 classrooms for children with special educational needs.

Before you decide if you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

- If you participate, you will be asked to join a focus group in school, alongside other members of staff who have a role in supporting the transition of children with identified SEND from Reception to Year 1, post COVID-19.
- During the focus group, the researcher will raise a range of topics and questions regarding your experiences of supporting children with SEND during their transition to Year 1, what you perceive as the key environmental factors in

facilitating/hindering a successful transition to Year 1 for children with SEND, and your perceptions of a 'ready' and inclusive Year 1 environment.

- The focus group will last approximately 60-90 minutes and will be recorded by the researcher, who will anonymise the information before analysing it and drawing conclusions.
- Following the focus group, you will be provided with a debrief sheet, which will signpost you to a range of information and support services which you may choose to access following the research.

Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are under no obligation to take part. You are free to withdraw at any point before or during the study, and up to two weeks after the focus group. The researcher is a trainee Educational Psychologist studying at the University of Nottingham, currently on placement with [redacted] Educational Psychology Service. This study is being conducted in their role as a university researcher, and withdrawal from the research will have no impact upon future or current involvement with the Educational Psychology service.

All data collected, including recordings, will be stored on a protected laptop, in a safe location, and will be used for research purposes only (see attached Privacy Notice for further information).

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to ask, by contacting [Abigail.Westwood@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:Abigail.Westwood@nottingham.ac.uk).

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:

Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)

[stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk)

## ***Parent/Carer Information Sheet***

<p><b>School of Psychology</b></p> <p><b>Information Sheet</b></p>
--



*Title of Project: What environmental factors facilitate/hinder a successful transition to Year 1 for children with special educational needs? Exploring the experiences and perspectives of school staff and parents/carers.*

*Ethics Approval Number: S1605*

*Researcher: Abigail Westwood*

*Supervisor: Maria Abijah-Liburd*

*Contact Details: Abigail.Westwood@nottingham.ac.uk,  
lpama@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk*

This is an invitation to take part in a research study exploring school staff and parent/carers perspectives of the environmental factors which can facilitate/hinder a successful transition to mainstream Year 1 classrooms for children with special educational needs.

Before you decide if you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

- If you participate, you will be asked to join a focus group in school, alongside other parents or carers of children with identified special educational needs, who are currently in Year 1 or Year 2.
- During the focus group, the researcher will raise a range of topics and questions regarding the experiences of you and your child during their transition from Reception to Year 1, what supported it and how it could have been improved by changes to the transition processes and/or classroom environments.

- The focus group will last approximately 60-90 minutes and will be recorded by the researcher, who will anonymise the information before analysing it and drawing conclusions.
- Following the focus group, you will be provided with a debrief sheet, which will signpost you to a range of information and support services which you may choose to access following the research.

Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are under no obligation to take part. You are free to withdraw at any point before or during the study, and up to two weeks after the focus group. The researcher is a trainee Educational Psychologist studying at the University of Nottingham, currently on placement with [redacted] Educational Psychology Service. This study is being conducted in their role as a university researcher, and withdrawal from the research will have no impact upon future or current involvement with the Educational Psychology service.

All data collected, including recordings, will be stored on a protected laptop, in a safe location, and will be used for research purposes only (see attached Privacy Notice for further information).

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to ask, by contacting [Abigail.Westwood@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:Abigail.Westwood@nottingham.ac.uk).

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:

Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)

[stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk)



## 8.11 Appendix K- Participant Consent Form

**School of Psychology**  
**Consent Form**



*Title of Project: What environmental factors facilitate/hinder a successful transition to Year 1 for children with special educational needs? Exploring the experiences and perspectives of school staff and parents/carers.*

*Ethics Approval Number: S1605*

*Researcher: Abigail Westwood [Abigail.Westwood@nottingham.ac.uk]*

*Supervisor: Maria Abijah-Liburd [lpama@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk]*

The participant should answer these questions independently:

- Have you read and understood the Information Sheet? YES/NO
- Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study? YES/NO
- Have all your questions been answered satisfactorily (if applicable)? YES/NO
- Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study? (at any time and without giving a reason)  
YES/NO
- I give permission for my data from this study to be shared with other researchers provided that my anonymity is completely protected.  
YES/NO
- Do you agree to take part in the study? YES/NO

Full Name: .....

Signature: .....

Role: School staff member / Parent or carer (delete as appropriate)

Setting you work at/ your child attends: .....

Date: .....

## 8.12 Appendix L- Focus Group Schedule

### **RQ1:**

What are school staff and parent/carers' experiences and views of the transition to Year 1 for children with SEND, post COVID-19?

Staff:

- How would you describe the transition from Reception to Year 1 in general, for all children?
  - What are the main differences between the two year groups?
  - Do children face any challenges during this time? If so, what are the key challenges?
  - Do you see any positive changes for children during this time? If so, what are these?
- In your experience, is this transition different for children with SEND? If so, how?
  - Do you feel current Year 1 classrooms are 'ready' to meet the needs of all pupils? If not, why not? If so, why?
- Have you noticed any difference in how children manage this transition since COVID-19? If so, what are the differences?
  - Is this the same for all children?

Parents:

- How would you describe the transition from Reception to Year 1 for your child?
  - What are the main differences between the two year groups?
  - Was it a challenging time? If so, what was challenging for them?
  - Did you notice any positive changes? If so, what were these?
- Do you feel COVID-19 had an impact on how your child managed this transition? If so, how?
- Do you feel current Year 1 classrooms are 'ready' to meet the needs of all pupils? If not, why not? If so, why?

### **RQ2:**

What do school staff and parents/carers perceive as the key factors in facilitating/hindering a successful transition to Year 1 for children with SEND?

## Staff

- What factors do you believe facilitate a successful transition to Year 1 for children with SEND?
  - What supports their communication/interaction?
  - What supports their social, emotional and mental health?
  - What supports their cognition and learning?
  - What supports their physical development?
- What factors do you believe hinder a successful transition to Year 1 for pupils with SEND?
  - Are there any barriers to changing/removing these factors?

## Parents

- What factors do you feel positively impacted your child's transition to Year 1?
  - What has supported their communication/interaction?
  - What has supported their social, emotional and mental health?
  - What has supported their cognition and learning?
  - What has supported their physical development?
- What factors do you believe have negatively impacted your child's transition to Year 1?
  - Do you feel these things could be changed/improved? If so, how?

## All

- Miracle question- if you could wave a magic wand and create your ideal inclusive Year 1 classroom, what would it look like?
  - What is the same as the current classroom?
  - What is different to the current classroom?
  - What do you consider the 3 changes which would have the biggest impact? Why?

## **Closing Questions**

- Is there anything important that you feel I have not asked about/you would like to tell me?
- Is there anything you wish to clarify/revisit?
- Do you have any questions for me?

## 8.13 Appendix M- Flowchart Showing the Focus Group Procedure



## 8.14 Appendix N- Braun and Clarke's (2006) '15 Point Checklist for Good Thematic Analysis'

Process	No.	Criteria
Transcription	1	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for 'accuracy'.
Coding	2	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
	3	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.
	4	All relevant extracts for all each theme have been collated.
	5	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
Analysis	6	Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.
	7	Data have been analysed – interpreted, made sense of – rather than just paraphrased or described.
	8	Analysis and data match each other – the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.
	9	Analysis tells a convincing and well-organized story about the data and topic.
Overall	10	A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
	11	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly.
Written report	12	The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated.
	13	There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done – ie, described method and reported analysis are consistent.
	14	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.
	15	The researcher is positioned as <i>active</i> in the research process; themes do not just 'emerge'.

