

# An exploration into the implications of the Covid-19 restrictions on the transition from Early Years Education to Key Stage 1 for children with special educational needs and disability – a comparative study

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**This small-scale comparative study explores how the coronavirus pandemic has impacted on the transition from Early Years Education to Key Stage 1 (KS1) for children with special educational needs and disability (SEND) in a SEND specialist school in the UK. Two focus group interviews were conducted with nine professionals who work across three KS1 classes for pupils with moderate learning difficulties at a SEND specialist provision setting. This study aimed to compare their experiences and observations of how the children responded to this significant transition in September 2020, in the context of the coronavirus restrictions, and how their practice, provision and transitional support were adapted to meet the needs of the children and to adhere to the changing Covid-19 guidance. The novel findings of this study revealed that the professionals observed significant disruptions and delays in children's independence skills and social and emotional skills, and in adhering to behavioral expectations, in comparison to cohorts in previous academic years. Additionally, the study identified**

**a lack of consistent and systematic educational guidance during the coronavirus pandemic and a significant difference in transitional support practices due to the coronavirus restrictions.**

**Key words:** coronavirus, special educational needs and disability, transitional support, transition to school, impact of Covid-19 on transition

## **Introduction and rationale**

The transition from Early Years Education (EYE) to Key Stage 1 (KS1) is one of the most significant compulsory transitions that children experience during their childhood (Sharp et al., 2006). Substantial transitions and changes, such as transitioning from an EYE setting (aged 0 to 5 years) to a formal KS1 (aged 5+) school setting, can cause anxiety and distress in children with special educational needs and disability (SEND) which, in turn, can trigger responses or behavior that can be perceived as challenging. Retrospectively, changes to routine and behavioral expectations can impact on learners with SEND and cause feelings of fear and anxiety (Evans et al., 2018; Sharp et al., 2006). Consequently, it is paramount that practitioners utilize an integrated approach, which is a learner-centred approach whereby the environment and context are centred around the needs and interests of the child or young person (Lynch & Irvine, 2009). Research and legislation assert that utilizing an integrated approach to promoting school readiness and independence ensures that children and young people with SEND are supported through this transition and are as well prepared for these changes as possible (DfE & DoH, 2015; Martin et al., 2019; Waters & Friesen, 2019).

However, the concept of school readiness is heavily debated within SEND education, as it can manipulate children to fit within a standardized education system that may not necessarily meet their potentially complex learning, well-being and personal needs (Lynch & Soni, 2021). Consequently, experienced SEND professionals possess the flexibility to make reasonable adjustments to their practice and provision to meet the needs of children with SEND to ensure that learners are aware of and prepared for the changes involved in this transition, such as changes to routine and behavioral and learning expectations (Blair & Raver, 2015; Marsh et al., 2017). In the context of this study, the concept of school readiness concerns how children respond to the transition from EYE to KS1 and whether they are behaviourally and emotionally prepared for the transition.

The coronavirus pandemic, also referred to as Covid-19, has significantly impacted on education and society globally and has prompted changes to education in response to changing guidance, rules and restrictions (Farnell et al., 2021; Onyeaka et al., 2021; Verma & Prakash, 2020). Schools and EYE settings in England initially closed in 2020, and a second time in 2021 (DfE, 2021). The school closures, the coronavirus restrictions and the social distancing guidance have caused significant disruption to the educational experiences of children during the September 2020 to July 2021 academic year (Viner et al., 2020).

It is common practice for practitioners to utilize transitional strategies to promote school readiness during EYE to prepare children with SEND for the transition, including implementing more structured lessons within the EYE setting and implementing transitional visits to the new formal school setting before the change has occurred. This is so that children become more familiarized with the new school, behavioral expectations and routines (DfE & DoH, 2015; Fleury et al., 2015; Harper, 2016; Marsh et al., 2017; Sharp et al., 2006).

However, during the September 2020 to July 2021 academic year, education professionals had to make significant adaptations to their transitional provision in light of the coronavirus restrictions and social distancing, which prevented many of these strategies from being used. This study explored how KS1 teaching staff in a specialist provision setting have worked around these restrictions to support children with SEND through the transition from EYE to KS1.