## 8.15 Appendix O- Reflexive Thematic Analysis Phase One (Familiarisation)

### Example of Visual Familiarisation Notes (Staff Group 3)



## ***Overall Dataset Familiarisation Notes***

- Both school staff and parents/carers see big differences between Reception and Year 1 and consider this a huge change for all children.
- The overall tone of focus groups, and extent to which the transition was perceived as successful or difficult, was largely impacted by the setting's approach to the Year 1 curriculum and provision. In schools where play and child-led learning was incorporated into Year 1, both parents/carers and staff expressed more positive views of the transition, for children with and without SEND. In schools where more formal adult-led learning was prioritised in Year 1, the general sentiment was that the transition was more difficult and a negative experience for many children, especially those with SEND. It felt as though a formal Year 1 curriculum exacerbated differences in transition experiences between children with and without SEND, causing attainment gaps to grow.
- Across multiple focus groups, it was suggested that transition practices for children with identified SEND are often more thought out and better planned than for children without SEND, as it is anticipated that the transition may be more challenging for these children. This can result in more positive transition experiences for children with SEND.
- Relationships between school staff and children are seen as key in facilitating a positive transition for children with SEND. This view was expressed strongly within all focus groups.
- Parents of children with SEND overall feel more communication with parents is needed to support smoother transitions. Whilst children may appear to be managing the change well in school, their parents/carers often see the emotional impact of the transition at home, where they feel safe and therefore do not suppress their feelings. During parent/carer groups, there was an overwhelming sense that this is a potentially stressful and difficult time for parents/carers, as well as their children.



## 8.16 Appendix P- Reflexive Thematic Analysis Phase Two (Generating Initial Codes)

### Example of Data Coded within NVivo (Parent/Carer Group A)

Claire	I haven't seen no positives, I can't remember one positive about him going up to Year 1. Not in a nasty way, just like it was... it was... it's like he gets into a class and then it takes him all year to settle.	RQ 1 - Parents worry about future transitions. RQ 1, 2 - Parents unsure about introduction of play in Year 1. RQ 2 - Introducing formally slowly. RQ 1, 2 - Higher academic expectations in Year 1. RQ 2 - More inclusive practice needed RQ 1, 2 - Parents not feeling their views are heard or valued. RQ 1, 2 - Lack of support for children with unidentified SEN. RQ 1 - Attainment gaps begin to increase in Year 1. RQ 1 - Parents questioning if mainstream school is right for their children as they move through school. RQ 2 - Staff transitioning with children.
Alexander	There was one positive, when he moved from Reception to Year 1, Mrs Green [TA] moved up with him. Like you said about how they become attached to one person.	RQ 1 - Parents compare progress with other children. RQ 1, 2 - Wider school expectations in Year 1. RQ 1 - Difficulty adapting to changes in routine and environments. RQ 1 - Transition as a difficult experience for children with SEN. RQ 1 - Positive experience of transition. RQ 2 - Information sharing between staff and parents. RQ 1, 2 - Inclusion of pupils with SEN in the mainstream classroom. RQ 1 - Parents struggling - e.g., feeling alone and blamed. RQ 1, 2 - More adaptations needed for pupils with SEN. RQ 1 - Impact of transition seen in the home (masking). RQ 1 - Formal Year 1 teaching impacts inclusion of pupils with SEN.
Claire	He had Mrs Lindsay [other TA] didn't he?	RQ 1 - Parental anxiety around transition and formal learning.
Alexander	He had Mrs Green.	
Claire	He had Mrs Lindsay in Year 1.	
Alexander	Yeah Mrs Green moved up and then she was off and Mrs Lindsay...	
Claire	Yeah because he had Mrs Green in Nursery and Reception and then he had Mrs Lindsay in Year 1, erm... although Mrs Lindsay is still with Year 1 she's with the opposite class. Erm... but he sort of, and he doesn't like women, he likes men better, erm... so obviously for him to attach, and it's been more to an older female figure, erm... yeah that's... And I always knew that was the only one reassuring thing for me, that he'd made an attachment with someone and I knew if he was ever upset during the day, erm... he'd got that one person to give him a cuddle, or... you know, that, you know... because obviously the teachers are busy aren't they, so obviously the TAs step in, and obviously for him last year in Year 1 it was Mrs Lindsay. And she has such a soft spot for him you know. And I think that was the one positive, that fact that he'd always had a person, if not the main... because it was never really the main teacher, more the TA, that he'd known. Erm... and twice they've gone up with him, so that is the only positive that you knew that he had that support within the class. So that was the one positive.	RQ 2 - Maintaining consistency of routines. RQ 2 - Maintaining consistency between the Reception and Year 1 environments. RQ 1, 2 - Attributing positive transition to practice changes.
Interviewer	Yeah, that's really nice.	
Jessica	I think I'd say obviously what we've already stated, their moving up and it's still kind of Reception type. Now I probably understand other kids are having their... the y're probably doing a bit more learning, formal learning maybe. I don't know, I'm not in the class, but obviously for Alice [her child] and Billie [Simon's child], the way that they probably learn is through play, so I suppose they've brought that up... I mean I can kind of see down sides to it, but I see the up side to it more because it's what Alice likes. It's what she likes, it's what she knows, so her doing that, meaning that she's still learning, is like a big factor. And I think as well, in our generation anyway, with all like the whiteboards and the interactive games they get to do, I feel like Alice won't really join in a lot, but kind of, if you stand to the side when we do that Year 1 thing and we got to come in and play with the kids and what not, obviously all the other kids are doing activities that are set out and Alice is just having	RQ 1, 2 - Play-based approach supports inclusion.



### ***Coding Presented in an Alternative Format (Parent/Carer Group A)***

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Excerpt</b>	<b>Attached Codes</b>
Claire	I haven't seen no positives, I can't remember one positive about him going up to Year 1. Not in a nasty way, just like it was... it was... it's like he gets into a class and then it takes him all year to settle.	RQ1- Transition is a difficult experience for children with SEND. RQ1- Difficulty adapting to changes in routines and environments.
Alexander	There was one positive, when he moved from Reception to Year 1, Mrs Green [TA] moved up with him. Like you said about how they become attached to one person.	RQ2- Staff transitioning with children. RQ2- Importance of relationships between children and school staff.
Claire	He had Mrs Lindsay [other TA] didn't he?	N/A
Alexander	He had Mrs Green.	N/A
Claire	He had Mrs Lindsay in Year 1.	N/A
Alexander	Yeah Mrs Green moved up and then she was off and Mrs Lindsay...	N/A
Claire	Yeah because he had Mrs Green in Nursery and Reception and then he had Mrs Lindsay in Year 1, erm... although Mrs Lindsay is still with Year 1 she's with the opposite class. Erm... but he sort of, and he doesn't like women, he likes men better, erm... so obviously for him to attach, and it's been more to an older female figure, erm... yeah that's... And I always knew that was the only one reassuring thing for me, that he'd made an attachment with someone and I knew if he was ever upset	RQ2- Staff transitioning with children. RQ2- Importance of relationships between children and school staff. RQ1- Parental anxiety around transition to formal learning.

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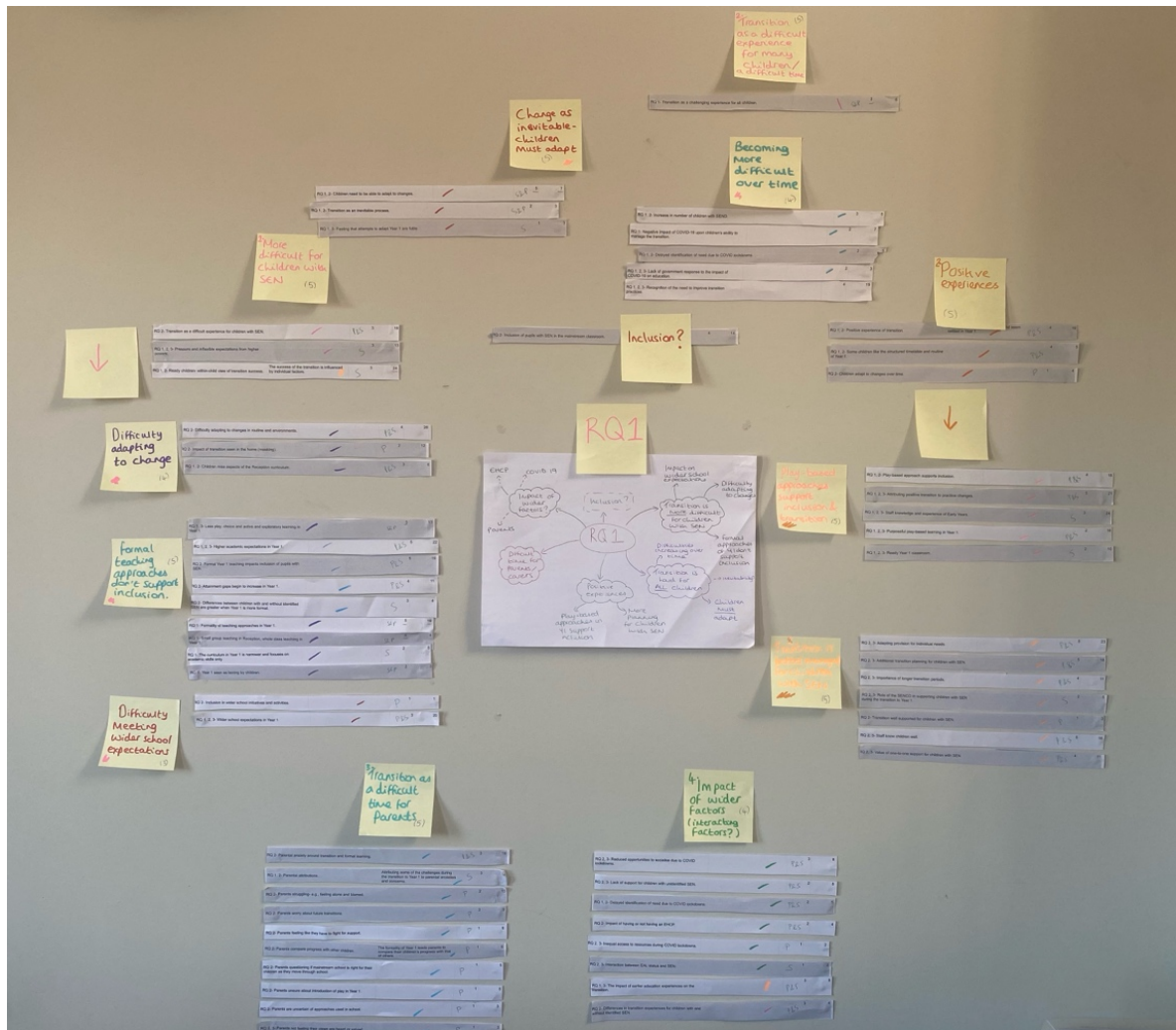
during the day, erm... he'd got that one person to give him a cuddle, or... you know, that, you know... because obviously the teachers are busy aren't they, so obviously the TAs step in, and obviously for him last year in Year 1 it was Mrs Lindsay. And she has such a soft spot for him you know. And I think that was the one positive, that fact that he'd always had a person, if not the main... because it was never really the main teacher, more the TA, that he'd known. Erm... and twice they've gone up with him, so that is the only positive that you knew that he had that support within the class. So that was the one positive.

Interviewer	Yeah, that's really nice.	N/A
Jessica	I think I'd say obviously what we've already stated, their moving up and it's still kind of Reception type. Now I probably understand other kids are having their... they're probably doing a bit more learning, formal learning maybe. I don't know, I'm not in the class, but obviously for Alice [her child] and Billie [Simon's child], the way that they probably learn is through play, so I suppose they've brought that up... I mean I can kind of see down sides to it, but I see the up side to it more because it's what Alice likes. It's what she likes, it's what she knows, so her doing that, meaning that she's still learning, is like a big factor.	<p>RQ1, 2- Play-based approaches support inclusion.</p> <p>RQ1, 2- Attributing positive transition to practice changes.</p> <p>RQ2- Maintaining consistency between Reception and Year 1 environments.</p> <p>RQ2- Maintaining consistency of routines.</p> <p>RQ1, 2- Purposeful play-based learning in Year 1.</p> <p>RQ1- Parents compare progress with other children.</p>

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## 8.17 Appendix Q- Reflexive Thematic Analysis Phase Three (Generating Initial Themes)

### Images of Codes Sorted into Initial Themes



Topic 7  
Money  
resources.  
(5)

MS1.1.1.1	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.2	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.3	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.4	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.5	100%	100%

Individual  
Transition  
Planning  
(5)

MS1.1.1.1	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.2	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.3	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.4	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.5	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.6	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.7	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.8	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.9	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.10	100%	100%

RQ 2

```

graph TD
    RQ2((RQ 2)) --- Financial[Financial]
    RQ2 --- Communication[Communication]
    RQ2 --- Knowledge[Knowledge]
    RQ2 --- Skills[Skills]
    RQ2 --- Attitudes[Attitudes]
    Financial --- F1[Financial literacy]
    Financial --- F2[Financial planning]
    Financial --- F3[Financial management]
    Financial --- F4[Financial education]
    Financial --- F5[Financial awareness]
    Communication --- C1[Communication skills]
    Communication --- C2[Communication strategies]
    Communication --- C3[Communication tools]
    Communication --- C4[Communication resources]
    Communication --- C5[Communication networks]
    Knowledge --- K1[Knowledge of the world]
    Knowledge --- K2[Knowledge of the self]
    Knowledge --- K3[Knowledge of the community]
    Knowledge --- K4[Knowledge of the environment]
    Knowledge --- K5[Knowledge of the future]
    Skills --- S1[Skills for learning]
    Skills --- S2[Skills for working]
    Skills --- S3[Skills for living]
    Skills --- S4[Skills for citizenship]
    Skills --- S5[Skills for global citizenship]
    Attitudes --- A1[Attitudes for learning]
    Attitudes --- A2[Attitudes for working]
    Attitudes --- A3[Attitudes for living]
    Attitudes --- A4[Attitudes for citizenship]
    Attitudes --- A5[Attitudes for global citizenship]
  
```

Transition  
1  
(5)

MS1.1.1.1	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.2	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.3	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.4	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.5	100%	100%

Staff 2.  
Knowledge  
& Confidence  
Circles

MS1.1.1.1	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.2	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.3	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.4	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.5	100%	100%

Communication  
5  
(5)

MS1.1.1.1	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.2	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.3	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.4	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.5	100%	100%

Wider  
expectations  
8.

MS1.1.1.1	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.2	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.3	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.4	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.5	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.6	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.7	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.8	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.9	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.10	100%	100%