### *Managing changes to routine for children with SEND*

Research and legislation assert that it is paramount for teachers and other education professionals to consider the potentially complex needs of children with SEND within their planning and provision (DfE & DoH, 2015; Webster & De Boer, 2019). They are obligated to adhere to relevant inclusion legislation and principles, including the 2015 SEND Code of Practice, formulated and enforced by the Department for Education and the Department of Health (DfE & DoH, 2015). This statutory guidance promotes educational equity and diversity within provision and practice, and asserts that through differentiation and inclusive pedagogical practices, the learning needs of the children are met, and consequently, they are facilitated to reach their full academic potential (DfE & DoH, 2015; King et al., 2017; Webster & De Boer, 2019).

It is common for children and young people with SEND to experience difficulties or challenges as a result of changes to their lives or daily routines (Sevin et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2012). This can include more significant life

changes, such as transitioning to a new school, and changes to daily routines which are considered to be milder or temporary, such as unexpectedly having a supply teacher, which may also cause children with SEND to experience anxiety or distress (Ledgerton, 2013; Richler et al., 2010).

Research emphasizes the importance of pre-warning children with SEND before changes occur, to allow them to have the necessary additional time to process what will happen and prepare for the shift (Denning & Moody, 2013; Smith et al., 2012). In education, it is the role of education professionals to support the children in their care through transitions and prepare them for changes and unfamiliar experiences, to reduce anxiety in response to changes to routine (DfE & DoH, 2015; Sevin et al., 2015).

Consequently, practitioners utilize strategies and provisions to prevent or reduce the disruption of routine – a common example in mainstream and specialist education settings is displaying a visual timetable in the learning environment to promote regularity and routine (Gage & van Dijk, 2018; Wearmouth & Butler, 2020). Such strategies help prepare children before the change occurs and support them through transitions, preparing them for what is going to happen and when and reducing negative responses to the disruption of routine.

Therefore, if children with SEND are prepared prior to changes happening, rather than the changes being completely unexpected, and are supported before, during and after transitions, research indicates that this will reduce anxiety and negative responses to the disruption in routine, along with decreasing the likelihood of emotional reactions, anxiety-induced frustration or behavior that may be perceived as challenging (Macdonald et al., 2018; Zimmerman et al., 2017).

#### *The importance of preparing children with SEND for the transition to KS1*

Transitioning from EYE to KS1 is a critical aspect of all children's educational journeys. In a UK specialist provision setting, much of EYE is typically based in a nursery setting or a reception classroom, while KS1 is found within a school classroom setting and is children's emergent experience of formal schooling (Besi & Sakellariou 2019; Zeedyk et al., 2003). In the school where this study was conducted, the learners transitioned from the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) area of the school, into the KS1 area, as the moderate learning difficulties (MLD) classes are grouped by nature of need, rather than specifically by ages.

It is paramount to promote a successful transition so that children feel a sense of belonging to their new school environment. In turn, this improves their experiences of education (Cronin et al., 2022). Bowlby's (1988) theory of attachment establishes children's innate, or principal, emotional attachments and a reluctance to separate from these attachments. Similarly, Ainsworth's theory suggests that children who have secure attachments with their carers may experience anxiety or distress in unfamiliar situations and when they are parted from their primary carers (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). In the context of transitioning from EYE to KS1, if children have not previously attended an EYE setting, KS1 may be their first experience away from their parents or carers, and potential separation anxiety may pose an emotionally challenging response (DfE & DoH, 2015; Norton et al., 2010; Sharp et al., 2006).

There are many changes that a child experiences before, during and after this educational transition has occurred, and consequently, the impacts of these changes can be more challenging and profound for a pupil with SEND (Marsh et al., 2017; Besi & Sakellariou, 2019). The social, behavioral and learning expectations of KS1 differ from the rules of the EYFS classroom, and there are advanced expectations for learning as children transition from learning through play to following a more formalized curriculum (Fisher, 2011; Sharp et al., 2006; Whitebread & Bingham, 2014).