Flexibility  
of the  
Curriculum  
4

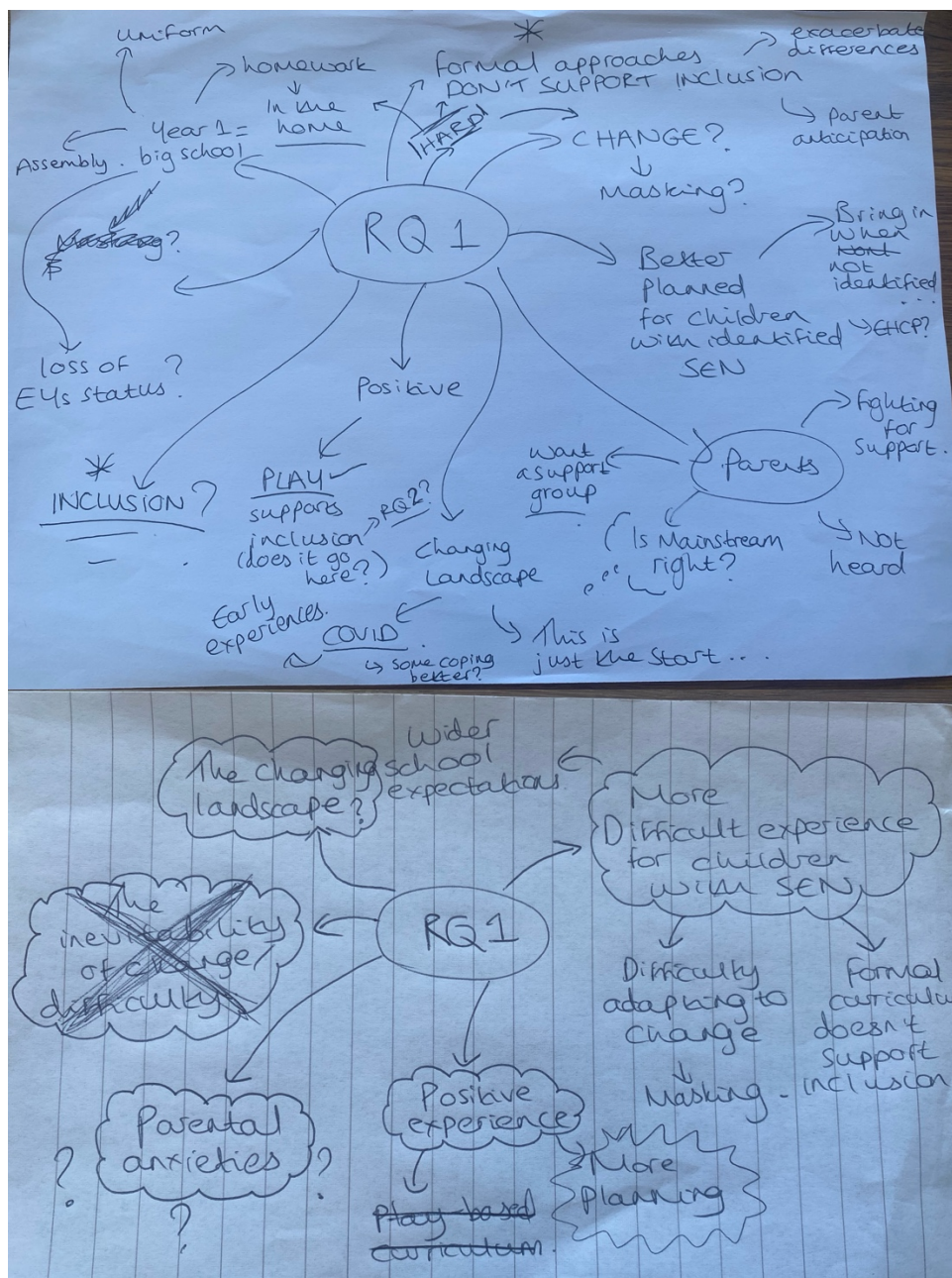
MS1.1.1.1	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.2	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.3	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.4	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.5	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.6	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.7	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.8	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.9	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.10	100%	100%

Consistency  
of curriculum  
and materials  
4

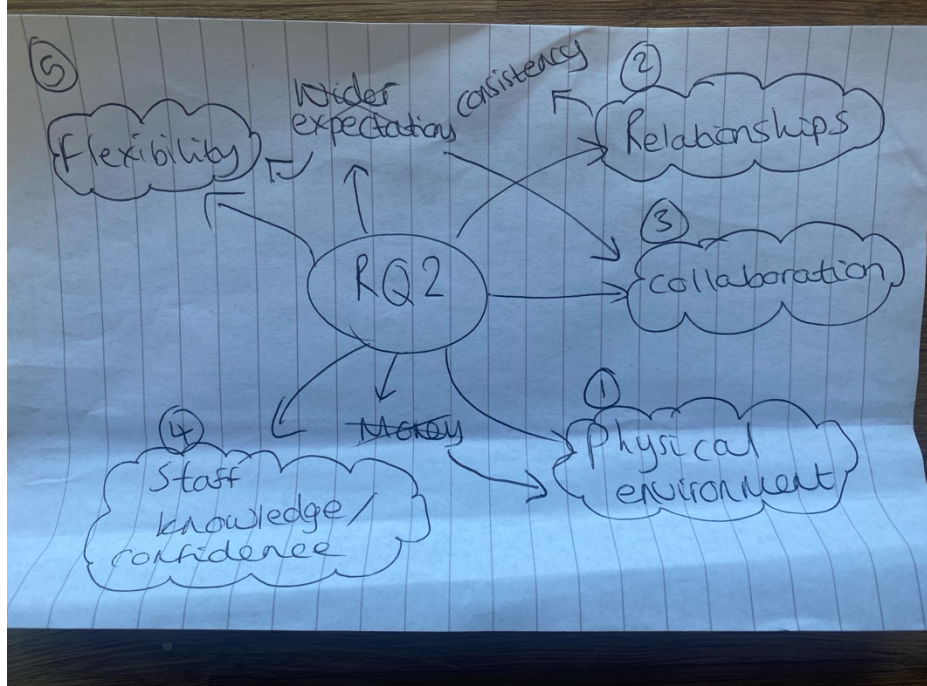
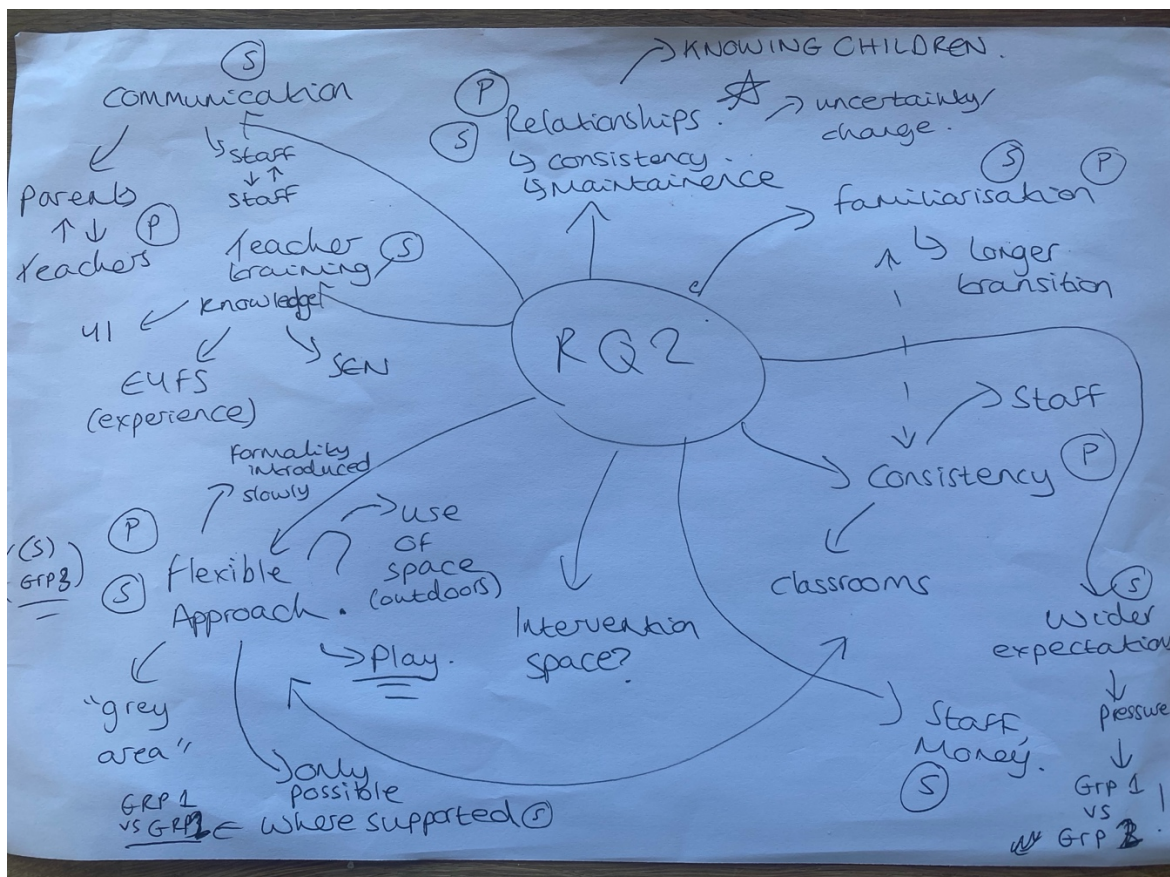
MS1.1.1.1	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.2	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.3	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.4	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.5	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.6	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.7	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.8	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.9	100%	100%
MS1.1.1.10	100%	100%