Therefore, it is imperative for practitioners to utilize an integrated approach, which is a learner-centred approach whereby the environment and context are centred around the needs and interests of the child or young person (Lynch & Irvine, 2009), to advocating school readiness and independence. This approach, endorsed by research and legislation, ensures that children with SEND are prepared for and supported through these changes (DfE & DoH, 2015; Martin et al., 2019; Waters & Friesen, 2019). If children with SEND are not prepared for this significant change, this poses the risk of them having a negative response to the new learning environment, which can have a substantial impact on their learning and development, as they may have less engagement in learning and be less likely to reach their full potential (Marsh et al., 2017; Fleury et al., 2015).

Retrospectively, educators must learn about each learner's individual learning preferences, abilities and interests, to ensure that provision is learner-centred and inclusive and to promote independence and social development to promote school readiness. Moreover, the EYFS mandatory

guidance acknowledges that parents and carers know their child best as their enduring educators (DfE, 2014) so it is paramount that educators work in collaboration with parents and carers to best meet the transitional needs of their child.

Support through important transition points is an area that is prevalent within education, health and care plans (EHCPs) (DfE & DoH, 2015). Effective transitional strategies to promote school readiness and independence that are endorsed in academic literature include utilizing social stories and role play, and implementing more structured English, Mathematics and phonics lessons in the EYE setting in advance of transitioning from a play-focused early years curriculum to the more structured KS1 curriculum (Fleury et al., 2015; Marsh et al., 2017; Sharp et al., 2006).

Furthermore, transitional visits are also an effective strategy to prepare learners for this vital educational transition. These visits can involve the child and their family visiting the new school setting and meeting the new teacher after school in advance of the transition occurring, and implementing visits to their new classroom during the school day for a morning or afternoon, and gradually increasing the time in their new classroom to a full day (Harper, 2016; Marsh et al., 2017; Sharp et al., 2006).

However, during the academic year of September 2020 to July 2021, professionals have had to make significant adaptations to their transitional provision in light of the coronavirus restrictions and social distancing, which may have prevented many of these strategies from being used over the course of the preparation and execution of the transition, and after the transition to KS1 has occurred. This study was carried out to explore how professionals who work with learners with SEND have had to adapt their transitional processes and what impacts these changes have had on children and young people with SEND.

#### *The impact of Covid-19 on the educational experiences of children with SEND*

The coronavirus pandemic has prompted extensive changes to education and society to manage and reduce cases of the disease, including the early closure of schools around the UK in 2020, and a second time in 2021; the transition from face-to-face learning in an educational setting to learning at home through online learning and distance learning opportunities; and the implementation of changing coronavirus-related guidance, rules and restrictions (Klimek-Tulwin & Tulwin, 2020; Viner et al., 2020). During

the school closures, children with parents who were key workers and children who were considered vulnerable could still go to school. Children with an EHCP were still allowed to go to school, as they are considered vulnerable (DfE, 2021).

The unpredictable changes to education due to the changing coronavirus guidance and legislation have impacted academic achievement and the well-being of children and young people – particularly learners with SEND (Eshraghi et al., 2020; Panovska-Griffiths et al., 2020; Sheikh et al., 2020). Studies by Crane et al. (2021) and Skipp et al. (2021) demonstrate the impact of the educational disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic on the educational experience and the learning and progression of learners with SEND. The findings of both studies emphasize how the pandemic has challenged all educational settings, and discuss the significant impact of the pandemic on children and young people in health and education contexts. The recommendations of both studies show the inconsistencies in educational practices that were identified during the pandemic and assert that positive changes within SEND education will be made to promote good, inclusive practice in the future (Crane et al., 2021; Skipp et al., 2021).

Due to the changing governmental guidance and the changes to education and the emerging research within this field, such as the studies acknowledged in this article so far, it is opportune to suggest that children transitioning from EYE to KS1 during the September 2020 to July 2021 academic year have had a completely different experience than children making this transition during previous years (Crane et al., 2021; Eshraghi et al., 2020; Sheikh et al., 2020).

#### *The impact of Covid-19 on the transition from EYE to KS1*

A study conducted by Bakopoulou et al. (2021) has investigated the impact of the Covid-19 restrictions on the transition from EYE to KS1 during the September 2020 to July 2021 academic year, through gathering data from mainstream primary school and EYFS practitioners. This study highlights the impact on the children after the transition has occurred, including language development, physical development, social and emotional skills and independence (Bakopoulou et al., 2021).

Building on the findings of the study conducted by Bakopoulou et al. (2021), this small-scale study focuses on the impact on children with a form of SEND and teaching staff in a specialist provision school, through interviewing KS1

education professionals. The goal of this study was to provide an opportunity for professionals who work within specialist provision schools to share their experiences of supporting learners with SEND during a global pandemic, to improve transitional practices in the future. This study adds a new perspective to the work of Bakopoulou et al. (2021) by further exploring the implications of the coronavirus restrictions on learners with SEND, within a specialist provision setting. Although similarities in the findings of this study and the study by Bakopoulou et al. (2021) were anticipated, this small-scale study provides opportunities for comparison between how teachers within mainstream education and teachers within SEND specialist provision have responded to the coronavirus guidance in relation to supporting learners through the transition from EYE to KS1.

## **Method**

### *Research questions*

The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. How has the coronavirus pandemic impacted on the transition from EYE to KS1 for children with SEND in a class for pupils with MLD in a specialist school?
2. What changes to practice were utilized by education professionals in relation to supporting learners through the transition from EYE to KS1?
3. From the perspective of education professionals, how did the changing coronavirus guidance impact on the transitional support and intervention that was utilized for children with SEND?

### *Research participants*

Two focus group interviews were conducted to gather the research data, with nine education professionals across three KS1 classes, who all work at the same specialist provision setting. The setting is a specialist school for communication and interaction, and the children in the KS1 classes have MLD, with the age range of learners in these classes ranging from five to nine years. The first interview was conducted in February 2021, and the second interview was conducted in September 2021. The professionals in the research sample include class teachers, teaching assistants who work in the classroom in a general context and support the class teacher, 1:1 teaching assistants who work on a 1:1 ratio with learners who have complex learning needs, and a student-teacher, who began working at the setting in September 2020. For both interviews, the same nine professionals participated, with the exception of the student-teacher, who no longer worked at the setting when the second interview took place in September 2021.



### *Research methods*

Two 60-minute focus group interviews were conducted. The nine education professionals worked across the two MLD lower KS1 classrooms located in the same corridor in the school setting. A focus group approach was utilized to obtain a true reflection of the experiences and observations of the KS1 teaching staff in supporting children during the coronavirus pandemic (Barbour & Morgan, 2017; Mann, 2016). The interview questions were open-ended questions that were addressed to all nine participants, to allow them to expand on their answers in more depth and provide examples to support their answers if necessary.

This approach was most time-efficient for the participants, and some cross-over in their responses was anticipated. Interviewing the participants as a focus group facilitated group discussion, and asking the nine participants the same questions during the group interview provided opportunities for comparison, as the professionals all work with the same age range, but each had their own unique experiences, perspectives and opinions (Barbour & Morgan, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Mann, 2016). Due to the then current coronavirus guidance, the first focus group interview was conducted virtually, utilizing Microsoft Teams. The second interview was conducted in person, in the school setting.

The British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2018) were adhered to throughout all processes of this study.

### *Analysis of research data*

After conducting and transcribing the interview, a thematic analysis approach was utilized to analyze and triangulate the findings and bring the research participants' perspectives together (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through coding the interview transcript, common themes within the interview were identified. This facilitated bringing together the responses from the nine participants to address the intended field of research (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). The coding of the interview transcript categorized the responses by theme instead of organizing the responses by who said it, which facilitated greater objectivity when analyzing the research data, as the responses were then anonymised. In turn, this increased the credibility of the research findings, as the participants were all valued equally, and the responses of all nine participants were included in the data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013; Sayer, 2000).