## 8.18 Appendix R- Reflexive Thematic Analysis Phase Four (Reviewing and Developing Themes)

### Examples of Thematic Map Iterations







## 8.19 Appendix S- Final Themes and their Contributing Codes (Reflexive Thematic Analysis)

**Table S.1**

*A Table to Show the Final Themes and their Contributing Codes*

Research Question	Theme/Subtheme	Codes
1	Theme 1- Transitions are more difficult for children with SEND.	See below.
1	Subtheme 1- Difficulty adapting to the formal teaching approaches of Year 1.	<p>The change to formal learning is sudden.</p> <p>Formal Y1 teaching impacts inclusion of pupils with SEND.</p> <p>Differences between children with and without SEND are greater when Y1 is more formal.</p> <p>Attainment gaps begin to increase in Y1.</p> <p>Children miss aspects of the Reception curriculum (play and choice).</p> <p>The curriculum in Y1 is narrower and focuses on academic skills only.</p>

1	Subtheme 2- The impact of whole school expectations.	Impact of increased wider school expectations.
1	Subtheme 3- The true impact of the transition is seen in the home.	Impact of transition is seen in the home (masking in school).
1	Theme 2- A difficult time for parents/carers.	<p>Parental anxiety around the transition to formal learning.</p> <p>Parents compare progress with other children.</p> <p>Parents question if mainstream school is right for their children.</p> <p>Parents struggling- e.g., feeling alone and blamed.</p> <p>Parents worry about future transitions.</p> <p>Staff attribute transition difficulties to parents/carers.</p>
1	Theme 3- Transitions are better planned and managed for children with SEND.	<p>Additional transition planning for children with SEND.</p> <p>Adapting Y1 provision for individual needs.</p> <p>Experience depends on whether needs are identified.</p> <p>Transition periods are longer for children with identified SEND.</p> <p>The SENCO's role in supporting children with SEND during the transition to Y1.</p>



		<p>The benefits of one-to-one support.</p> <p>Parents are happy with the support in place.</p> <p>Positive experiences of transition.</p>
1	Theme 4- The landscape is changing.	<p>Delayed identification of needs due to COVID-19 lockdowns.</p> <p>Lack of government response to the impact of COVID-19 on education.</p> <p>Reduced opportunities to socialise due to COVID-19 lockdowns.</p> <p>The impact of earlier education experiences on the transition.</p> <p>This transition is just the start.</p> <p>Increase in number of children with identified SEND.</p> <p>Recognition of the need to improve transition practices.</p>
2	Theme 5- The physical environment.	<p>Difference in the physical environments of Reception and Y1.</p> <p>Maintaining consistency between the Reception and Y1 environments.</p> <p>Y1 teachers adapting the classroom.</p> <p>Importance of familiarisation with new environments.</p> <p>Impact of the sensory environment.</p> <p>Use of tools to support communication and learning.</p> <p>Access to SEND hub or intervention space.</p>

2	Theme 6- Consistency of relationships.	<p>Importance of relationships between children and school staff.</p> <p>Staff transitioning with children.</p> <p>Building familiarisation with new teachers over time.</p> <p>Staff knowing the children well and understanding their needs.</p> <p>Uncertainty about Y1 staff as a hindering factor</p>
2	Theme 7- Strong collaboration.	<p>Importance of communication between all stakeholders.</p> <p>Importance of information sharing between staff.</p> <p>Relationships between staff and parents are important.</p> <p>Importance of information sharing between staff and parents.</p> <p>Leadership supporting transition practices and trusting staff opinions.</p> <p>Consistency of approaches across staff.</p> <p>Sharing information with children prior to the transition.</p>

2	Theme 8- Flexibility of curriculum delivery.	<p>Importance of flexibility.</p> <p>Introducing formality slowly.</p> <p>Purposeful play based approaches support inclusion.</p> <p>Transition will look different for every cohort.</p> <p>Child-led learning encourages independence.</p> <p>Considering children's interests.</p> <p>Prioritising outdoor learning.</p> <p>Creative ways to record work.</p> <p>Creating a ready Y1 classroom.</p> <p>Competing pressures as a hindering factor.</p> <p>Phonics screening as a hindering factor.</p> <p>Time/timetabling as a hindering factor</p> <p>Calls for wider government level change.</p>
2	Theme 9- Staff knowledge, skills and confidence.	<p>Staff knowledge and experience of EYFS.</p> <p>Staff knowledge of SEND and how to support children.</p> <p>The need for experienced and specialised teachers in Y1.</p> <p>The need for open, creative and bold Y1 teachers.</p> <p>The role of staff hard work, passion and enthusiasm.</p>

## 8.20 Appendix T- Ethical Approval Letter



School of Psychology

The University of Nottingham  
University Park  
Nottingham  
NG7 2RD

T: +44 (0)115 8467403 or (0)115 9514344

SJ/tp

Ref: **S1605**

Tuesday 7th May 2023

Dear Abigail Westwood & Maria Abijah-Liburd

### **Ethics Committee Review**

Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research 'What environmental factors facilitate/hinder a successful transition to Year 1 for children with special educational needs? Exploring the experiences and perspectives of school staff and parents/carers.'

That proposal has now been reviewed by the Ethics Committee and I am pleased to tell you that your submission has met with the committee's approval.

Final responsibility for ethical conduct of your research rests with you or your supervisor. The Codes of Practice setting out these responsibilities have been published by the British Psychological Society and the University Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns whatever during the conduct of your research, then you should consult those Codes of Practice. The Committee should be informed immediately should any participant complaints or adverse events arise during the study.

Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site. Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'S Jackson', written over a faint circular stamp.

*Professor Stephen Jackson  
Chair, Ethics Committee*

## 8.21 Appendix U- Participant Debrief Sheets

### *School Staff Debrief Sheet*

**School of Psychology**  
**Debrief Statement**



**The University of  
Nottingham**

UNITED KINGDOM • CHINA • MALAYSIA

**Name of Researcher:**

Abigail Westwood

**Email of Researcher:** Abigail.Westwood@nottingham.ac.uk

**Name of Supervisor:**

Maria Abijah-Liburd

**Email of Supervisor:**

lpama@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk

**Title of Study:**

What environmental factors facilitate/hinder a successful transition to Year 1 for children with special educational needs? Exploring the experiences and perspectives of school staff and parents/carers.

**A note from the researcher:**

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this focus group, and for supporting research into this highly important topic.

**What happens next?**

Following this focus group, the researcher will transcribe the recordings and remove any personal details to anonymise the information shared. The transcript will be analysed, alongside transcripts from other focus groups conducted with parents/carers and staff members from a range of mainstream primary schools across the local authority. The researcher will look for themes in the data, to identify recommendations which they hope will inform future practice in the focus area.

**Useful Resources:**

If you have been affected by any of the topics discussed during this focus group, please make use of the following resources and services:

- Education Support <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk> – A UK-based charity dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of teachers and education staff in schools, colleges and universities.
- The National Literacy Trust <https://literacytrust.org.uk/education-recovery/teacherwellbeing/> - A website which provides resources, advice and events to support school staff wellbeing.

If you require any further information regarding the study, or wish to withdraw from the research, please contact the researcher on the email address provided above. Please be aware, that the final date for withdrawal from the study will be two weeks after the focus group.

## Parent/Carer Debrief Sheet

School of Psychology

Debrief Statement



The University of  
Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM • CHINA • MALAYSIA

**Name of Researcher:**

Abigail Westwood

**Email of Researcher:**

Abigail.Westwood@nottingham.ac.uk

**Name of Supervisor:**

Maria Abijah-Liburd

**Email of Supervisor:**

lpama@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk

**Title of Study:**

What environmental factors facilitate/hinder a successful transition to Year 1 for children with special educational needs?  
Exploring the experiences and perspectives of school staff and parents/carers.

**A note from the researcher:**

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this focus group, and for supporting research into this highly important topic.