## Findings

Due to the coronavirus restrictions, it may not have been possible to use many of the previously effective strategies for preparing children for the transition from EYE to KS1, or adaptations may have been required to adhere to the coronavirus guidance. Table 1 demonstrates the various transitional strategies that the research participants found effective or successful during previous academic years in their professional practice. The table also shows the strategies that were implemented during the September 2020 academic year, in the context of the constraints posed by the coronavirus restrictions.

*'It was quite difficult this year, and we sort of worked on the spot as we only really knew about the child from their EHCP and virtual conversations with others, rather than meeting and observing the child before the transition.'* (Participant B)

It is evident that the coronavirus restrictions have had a significant impact on planning and provision, as the teaching staff revealed that due to not having this initial meeting before the transition occurred, their knowledge of each child, such as information on their individual interests and learning preferences, was not as extensive as it had been in previous academic years.

At the setting where this study was conducted, classroom visits and initial meetings between the KS1 teaching staff, each child and their families were conducted virtually. Furthermore, the class teacher filmed a video tour of the classroom and video introductions from the teaching staff, as previously effective in-person visits and 'taster' visits, where each EYE pupil would spend a morning or afternoon in the current KS1 class to meet their new teacher and experience the routines and behavioral expectations of their new school, were not possible due to social bubbles and social distancing legislation.

During the interview, the participants also perceived that the transition from in-person to virtual transitional support was challenging for the children. Upon completing a process of thematic analysis to analyze and triangulate the research data, three common themes were identified in the responses of the research participants: independence; behavior; and social and emotional skills. We now look at each of these in turn.

**Table 1: A comparison of utilized transitional strategies**

	Transitional strategies that have been effective during previous academic years	Transitional strategies that were utilized and adapted during the academic year of September 2020 to July 2021
<b>Before the transition</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre-transitional visits to the new school to visit their classroom and meet their new teacher face-to-face</li> <li>• 'Faster' visit: the child visits the current KS1 class for a morning or afternoon when they are in EYE</li> <li>• School-based videos, books, social stories and role-play activities in EYE</li> <li>• Face-to-face (preferable) or written communication and collaboration between the EYE and KS1 setting, the parents or carers and any external agencies to discuss meeting the needs of the child</li> <li>• Providing parents with a written information booklet and introductory letter from the KS1 teacher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Virtual initial meetings between the child and their parents or carers and the new KS1 teacher</li> <li>• Filmed a video tour of the classroom and video introductions from the teaching staff, as in-person visits were limited due to social bubbles</li> <li>• Providing parents with a written information booklet and introductory letter from the KS1 teacher</li> <li>• KS1 teacher briefly introduced herself to the children who already attended the school</li> <li>• Virtual meetings with parents and carers and other relevant agencies or professionals over Microsoft Teams</li> <li>• When in-person meetings could not occur, communication occurred via Teams, phone or email</li> </ul>
<b>During and after the transition</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible transitional period where there is limited formal curriculum delivery</li> <li>• Visual timetable to learn routines</li> <li>• Inviting parents to the setting once morning a week to read with the children</li> <li>• Communicating with parents and carers at the school gates after school, and communicating through home learning diaries, phone calls and emails</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introductory first few weeks for children to 'settle in' after the transition, before the curriculum delivery commences</li> <li>• Year group social bubbles were implemented – the two KS1 classes could mix with each other</li> <li>• Regular two-way communication with parents and carers through Tapestry, an online learning journal, when face-to-face meetings could not occur</li> </ul>

### *Independence*

During the focus group discussions, the participants acknowledged that children who have transitioned to their KS1 class commonly require additional support when completing tasks independently. Then this support is gradually reduced depending on the individual learning needs of each child.

However, the participants pointed out that in the 2020/2021 academic year, in light of the coronavirus restrictions, which caused many EYE settings to close following the initial lockdown, there was a significant increase in the support they were administering to enable children to be independent in contrast to previous years. They observed that many children did not have established independence skills, such as toileting or dressing themselves. They noticed a significant difference between the independence skills and capabilities of the children in the 2020/2021 academic year in comparison to previous years.

*'Children need that little bit of support at first, but I have definitely seen a difference this year ... the first few weeks, the children did need a lot of support and motivation when it came to being independent.'*

(Participant D)

*'It seemed as if some of the children weren't really ready for Year 1 yet.'*

(Participant E)

*'It's almost as if we had the extra job of teaching these independence skills which children should ideally be able to do before starting school ... it gave me the impression that some of the children weren't "school ready".'* (Participant A)

### *Behavior*

Similarly, the staff noticed a change in the children's behavior in the 2020/2021 academic year. The KS1 teaching staff who participated in this study identified that during the academic year starting in September 2020, in the context of the coronavirus restrictions, the time it took for the children to understand and adhere to the behavioral expectations of the classroom was increased in comparison to past years. The education professionals noted that some children showed a significant delay or reluctance with regard to following the class rules.

*'This year, the number of pupils who did not adhere to the rules right away seemed more than normal ... it took longer for some of the pupils to respond to the rules in the classroom than in the past.'* (Participant F)

During the focus group interview, the participants established a link between the delays and reluctance in some children in following the class rules during the academic year of 2020/2021 and the coronavirus restrictions, as the children did not have the chance to experience a pre-transitional visit to the Year 1 class, with opportunities to experience the class rules, routines and behavioural expectations, due to the social distancing legislation.

*'I could tell which pupils had moved up from reception class at this school and which children maybe hadn't been at school before.'* (Participant C)

*'I do think the increase in ... "bad" behaviour is because the children didn't have the chance to come to the classroom and physically experience what Year 1 is like before the transition.'* (Participant H)

#### *Social and emotional skills*

During the focus group interview, the education professionals noticed a delay in the development of the social and emotional skills of the children in their KS1 class. As in the case of independence skills, it was implied by the participants that some of the children may not have been socially or emotionally ready or prepared for school.

*'This year, I have definitely been able to identify which children seem to have had less experience in socialising with other children ... we have absolutely had to put more intervention in place to develop social skills, more than normal.'* (Participant A)

*'By the end of the year, when the world was getting back to normal, some of the children did still show a lack of trust and social skills with each other.'* (Participant D)

The participants revealed that many children in the 2020/2021 cohort relied extensively on additional intervention to support their social and emotional skills. Changes to practice were implemented to facilitate social interactions between peers and support the children emotionally after the transition to KS1. Furthermore, two of the participants observed that they could more easily identify which children may not have attended a nursery before, or

the possibility of them being an only child during the academic year of 2020/2021, compared to previous years.

## **Discussion**

**Table 1** shows various transitional strategies that the research participants found effective or successful during previous academic years within their professional practice, and which strategies were implemented during the September 2020 to July 2021 academic year, within the constraints of the coronavirus restrictions.

The participants revealed that the movement from in-person to virtual meetings was challenging for them as professionals. Research and legislation emphasize the importance of a collaborative partnership with parents and carers to learn how to meet the needs of the child and find out about their learning preferences, abilities and interests (DfE & DoH, 2015; Harper, 2016; Thomas, 2019), since, as their enduring educators, parents/carers know their child best (DfE, 2014). However, social distancing guidance restricted them from meeting each child and their family in person. Much of the pre-transitional communication between the teaching staff, the child and their family was conducted virtually.

The professionals revealed that being restricted from meeting the children in person before the transition occurred meant that they had limited knowledge of each child's interests, preferences and abilities. The first day of school was the first time the professionals met most of the children face to face, and this may have impacted on how the children responded to the transition from EYE to KS1 behaviourally, socially, emotionally and in relation to independence.