**What happens next?**

Following this focus group, the researcher will transcribe the recordings and remove any personal details to anonymise the information shared. The transcript will be analysed, alongside transcripts from other focus groups conducted with parents/carers and staff members from a range of mainstream primary schools across the local authority. The researcher will look for themes in the data, to identify recommendations which they hope will inform future practice.

**Useful Resources:**

If you have been affected by any of the topics discussed during this focus group, please make use of the following resources and services:

- The Information, Advice and Support Service [*link redacted*] - A free service providing impartial information, advice and support on matters relating to a child or young person's special educational needs or disability from birth to 25 years.
- [*Name and link redacted*]- Parent Carer Forum (made up of parents and carers of children and young people (0-25 years) who have a wide range of special educational needs and disabilities).
- Parent/Carer consultation Service [*link redacted*]- Offers a consultation of up to 30 minutes with a member of the Educational Psychology Service.
- Mencap <https://www.mencap.org.uk/advice-and-support/children-and-young-people/support-parents-and-carers-children-and-young-people> - A charity who work with children and young people with learning disabilities, their families and their carers.
- Samaritans <https://www.samaritans.org> - Offer 24/7 support for individuals experiencing mental health difficulties. To talk about anything that is upsetting you, you can contact Samaritans by calling **116 123** (free from any phone), emailing [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org) or visiting some branches in person.
- Shout <https://giveusashout.org> - If you would prefer not to talk but want some mental health support, you could text SHOUT to 85258. Shout offers a confidential 24/7 text service providing support if you are in crisis and need immediate help.

If you require any further information regarding the study, or wish to withdraw from the research, please contact the researcher on the email address provided above. Please be aware, that the final date for withdrawal from the study will be two weeks after the focus group.

## 8.22 Appendix V- Themes and Their Associated Participant Groups

**Table V.1**

*A Table to Identify Which Groups Contributed towards Each Theme (with Illustrative Examples)*

Theme	Groups in which the theme was identified	Illustrative Examples
Subtheme 1- Difficulty adapting to the formal teaching approaches of Year 1.	School staff- groups A, B and C. Parents/carers- groups A and D.	<p>School staff</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Megan (staff group A): <i>“we’ve been able to support the children to integrate in the classroom, majority of children...It might be that further throughout the year when it does get more formal and the expectations and the work get higher that they sort of tend to stand out a little bit more [children with SEND]”.</i></li> <li>• Heidi (staff group B): <i>“I think from my perspective as well, the SEND children that have come up are finding it more difficult to get the structured routine in, with lessons and stuff because they still keep asking “when are we going to do so-and-so” what they used to in Reception”.</i></li> <li>• Martha (staff group C): <i>“because they’re used to doing that in Early Years aren’t they [making choices] ...particularly SEN children. We’ve got resources which enable them, even if they’re non-verbal, to show</i></li> </ul>

---

*us images to show us things, Makaton, symbols and things, to choose, and they go to Year 1 and a lot of that choice aspect is taken away”.*

Parents/carers

- Jessica (parent/carer group A): *“when it comes to the more sitting down... she can’t sit still either, she cannot stay in her seat. So the more sitting down it gets... I know the teachers are going to struggle, they know they are because we’ve already spoke about it”.*
- Sarah (parent/carer group D): *“I think for Elliott, my biggest concern for him was the lack of choice and freedom [in Y1] ...academically he was more than ready, he loves learning, he’s very interested, but he likes to do things on his terms”.*

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Subtheme 2- The impact of whole school expectations.

School staff- group C.  
Parents/carers- groups A and D.

School staff

- Martha (staff group C): *“they’re just getting used to all these things that we’ve already spoken about all the timetabling issues, all the expectations, and then you throw extracurricular things at them that they don’t actually need to do. Why are they being pushed to do that in autumn term?”*

Parents/carers

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Alexander (parent/carer group A): <i>"I think something that I picked up on was two things that your daughters found difficult, assembly, RML [phonics]. Charlie struggled with both of those as well"</i>.</li> <li>Sarah (parent/carer group D): <i>"For Elliott it was going to Assembly... he had times where he just didn't go into assembly last year because it was just too much for him"</i>.</li> </ul>
Subtheme 3- The true impact of the transition is seen in the home.	Parents/carers- groups A and D.	Parents/carers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jessica (parent/carer group A): <i>"she was coming home, her sleeping was going all over the place, she wouldn't eat properly. Just anything that's sets her routine back, she then acts out in different ways"</i>.</li> <li>Nina (parent/carer group D): <i>"My son was more like... shy, so he wouldn't speak up. Then he would come home and say "oh, I'm sitting by so and so and I don't want to sit there"</i>.</li> </ul>
Theme 2- A difficult time for parents/carers.	School staff- groups A and B. Parents/carers- groups A and D.	School staff <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Megan (KS1 lead/Y1 teacher): <i>"We have quite a few parents with anxiety... struggling to leave the children and actually we found that the children were fine coming back [to Y1] but lots of the parents were worried about the children coming back"</i>.</li> <li>Lisa (staff group B): <i>"I think a lot of our parents since COVID, they, is it the word Moddy coddling? Needy... they're really like, babying the children now, you know"</i>.</li> </ul>

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Parents/carers		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jessica (parent carer group A): <i>"I always kind of try and picture how things are going to play out. So all over the six weeks all I did was panicking how she's going to be".</i></li> <li>• Nina (parent/carers group D): <i>"I was stressed. More stressed than him. I was panicking, oh is it going to be another part-time year for him?"</i></li> </ul>		
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Theme 3- Transitions	School staff- groups A, B	School staff
are better planned	and C.	
and managed for	Parents/carers- groups A	
children with SEND.	and D.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anita (staff group A): <i>"[they had] lots more earlier opportunities and that drip feeding of seeing those members of staff... having more opportunities possibly than... your typical Reception child, they had more opportunities to go up and see what that environment was like and what the members of staff were like".</i></li> <li>• Liz (staff group B): <i>"the SEND children probably have maybe a better transition than the other children, because they have got that consistency of things that were familiar to them in Reception but have continued into Year 1".</i></li> <li>• Kate (staff group C): <i>"I think it's more of the way it should be for the rest of the children because there is more flexibility, so they get time for sensory breaks, they know it's short 5-minutes of work then they move on to what they want to choose to do, so it is like a choosing</i></li> </ul>		
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*time for those children... So there is that flexibility more for the SEN children than there is [for other children]”.*

Parents/carers

- Jessica (parent/carer group A): *“her teachers walking her round the classroom beforehand was amazing... introducing it to them before the six weeks, quite early on... and telling them how it’s going to be and different things... it then became routine to go to that classroom”.*
- Helen (parent/carer group D): *“I feel like they’re doing everything they can to get him in [to the Y1 classroom], he’s got his own little desk, he loves numbers so he’s got numbers all across his desk... And I feel like they’ve made it quite inviting for him, because it’s his special interest, numbers, he loves it”.*

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Theme 4- The landscape is changing.	School staff- groups A, B and C. Parents/carers- groups A and D.	<p>School staff</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lydia (staff group A): <i>“I think schools in general just need to start... thinking ahead and adapting more. And schooling as we know it isn’t going to be the same is it? It’s going to be completely different. Whether that’s a COVID thing or a SEN thing or a parenting thing or finance I don’t know”.</i></li> <li>• Rick (staff group B): <i>“we mentioned earlier it’s that sort of COVID generation coming through, I think a lot of these children will have missed sort of key milestone appointments when they were younger.</i></li> </ul>
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*And I think there'll be a lot of missed opportunities to diagnose any particular needs or specific needs that they might have".*

- Ruth (staff group C): *I think because we changed it then, we knew that there was massive impacts but... I think some people would probably see more of the changes [since COVID-19]. I think because we spotted it quite quickly we made changes".*