### *Independence*

Extensive academic literature and legislation substantiate the importance of developing independence skills to promote 'school readiness'. In turn, there is an expectation that children should have established independence skills when they start school. However, the independence skills of a child with SEND may be delayed or impaired, and they may require additional support for the transition to KS1 (DfE & DoH, 2015; Martin et al., 2019; Whitebread & Bingham, 2014). During the focus group interview, the education professionals noticed a significant difference between the independence skills and capabilities of the children in the 2020/2021 academic year in comparison to previous years. This element of the research findings was consistent with the findings of Bakopoulou et al. (2021). They also identified impairments or delays in children's independence skills as a significant consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic (Bakopoulou et al., 2021).

This may be for a variety of reasons. However, through comparing the findings of this study with previous and emerging literature, it is evident that the coronavirus restrictions, including school closures and social distancing, will have had an impact and will be a factor contributing to why many of the children demonstrated processing delays and challenges in instances where they had to complete tasks and actions independently.

### *Behavior*

It is prevalent within literature and policy that the impacts of significant changes can be more challenging and profound for a child with SEND and, in turn, can cause anxiety or distress in children if they are not adequately prepared for the change (Marsh et al., 2017; Besi & Sakellariou, 2019). The behavioral expectations of children in EYE and KS1 are significantly different (Whitebread & Bingham, 2014), and this change may trigger responses or behavior that can be perceived as challenging, particularly if children are not prepared for the shift (Evans et al., 2018; Marsh et al., 2017; Sharp et al., 2006).

During the focus group interview, the participants established a link between the delays and reluctance in some children following the class rules during the academic year of 2020/2021 and the coronavirus restrictions, as the children did not have the chance to experience a pre-transitional visit to the Year 1 class, with opportunities to experience the class rules, routines and behavioral expectations, due to the social distancing legislation.

Consequently, it is appropriate to suggest that the coronavirus restrictions, including the initial school closures before the transition, were a contributing factor in the behavioral responses of some of the children, particularly in the case of children who had transitioned from home learning, or an EYE setting, and had no or limited previous experience of the behavioral expectations of a formal school setting.

### *Social and emotional skills*

The social expectations of KS1 differ from the rules of the EYFS classroom (Sharp et al., 2006; Whitebread & Bingham, 2014), and if children are not prepared for these changes, then this can have an impact on how they respond to the transition and their holistic educational experience, and they may struggle to feel a sense of belonging in their new school environment (Cronin et al., 2022).

The findings of the focus group interview in relation to how the learners responded socially and emotionally are also consistent with the study

conducted by Bakopoulou et al. (2021), as their results included the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's social and emotional skills, including anxiousness about social interactions, delays and impairments in language acquisition and development, and a reluctance to take risks and experience new situations (Bakopoulou et al., 2021).

These findings are also consistent with Bowlby's (1988) theory of attachment, which establishes the formation of children's innate emotional attachments, commonly their parents or carers, and a reluctance to separate from these attachments. Additionally, in her work on attachment and separation anxiety, Ainsworth suggests that children who have secure attachments with their carers may experience tension in unfamiliar situations and when they are parted from their primary carers (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). These attachment theories are particularly relevant in this context if children have not previously attended an EYE or formal school setting. However, it is worth noting that if children has experienced these issues during the 2020/2021 academic year, it may have been more challenging to manage some of the emotional challenges that the children experienced, due to the social distancing policies at the school where the research was conducted.

The increased impairments and delays in the emotional and social skills of the children in the KS1 cohort may be due to many reasons. Still, it is appropriate to imply that the coronavirus restrictions may have had an impact, as the previously effective transition strategies were unable to be implemented in their entirety, due to the changing coronavirus and social distancing legislation.

### **Solutions**

This study aims to have a positive impact on children with SEND who are transitioning from EYE to KS1 in future as, during the focus group interviews, a discussion occurred regarding what elements of transitional support the KS1 teaching staff would keep the same and what changes to policy and practice would make the transition a more positive experience for children with SEND in general, and if a situation similar to the Covid-19 pandemic were to arise in the future.