#### Parents/carers

- Claire (parent/carer group A): *"I felt like the pandemic was really the beginning of our nightmare wasn't it? Because he had his...two year check during the pandemic, which was online. And if it hadn't been online, there might have been more noticeable factors if we'd actually visited someone in person...So I feel like the pandemic really took a toll, especially on the kids that were having developmental checks at that time, because a lot of it was missed, completely missed. That could have been prevented, and obviously the ball could have been moving a lot quicker and you know, support".*
  - Sarah (parent/carer group D): *"I think definitely for Elliott it impacted, because prior to COVID we were doing a lot of like playgroups, meet ups, baby classes, well toddler classes....and he's an only child. So when we went into lockdown, there was just him at home as a child".*
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Theme 5- The physical environment.	School staff- groups A, B and C. Parents/carers- groups A and D.	<p>School staff</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anita (staff group A): <i>“I think the smallest thing as well, they’ve walked into the classroom and they’ve seen toys and I think that’s been, just visually, seeing toys, new toys, that was a big tick straight away... And seeing the classroom not in those you know, five sets of three tables and everything is so clean and just sterile”.</i></li> <li>• Rick (staff group B): <i>“I think there needs to be similarities to the Early Years environment”.</i></li> <li>• Ruth (staff group C): <i>“The classroom’s not big enough. That is a big thing for SEND children is the lack of space when you get to Year 1... one of the Year 1 classrooms is very small, and you literally can just fit the desks in there”.</i></li> </ul> <p>Parents/carers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jessica (parent/carer group A): <i>“I think they’ve kept the classroom structure very similar... for Alice... it’s like being at home with just the furniture moved around... So I think that made it easier, whereas if you were to probably stick her in a classroom now, with like a desk and two chairs... very formal, sitting down, learning, she wouldn’t want to go in there, she’d probably cry “no””.</i></li> <li>• Nina (parent/carer group D): <i>“the fact that they strip it of toys and it just looks like a normal classroom, I think that’s a shock for them. I</i></li> </ul>
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		<i>think they should have something... just to remind them that they are still children and they can still play".</i>
Theme 6- Consistency of relationships.	School staff- groups A, B and C. Parents/carers- groups A and D.	<p>School staff</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lydia (staff group A): <i>"I think at least one person has transitioned with the children and I think that's helpful, they've got someone they can relate to".</i></li> <li>• Lisa (staff group B): <i>"we're quite fortunate here often if there's a SEN child with a one-to-one, you might get a chance for that one-to-one to move up with that child or at least be around or still be part of that child's day".</i></li> <li>• Ruth (staff group C): <i>"that class has struggled that little bit more [with the transition], and potentially that could have been a little bit a part of their struggle, is that they weren't able to form a relationship... And I think that can have a massive impact, particularly with SEND children".</i></li> </ul> <p>Parents/carers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alexander (parent/carer group A): <i>"There was one positive, when he moved from Reception to Year 1, Mrs Green [TA] moved up with him. Like you said about how they become attached to one person".</i></li> <li>• Helen (parent/carer group D): <i>"I don't feel like he's got that same relationship with the Year 1 teacher [compared to his Reception</i></li> </ul>

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*teacher]... he's hardly spent any time with her at all... he could have done with the time before to try and get used to her... but he hasn't really had the chance to get that relationship because he's not going in there. But would he have gone in if he'd had that relationship with her sooner?"*

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Theme 7- Strong collaboration.	School staff- groups A, B and C. Parents/carers- groups A and D.	<p>School staff</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tracey (staff group A): <i>"We've all worked so closely together [Reception and Y1 staff]. We've spoke so much about the children and what they're like, you know what triggers them. So they was all prepared when they moved up and knew exactly what was going to happen. Staff knew with a trigger what would happen".</i></li> <li>• Rick (staff group B): <i>"I think there needs to be more conversations between sort of Reception class teachers and Year 1 class teachers. I think we need to get TAs involved at all points. I think SENCO needs to sort of take the lead, particularly with the SEND children, take the lead in facilitating those conversations, because it's the only real way that we'll get that transition and make it more effective"</i></li> <li>• Kate (staff group C): <i>"we're really lucky actually, that last half term we do get time with the teacher to hand over...it's not just a half an hour gap either, you know. We've had a document to fill in to actually put a personalised comment about every single child".</i></li> </ul>
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	Parents/carers	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Claire (parent/carer group A): <i>"They're only seeing a school side, there is another side to these children. And it sort of impacts the other... I think they definitely need to sit with parents and get a full view of a child... in order to be able to put things in place for a particular child"</i>.</li><li>• Helen (parent/carer group D): <i>"[A] meeting with parents and teachers, before the term starts, so we're expressing what their struggles are, what they're good at, like that one page profile, but being able to discuss it with the teacher"</i>.</li></ul>	
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Theme 8- Flexibility of curriculum delivery.	School staff- groups A, B and C.  Parents/carers- groups A and D.	School staff <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Megan (staff group A): <i>"Year 1 in autumn term now, it does feel like Reception, doesn't it? And actually, I keep forgetting that we're only four weeks in and they've responded so well to that because they've had that consistency... they've settled really well. So I think moving forward we've already started to add a little bit more formality in because they've been able to cope with it, including the SEN children"</i>.</li><li>Rick (staff group B): <i>"We've tried both... putting the more sort of continuous provision approach into Year 1... with mixed results to be completely honest. And so our emphasis has really been on putting the structure in, or as much structure as you can in a Reception"</i></li></ul>
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*classroom... And it seems as though that's [had] more impact on what we wanted with that effective transition into Year 1".*

- Kate (staff group C): *"I had a really strong class last year. So I actually brought it forward [formal learning] because they were accessing the learning... Then Louise's class were a completely different cohort, so she held back, and that's ok".*

Parents/carers

- Simon (parent/carer group A): *"I think it is better because just imagine this, you've got the colour white and the colour black, they've made a grey in the middle. So that it just doesn't go from one to the other".*
- Helen (parent/carer group D): *"maybe when they first go into Year 1, it should be like a term I think, even for the other kids, where they are just kind of getting familiar with each other, getting familiar with Year 1. And then it's kind of like more structured if that makes sense after a term or maybe even half a term".*

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Theme 9- Staff knowledge, skills and confidence.	School staff- groups A, B and C. Parents/carers- group A.	School staff
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tracey (staff group A): <i>"I think in previous years you've lost the commentary approach in Year 1 and like you say, it's just putting toys out for the sake of putting toys out".</i></li> </ul>

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- Rick (staff group B): *“I think you’ll find that staff that have never taught in Early Years, they have that, it’s very much a misconception isn’t it really, that it’s just playing”.*
  - Martha (staff group B): *“you need that child development knowledge still in Year 1, and Year 2. Particularly those SEND children, if they are developmentally 12, 18 months behind then you need to be looking at the Early Years curriculum and child development things”.*

Parents/carers

- Simon (parent/carer group A): *“more teachers. And one-to-one. And specialist teachers”.*
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## **8.23 Appendix W- Examples of Reflexive Journal Excerpts**

### ***W.1 Example Excerpt 1- 23.09.2024, Before the First Focus Group***

My first focus group is taking place tomorrow, with members of school staff. At times it felt like this day would never come. I feel a mixture of emotions, including anticipation and excitement. I am conscious of the fact I haven't completed a pilot study, so I am uncertain how the questions will be received and the kind of discussions they will elicit. I am also very aware of my lack of experience in qualitative research; however, I am hopeful my experience of facilitating group processes as a TEP has provided me with some transferrable skills. I spent time this evening considering different scenarios and how I would respond but ultimately accepted that the beauty of qualitative research is that you never know what will come from it.

### ***W.2 Example Excerpt 2- 24.09.2024, Following the Completion of the First Focus Group with School Staff***

I feel a huge sense of achievement and relief having facilitated my first focus group with members of school staff. The discussion was richer than I could have ever predicted. The semi-structured script worked well, allowing flexibility but also ensuring the collection of data relevant to the RQs. I felt I remained neutral throughout the focus group, not expressing any of my own views. However, it is difficult to say whether my non-verbal cues gave any indication of my views. I felt that many of the views being expressed by staff were consistent with my own views regarding transition support, for example a belief in the value of play-based learning within Y1. Immediately after the focus group, I questioned whether I had subconsciously taken more notice of views consistent with my own. However, after listening back to parts of the recording, it seems my recall of the nature of the views expressed within the focus group was accurate. I wonder if I will experience a different emotional response if participants within other groups express views which

contradict my own. If so, it'll be even more important that I remain neutral, so as not to encourage social desirability bias in participant responses.