Regarding changes to policy and practice, the participants emphasized the importance of ensuring that frequent communication with parents and carers occurs before, during and after the transition, and that this collaboration



should be mandatory. Moreover, research demonstrates the importance of parental partnership (Harper, 2015; Thomas, 2019) and parental involvement, multi-agency working, and collaborative partnerships between education professionals, parents and carers, and any other relevant professionals, and this is a significant element of the 2015 SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015). Additionally, the KS1 teaching staff all shared their concerns about the uncertainty caused by the Government's changing coronavirus legislation:

*'Because everything was changing so quickly, there was a lot of uncertainty at school. It was quite challenging to not pass this worry on to the pupils and to keep things as normal as possible.'* (Participant G)

In terms of what they would keep the same in the future, the participants emphasized the importance of adapting to prevalent routines instead of making significant changes to practice to promote consistency. Additionally, the KS1 teaching staff discussed the importance of pre-transitional collaboration to learn about each child's needs, interests and abilities and build this information into planning – they expressed the view that Tapestry (an online learning journal) was influential in establishing communication between the school setting and parents and carers, particularly in the context of the coronavirus restrictions when face-to-face meetings were not always possible. The teaching staff indicated that they would also continue to utilize an initial introductory fortnight after the transition has occurred, for the children to settle in and become accustomed to the changes in behavioral and social expectations, before the formal curriculum delivery commences.

## **Conclusion**

This study investigated how the coronavirus pandemic has impacted on the transition from EYE to KS1 for children with SEND in a SEND specialist provision school, from the perspective of KS1 education professionals. Through the process of interviewing KS1 teaching staff to learn about their experiences and observations and comparing the findings to past studies and academic literature within this emerging field of research, it is evident that the coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact on the educational experience of children with SEND and, consequently, on the transition from EYE to KS1.

The coronavirus restrictions, including the school closures and the movement from face-to-face learning to learning at home through online and distance learning opportunities, have had a detrimental impact on the transitional

support that the children have received during the September 2020 academic year, as education professionals have had to make significant adaptations to their transitional provision because of the coronavirus restrictions and social distancing, which prevented many of their usual strategies from being used. Due to the coronavirus restrictions, the children did not receive the same transitional support practices as previous cohorts.

Consequently, the practitioners who participated in this research project observed significant disruptions and delays in children's independence, social and emotional skills, and adherence to behavioral expectations, in comparison to previous academic years.

### **Limitations**

This research is a small-scale study, and a nine-person focus group of professionals from the same setting will only provide research data from this one setting. It is appropriate to assume that the experiences, perceptions and observations of the research participants may not represent the experiences of all education professionals.

However, this research presents opportunities for future research across different SEND settings, locally and internationally, to understand how the coronavirus pandemic has impacted on and disrupted the transition from EYE to KS1 or equivalent formal schooling for children with SEND. Additionally, the findings of this study are focused on behavioral implications, so a future study to explore the educational implications would be beneficial to improve transition practices and educational experiences for children with SEND.

### **Recommendations**

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic have indicated areas of transitional support which can be improved to make the transition from EYE to KS1 more manageable for children with SEND, such as having consistent transitional support practices and strategies, and having established banked strategies, resources or provisions that can be implemented if an event similar to the coronavirus pandemic were to occur again in the future. Consequently, this study can have an impact on current and future practice as it explores what strategies KS1 professionals have utilized and found to be successful in supporting children with SEND before, during and after the transition from EYE to KS1, which can be built upon and used with future cohorts.

The academic year of September 2020 to July 2021 has been a learning experience for education professionals, and although many of the experiences and perceptions of practitioners have been negative, it is worth considering what the education sector and the Government have learned from the coronavirus pandemic. In the context of this research, the participants identified areas of transitional support that they adapted to adhere to the coronavirus legislation, but will consider continuing to implement in the future. This study suggests possibilities for future studies within this emerging field of research, on topics such as how the coronavirus pandemic has impacted on the transition from primary education to secondary education, and the transition from further to higher education. There are also quantitative research opportunities to analyze how the coronavirus pandemic has impacted on academic achievement and outcomes.

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