I had previous professional relationships with some members of this focus group, through my work as a primary school teacher prior to starting the doctorate. I was unsure how this would impact the views expressed, however, I feel it had a positive effect, as a rapport already existed between me and participants. I wonder whether I will receive the same level of openness and honesty from focus groups where there are no pre-existing relationships between me and participants.

### ***W.3 Example Excerpt 3- 22.01.2025, Following the Completion of the Second Focus Group with Parents/Carers***

At times, I thought the recruitment of a second parent/carer group would not be possible, so I was overjoyed to be able to conduct this group at the end of my data collection window. In comparison to the first parent/carer focus group, conversation remained more relevant to the RQs. I wonder what this reflected about parental experiences. Were the emotions of parents/carers at this setting more contained by members of school staff, so they felt less need to use the focus group as an outlet for more general frustrations and to seek support from others? Or had I honed my skills as a facilitator, so I was able to redirect discussion more effectively to avoid too many digressions? This leads me to consider whether my lack of experience when facilitating the first focus groups impacted the quality of the data gathered.

I am conscious that I have completed more staff groups than parent/carer groups. However, I am confident that the data gathered through the two parent/carer focus groups is sufficiently rich to begin data analysis. On reflection, I feel that more diverse views were expressed within parent/carer groups, compared to staff groups. This may be because staff within each focus group worked within the same context and had a shared experience of supporting children during the transition to Y1, therefore sharing more similar views, whereas parents/carers each had a unique experience of the transition period.

#### ***W.4 Example Excerpt 4- 08.01.2025, Data Transcription***

Although I've had many warnings, the time required to complete the manual transcription of focus group recordings has still surprised me. The first couple of days of transcription were clunky, and I felt like this task could potentially take months' worth of study time. However, I eventually got into a good rhythm, and the task slowly began to look more achievable. Now I am over halfway through, I am so glad I chose to manually transcribe my data. I feel so familiar with it and have noticed potential themes across the dataset already.

An interesting reflection I made whilst transcribing my data was how my knowledge of the contexts in which the data was collected supported my understanding of the views expressed by participants. My brain subconsciously filled the metaphorical gaps within potentially ambiguous statements, for example, when staff used names of specific provisions on offer within the setting or referenced particular members of school staff. It is important I make these things explicit when reporting my findings, and do not assume the reader has any knowledge of either the specific contexts in which the research was conducted, or of the research topic more generally.

#### ***W.5 Example Excerpt 5- 01.02.2025, Preparing for Data Analysis***

On completing data transcription, I expected to feel a great sense of relief that one enormous task was done, and I could move on to the next stage of my research. However, instead I felt a new wave of anxiety regarding how to manage the data analysis process. Many of the examples of RTA I've seen or heard about involved printing transcripts and manually coding data, before generating themes by physically sorting the extracts into groups. My research has generated a large amount of data. Thinking about printing off the transcripts and organising and managing the data in an efficient way made me feel overwhelmed. However, a colleague told me about NVivo, and how they used it to organise and manage their own data during the RTA process. I don't consider myself the best with technology but thought it worth looking into. After an afternoon exploring the programme, I have gotten to grips with the basics and am feeling much better about embarking on my

data analysis journey. Organising the transcripts electronically suits my way of working, and I feel far less overwhelmed focusing on one transcript at a time on my computer screen, rather than staring at a pile of papers and wandering where to start. Now I have found an approach to data analysis which I think will work for me, I feel excited to continue my journey and delve into my data.

### ***W.6 Excerpt Example 6- 17.02.2025, Familiarisation (RTA Phase 1)***

Heading into this stage of analysis, I already felt pretty familiar with my dataset. I have been immersed in the data for several months, as I facilitated all the focus groups and manually transcribed each one. This involved listening to the whole dataset from start to finish and playing many sections several times to ensure accurate transcription. Having previously taught in both Reception and Year 1 during my time as a teacher, many of the topics raised during the focus groups felt familiar to me. Often, examples given or anecdotes shared reminded me of my own experiences in the classroom. Through gathering data and completing the familiarisation phase of analysis, I have already noticed the presence of patterns across the dataset, as well as differences in views.

Something which struck me when listening back to the focus groups was the supportive and emotionally containing nature of the conversations. Particularly for parents/carers, it felt like the focus groups provided an opportunity to discuss shared or similar experiences with others who they may not have otherwise spoken with. This brought me joy, as I felt the focus groups had positively impacted participants.

As I complete the familiarisation process, I feel excited about embarking on the next stage of my data analysis. Listening back through the recordings, I felt privileged that so many people had shared their views and experiences with me. I had not realised how emotionally invested I would become within the research process. I hope the outcomes of my research do justice to the wonderful people who have participated in it. Although the amount of data is slightly overwhelming, I am incredibly excited to start the next stage of analysis and begin unpicking and exploring my data in a more systematic way.

### ***W.7 Example Excerpt 7- Coding 21.02.2025, (RTA Phase 2)***

The past week of coding has felt very intense, and at times overwhelming. However, I have greatly enjoyed becoming more critically engaged with the data. I did notice a tendency when I began coding to generate codes which were consistent with the literature or my own experiences of supporting children and families during the transition to Y1. Therefore, I made a conscious effort to identify novel ideas and meanings which had not emerged from other research and generate codes which were not reflective of ideas from the existing evidence base. I was surprised that many extracts were attached to multiple codes, whilst others were attached to just one, or even none. Seeing extracts with multiple attached codes gave me confidence in my analysis as I felt it showed that I was considering a range of meanings and avoiding foreclosure of analysis. This stage of my analysis has been focused at the micro-level, and I am now eager to take a step back and engage with the dataset as a whole, so I can begin identifying themes.

### ***W.8 Example Excerpt 8- 28.02.2025, Generating Initial Themes (RTA Phase 3)***

This stage of the data analysis process has been the most enjoyable to date. Seeing patterns form across the dataset has been exciting and given me a renewed sense of optimism towards my research. Already, I feel that the themes being generated are enlightening and will be applicable to practice. As my ultimate goal is for my research to be used to improve the experiences of children during their transition to Y1, this prospect makes me feel very happy! Currently I feel slightly overwhelmed by the number of themes I have, partly because I have multiple RQs to address. I feel that my problem may be that I'm trying to find a way to include everything expressed within focus groups, rather than focusing on the most significant patterns which offer the most insightful and relevant responses to my RQs. Learning to let go of codes which are less relevant and prevalent within the data is something which I need to become more comfortable with, to ensure I do not end up with a shallow interpretation of my data.

***W.9 Example Excerpt 9- 02.03.2025, Reviewing Themes (RTA Phase 4)***

I've been feeling quite overwhelmed this week. Everything is taking so much longer than I expected. Deadlines are creeping up, but I really want to do my participants and data justice. Focusing on one day at a time seems the best approach at the moment, as well as being kind to myself and knowing my limits. Although it's been a hard week, reminding myself of the purpose of my research has helped to keep me motivated.

***W.10 Example Excerpt 10- 10.03.2025 Writing up my Findings (RTA Phase 6)***

Today I started writing up my findings. At times over the past weeks and months, I felt this day would never come! I started the day with feelings of anticipation. I have so many great quotes for every theme, and so many possible avenues to explore, but I know I must work to ensure my write-up does not exceed the word limit allowed for my thesis. This will involve identifying the most important extracts and points, which tell the most compelling story about the data. Being concise has never been my strong suit. I have a tendency to try and include everything, so this will certainly be a test. However, I am also excited to see my data analysis come together in a way which tells a story of the findings to future readers. I can't wait to share the outcomes of the research with others, and to ensure the voices of my participants are heard.